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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
Seventh Meeting to Evaluate Mexico's National Programme of Action

Mexico City, Mexico
14 October 1994

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On seven occasions since the World Summit for Children, you, Mr. President, have called together cabinet ministers and other officials, NGO leaders and experts, in the glare of TV cameras and the scrutiny of the public, to evaluate implementation of Mexico's national programme of action (NPA) for children. In so doing, you have created a modern-day tradition that I trust will be followed by future administrations in Mexico, and, hopefully, by political leaders in other countries who are open and bold enough to want to be held accountable. And you have made UNICEF's participation in these meetings part of the tradition, for which I am personally as well as institutionally grateful.

President Salinas, five years ago -- in 1989 -- you joined with five other national leaders to convene the first global summit meeting in history, and you chose children as its theme. You were taking a major political risk -- because there was no assurance that the world's leaders would respond to a call to focus on children when there were so many other burning issues crying out for political attention after almost half a century of Cold War. But you and your fellow-conveners gambled that the leaders of the world would respond, because you saw that the potential of this new era lies precisely in its capacity to mobilize international cooperation for the human being -- the human being at the centre of all other issues -- symbolized and personified by the youngest and most vulnerable human beings, our children.

Your boldness and vision paid off... the rest is history that I need not review here today. Suffice it to say that the promise of the World Summit for Children is being kept. Well over a hundred nations are engaged in implementing national programmes of action to achieve concrete goals for children -- something never before seen in human history! It now appears that a majority of the mid-decade goals that have been set will be achieved by the end of next year in a majority of the developing countries, creating real momentum toward reaching the year 2000 goals.

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Mexico is one of those countries, and is in fact well ahead of the pack! At each of these meetings, we have become accustomed to seeing results -- real progress for children that in the past could be measured only from one decade to another, but which today can be measured every six months, year in and year out.

I do not want to repeat things that you or my friend Dr. Kumate have said, but I would like to highlight a number of Mexico's achievements that UNICEF believes deserve emphasis and that are worthy of greater international attention.

*** First, you have increased social spending in spite of a decrease in total public spending due to the reordering of the country's economy in recent years. As we have seen in other countries, adjustment often brings with it major cuts in social spending. But here in Mexico, social spending grew from 36 per cent in 1989 to 54 per cent of the national budget in 1994. As a portion of Gross Domestic Product for the same years, social spending went from 6 per cent to 10 per cent. Moreover, funding of your NPA alone increased 74 per cent between 1990 and 1994.**

*** Second, you have decentralized your NPA at the State level and in priority municipalities. Programmes of action are now up and running in practically all of Mexico's states, and most of the governors are following your lead, Mr. President, in personally evaluating progress on a periodic basis. Several key municipalities have drawn up and begun implementing programmes of action. This is vitally important, for obviously not everything can be done from the centre and it is only at the state and local level that national priorities and policies can be translated into effective action at the grassroots.**

*** Third, Mexico has established a solid intersectoral mechanism and top-notch technical teams to implement, monitor and evaluate efforts for children. Worthy of special mention are the efforts of the Health Minister as Coordinator of the National Commission for the Follow-up and Evaluation of the NPA, along with those of the Minister of Education, the National Director of the System for Integral Family Development, the General Director of the National Water Commission and their state counterparts. Together with their technical teams, all are working seriously on behalf of the children of Mexico.**

* Fourth, as of last month, Mexico had already achieved ten of the 16 intermediate goals proposed for end 1995:

-- immunization coverage has reached 92.6 per cent, far surpassing the intermediate goal of 80 per cent. It has surpassed the year 2000 goal of 90 per cent coverage eight years ahead of time. The main task now is to maintain the high levels of coverage already attained.

-- Mexico has achieved, three years ahead of schedule, the goal of reducing measles deaths by 95 per cent and of measles cases by 90 per cent. In 1990, there were 9,402 cases of measles in Mexico -- and so far this year, only 108.

-- Mexico became polio-free four years in advance of the mid-decade goal and nine years ahead of the year 2000 goal set by the World Summit for Children. And just recently, the entire Western Hemisphere became the first region to be certified as polio-free.

-- As a result of a commitment you made, Mr. President, at a meeting like this one two years ago, Mexico has achieved a 56 per cent reduction in diarrhoea-related mortality in children under the age of five -- an accomplishment unparalleled in the public health history of the developing world. An International Evaluation Commission has certified the success of your high-profile, multi-sectoral effort to promote the use of oral rehydration therapy to prevent lethal dehydration. You have slashed diarrhoea deaths in half seven years ahead of the world's year 2000 goal.

