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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
Global Forum on Environment and Development for Survival
"Basic Education for All: Getting at a root of many problems"

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"Basic Education for All: Getting at a root of many problems"

We have seen in these past few days in Moscow that a vast array of issues, and hopes for the future, and some of our highest aspirations for humankind, become the objects of discussion when the topic is environment. Guarding the concerns of children - perhaps the most vulnerable among us, and yet our greatest hope for the future - leads us in UNICEF and others concerned with children to look at environmental issues from several angles; it leads us to be particularly attuned to three major perspectives.

Deterioration of the environment

First among these is the life-threatening deterioration of the environment in which we all live. In the entrance of UNICEF headquarters in New York, a brass relief states: "The earth was not left to us by our parents...it was lent to us by our children." Without a life-sustaining environment, clearly there would be no future for children to inhabit. UNICEF's interest in sustainable development is a natural outgrowth of the obvious stake which children have in the world in which they are going to grow and live their lives - the environment of the future.

Age-old struggles with the environment

A second perspective is that there are many environmental problems which have been with us throughout the ages. They are problems which seem to have been solved so thoroughly by the industrialized world that their solution is taken for granted. Yet for more than a billion people - one fifth of humanity - they have not been solved, and they have a tremendous impact on children. Many find it difficult to relate to the fact, for example, that while the developed countries struggle against the problems of consumption, such as industrial pollution to rivers and lakes, obesity and alcoholism, millions of people have never had access to the clean water that a simple hand-pump would

bring, nor have they had access to basic hygiene information that could still save millions each year from fatal and debilitating diseases. Hard as it may be to believe, 40,000 children still die every day - a number equivalent to the Hiroshima toll every three days - a majority from adverse environmental factors such as polluted waters and from preventable diseases in the environment, such as polio, tetanus, measles and malaria. More than 100 million children will die in the 1990s from adverse environmental factors if current conditions continue.

Fortunately, we have the capacity today to make great headway toward solving these historic problems of the environment if we so wish. As a result of recent experience, we now know how to approach these problems as development issues, and through low-cost means that are also environmentally friendly. Yet despite this new know-how and capacity, we still have 8,000 young children dying every day from diseases which could be prevented with 50 US cents worth of vaccine in each child. And another 7,000 die each day from the dehydration associated with diarrhoeal diseases, even though a simple sugar and salt solution - Oral Rehydration Salts (ORS) - which has been available for two decades, can save an afflicted child's life, and costs 7 US cents per pre-packaged home application. Furthermore, most of the diarrhoeal diseases would not be contracted in the first place if families had clean water and knew to practice basic hygiene such as washing of hands in conjunction with the use of latrines.

Impact of child-related problems on the environment

A third perspective of which UNICEF cannot help but be acutely aware is the impact which problems related to children have on the environment. This is, as many speakers have noted, most readily apparent in issues of overpopulation, and in the wide recognition that the increasing numbers of people are contributing greatly to the disappearance of the rain forests, the denuding of the Himalayas, the despoiling of coastal waters, and the deforestation of Africa. It is also sadly evident that when a population consists of a significant proportion of people who bear for their lifetime the debilitating after-effects of childhood disease and malnutrition, that population is less equipped to solve its own problems, to use its resources wisely, and to interact constructively with other societies on solutions to common problems.

These three major perspectives on the environment can hardly be viewed in isolation from one another - our network of interdependence is far too intricately interwoven at this stage. An atmosphere polluted by industrial waste threatens the life-breath of the entire human family; the same atmosphere is threatened with disbalance by the ravaging of rainforests. But of equal if not greater importance to the children of the world is the intermingling of the second and third perspectives I have just outlined - the ancient scourges of the environment which still visit poverty-stricken areas, and the effect child-related problems have on the environment. This link is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that no country has dramatically reduced its fertility rates on a sustained basis until it has first significantly reduced its child death rates. Birth rates - and population growth rates - predictably fall once families are convinced that the children which they do

have will survive. This shift happens still faster when encouraged by effective family planning. Thus, for example, if all of South Asia already had had Sri Lanka's low child death rates and birth rates in 1988, 4.5 million fewer children would have died and 23 million fewer children would have been born that year.

The complex interweaving of cause and effect among the problems associated with these three perspectives give rise to the question: How do we, in efforts to solve any one of these sets of problems, get at the root causes of all three?

Education - a common-front attack on effects of poverty.

We can begin to probe for answers to this question at the link between lowered child death rates and lowered fertility rates. One of the most important means of reducing child death and birth rates and improving the health of a child-population is to empower families, and particularly women, through basic education, including education regarding life-saving and enhancing self-health knowledge such as the merits of birth spacing, of immunization, of breast-feeding, and of home-based ORT against the single biggest killer of children today, the dehydration from diarrhoea. As WHO Director-General Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, has stated: "Parents and families, properly supported, could save two-thirds of the 14 million children who die every year - if only they were properly informed and motivated." This two-thirds which could be saved translates into saving 25,000 children every day - the equivalent of avoiding one Armenia disaster every day!

When we look toward reducing child death and birth rates and disease through empowering people with self-health knowledge, we look toward smaller and healthier populations than would otherwise exist in the future. Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly undeniable that the main tool used to ensure child survival and development and lower birth rates - i.e., empowering people through basic education - is the same tool capable of breaking the tenacious grip of the poverty syndrome in other areas.

Education for All

Today there is light at the end of the dark tunnel of ignorance which has traditionally hidden the benefits of modern progress from the poor of the world. A process aimed at galvanizing global commitment to meeting the basic learning needs of all the world's people has been building for more than two years, and is about to undergo an important synthesis in the first week of March at Jomtien, Thailand, at the "World Conference on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs", sponsored and co-sponsored by such agencies as UNESCO, the World Bank, UNICEF, UNFPA, WHO, USAID, CIDA, SIDA and FINIDA.

Empowering people - particularly women - through education, with knowledge relevant to their own needs and values, has perhaps been recognized for some time as a key to the future including peace itself. As has been said: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that peace must be pursued".

The difference today is that, for the first time in history, the capacity exists to make such a basic education available to all people throughout the world, and those who are participating in the Jomtien conference and its process are acting on this new global potential. It is a possibility which exists largely as a result of two converging forces, both by-products of recent general developmental progress.

The first force is the sheer quantity of information - much of it relevant to survival and basic well-being - a quantity of information which has increased exponentially in a very few years, and the growth of which is still accelerating. This includes information about obtaining more life-enhancing knowledge - or learning how to learn. A synergistic combination occurs when important information is coupled with a second effect of modern progress - the vastly expanded capacity to communicate among virtually all people in the world, such as through radio and television, as Dr. Mayor has already noted. Never before in history has the capacity existed to reach so many people with so much relevant information for so little cost.

In the process leading to the Jomtien Conference, we have seen the world's leading education experts, national and international decision makers, the international donor community, and a groundswell of concerned people rallying around common key principles.

Although the Conference itself has not yet taken place, I don't mind telling you in advance that, in the effort to achieve this ambitious goal, the very first principle being considered for the World Declaration on Education for All, which will come out of that Conference, is: "[the] understanding that education makes possible a safer, healthier, more prosperous and environmentally sound world...".

Whether or not the unprecedented possibility of providing an Education for All, with all that that entails for human well-being, will become reality does not depend, at this point, on our capacity to do so. The capacity exists. It will depend, rather, on whether or not the political and popular will exist to make it happen. When so much can be done for so many, and at so little cost, it is increasingly unconscionable not to act - not to prevent an Armenia-scale disaster every day.

The principle of first call

In fact, the international community acknowledged the right of children to both an education and to a safe environment, among many other provisions, when it adopted, on 20 November, the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention, for the first time, codifies global norms regarding children's rights. And the rights of children, of course, in reality translate to obligations by adult society.

Transcending its detailed provisions, the Convention on the Rights of the Child embodies a fundamental principle which UNICEF believes should affect the course of political, social and economic progress in all nations over the next decade and beyond. That principle is that the lives and the normal

development of children should have first call on society's concerns and capacities and that children should be able to depend upon that commitment in good times and in bad, in normal times and in times of emergency, in times of peace and in times of war, in times of prosperity and in times of recession.

A World Summit for Children

The ethos of first call for children is a basic principle to which we are, perhaps, just beginning to awaken, at an international level. Within the last three years we have seen issues related to children rise increasingly higher on political agendas throughout the world. Just this past month, decisions have been taken by six countries and endorsed by the UNICEF Executive Board to convene the first-ever truly global summit - a North-South-East-West World Summit for Children, to which all Heads of State and Government are being invited. It will be held in New York in late September this year. What transpires during the two days of that meeting may well be the most important thing that happens for the environment during the 1990s.

Why would a World Summit for Children be so important for the environment? For exactly the reasons we have been discussing this morning: because of an increasing moral conviction in the unconscionability of an adverse environment for children, when so much can be done at such low cost to improve these conditions; because no country has been able to stabilize its population without first reducing its child mortality rates; and because meeting basic learning needs empowers people to take greater control of both their own lives and their environment. The World Summit for Children can be expected to focus tremendous concern and action on these issues. We may well look back on the Summit in five or ten years as the turning point in society's accountability in these arenas.

What can you do?