-- In the area of breastfeeding promotion, Mexico has also made progress. The agreement you reached with the Council of Infant Formula Manufacturers in January 1992 has held, and free or low-cost samples of breastmilk substitutes are no longer being distributed in the country's hospitals or maternity clinics. Out of 700 hospitals with maternity wards, 667 are modifying their practices to encourage breastfeeding, and 140 hospitals have already been certified as being "Mother and Baby-Friendly". The challenge you face is to continue the process of institutional reform and training in order to meet the goal of certifying 700 hospitals. Community and workplace support for breastfeeding also needs strengthening.

-- Mexico, an early ratifier of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, is in the process of bringing national and state legislation into line with the

treaty's provisions. As laws more uniformly support the rights of children, the challenge of course becomes one of disseminating the Convention as widely as possible and ensuring that its precepts work their way into the daily life of individuals, families, communities and institutions. Mexico's comprehensive report on its efforts to comply with the Convention was reviewed this past January by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Committee's concluding observations reflect both the remarkable progress being made here and several areas where further improvement is imperative. I am particularly pleased that all of the country's human rights commissions have come together to form the Mexican Federation of Public Organizations for the Protection and Defense of Human Rights, and that the Federation has made a public commitment to follow-up on each and every one of the concerns contained in the UN Committee's report. UNICEF stands ready to assist in any way we can with your efforts to address these issues.

-- Mexico has pushed forward the goal of universal access to basic education from the year 2000 to 1994, and enrolment currently stands at 98 per cent. It has also achieved the mid-decade goal for reduction of drop-out rates; in 1990, 5.3 per cent of children left school before finishing fifth grade, whereas in the 1993-94 school year, the percentage dropping out is down to 3.6 per cent. With respect to gender, only a small -- a 2.9 per cent -- disparity of male over female enrolment persists at the primary school level; nevertheless, achieving the mid-decade goal would require narrowing the gap still further, to 2.1 per cent.

-- Two years ahead of schedule, Mexico met the mid-decade goal of reducing the gaps in access to drinking water and basic sanitation. Between 1990 and 1993, 11.6 million more people were given access to safe drinking water, extending coverage from 80 per cent of the population to 85.6 per cent. An additional 10.2 million people have been given access to basic sanitation. Coverage has gone from 63.3 per cent in 1990 to 68.6 per cent in 1993. A special effort will be required to bring these services to dispersed populations in the more remote rural areas.

Thus, Mexico has reached or surpassed ten of the 16 mid-decade goals it set for itself, many of them well ahead of schedule. Thanks to these efforts, Mexico has managed to decrease infant mortality by more than a third between 1990 and the first half of 1994 -- six years ahead of the year 2000 goal

established at the World Summit for Children. This is a real achievement of which Mexico can feel deeply proud.

Inasmuch as Mexico has already made remarkable progress in implementing its NPA, and has already achieved so many important mid-decade goals ahead of schedule, it should be possible to place renewed emphasis on reaching the unreached, the poorest of the urban and rural poor, and in particular, the indigenous peoples. In a large country like Mexico with 121,000 towns and villages -- many of them mere settlements of fewer than 500 people -- this certainly presents a major challenge. But it is a practical and moral challenge that every country faces on the road to development, and Mexico is in a better position than most to address it successfully.

At each of these NPA reviews, I have abused my status as invited guest a little by challenging Mexico to go on to higher achievements, to accomplish even more than the formidable advances you have already registered. You have taken up each and every challenge I have thrown out, Mr. President, without batting an eye -- a legacy that I am sure the Mexican nation will continue in the future.

The urgent challenges that UNICEF feels that Mexico must now face are, in brief:

- a) to consolidate current achievements, ensuring the sustainability of your efforts over the long term;
- b) to identify and assist the under-reached, i.e. children and women in zones of extreme poverty, remote rural and indigenous areas where infectious diseases, poor nutrition, limited access to safe water and sanitation, and low levels of education still stand in the way of human and economic development. A concrete suggestion here would be to include, at future national evaluations of the NPA, a review of the goal-by-goal results of efforts in each of the country's states.
- c) to intensify efforts to
 - * eliminate neonatal tetanus;
 - * eliminate vitamin A deficiency;
 - * eliminate iodine deficiency disorders;
 - * reduce child malnutrition;
 - * further reduce primary school drop-out levels and improve the quality of basic education; and
 - * expand rural sanitation services.

With the momentum of successes that Mexico has already achieved, I am certain you can make rapid progress on these important fronts as well.

Mexico is solidly on track toward keeping the year 2000 promises of the World Summit for Children. It has made children a priority of the nation and thus contributed to the emergence of a new global ethic for children and development. UNICEF congratulates the Mexican people, its government and you, personally, President Salinas, for helping change the world by putting children first.