By helping combat poverty and by contributing to the long-term decline in rapid population growth, progress in child survival and development - especially through empowering people with basic education - addresses two of the major causes of the degradation of the environment. In fact, all other measures for the preservation of the environment are likely to be frustrated so long as the necessities for survival and basic human dignity of the world's poorest billion people compete with the needs of environmental protection.

As we enter the last decade of the millenium, global co-operation to solve common problems seems to be taking a quantum leap. What are the most important contributions that can be made to this advance of civilization? From UNICEF's vantage point as the world's agency for children, we see a number of priority "next steps" which need to be taken at this crucial juncture. You can:

- (1) First and foremost: identify what is readily do-able on behalf of children in your own community - what are the things that could make an enormous difference for relatively little expenditure? We now know that, at a global level, the additional costs, including delivery, of a

programme to prevent the great majority of child deaths and child malnutrition in the decade ahead might reach approximately US\$2.5 billion per year by the late 1990s. Two and a half billion dollars is a substantial sum. But to put the problem in perspective, it is 2 per cent of the poor world's own arms spending. It is as much as the Soviet Union has been spending on vodka each month. It is as much as U.S. companies have been spending each year to advertise cigarettes. It is 10 per cent of the European Economic Community's annual subsidy to farmers. It is as much as the world as a whole spends on the military every day.

At community level, like at international level, the list of what is do-able for children should include measures such as: universal child immunization, ensuring that all families have access to knowledge about the merits of oral rehydration therapy and child spacing, and ensuring that all pregnant women have access to effective pre-natal care. Social mobilization for child survival and development activities that are indigenous to the particular problems of your constituencies belong on that list - people power is inexpensive and goes a long way toward changing the reality of people's lives. You will notice that the list is made up of measures which are politically wise to champion, and ethically important to accomplish. And, of course, the natural extension of taking such an inventory is to take a leadership role - take responsibility - in ensuring that the readily do-able gets done.

- (2) Initiate activities in your own countries which are related to the World Summit for Children. For example: you can call Summits for Children at every level of community - neighborhood, city, district, national, regional, etc. Gather together all of those leaders of sectors of society involved with issues related to children, and design the best use of your collaborative efforts for the 1990s. Design the plan to do what is do-able. You, as parliamentarians and spiritual leaders, enjoy great influence among your constituencies. Are you willing to use that influence to raise issues related to children higher on the Agenda for Action of the people who look up to you? Are you willing to take responsibility - as true leaders - for the implementation of plans which you design for children for the 1990s?

It is very likely that a Summit of Spiritual Leaders will precede the World Summit for Children this summer. Are you willing to exert your influence to ensure participation from your denomination? Are you ready to take the lead in related activities, such as, perhaps, a global moment of inter-faith prayer during the World Summit for Children? Such an event might well be the most meaningful and most broad-reaching mobilization associated with the Summit. Are you willing to seize the opportunity and inspire its most profound manifestation?

- (3) You can ensure that your own country, and any other countries in which you have influence, have achieved the United Nations goal of Universal Child Immunization by December 1990 - before the convening of the World Summit for Children in September. Although vaccine protection against the six main child-killing diseases in our environment has increased from coverage of 10 per cent of the world's children at the beginning of the 1980s to

more than 70 per cent today, achieving the 80 per cent goal in each country would not only serve to save the lives of millions of children, it would also offer a greatly increased credibility in the world community's capacity to do what it says it will do. Success in this relatively straightforward goal can be expected to offer confidence in attempting more complex achievements for the world's children...and on many other issues beyond children.

- (4) Take responsibility for making ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child a priority this year. Now that this landmark document has been adopted, it will take ratification by 20 countries to bring the Convention into force. You, as parliamentarians and religious leaders, are the guardians of the best interests of the child. In the case of the Convention, this means that you have the opportunity and obligation to, first, encourage your governments to initiate the ratification process as soon as possible; second, facilitate the ratification process in your respective spheres of influence; and third, ensure that, after ratification, the Convention is continuously observed as a yardstick by which we measure progress for children.
- (5) Ensure that the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child are effectively implemented in your own countries, and throughout the world. There are responsibilities that go far beyond monitoring the formal process of ratification. As parliamentarians and spiritual leaders, you could play a particularly important role in disseminating knowledge of, and respect for, the provisions of the Convention. As in all human rights issues, the more widespread knowledge there is about them, the stronger is the public demand for implementation. Governments always have to be sensitive to the will of the population and its craving for respect for human dignity. As political and spiritual leaders, you play a pivotal role in the creation of public attitudes. You could work to integrate the ideals and provisions of the Convention into all thinking and activities, and into all policy making which is relevant to children. You could make sure that issues related to children are always on the agenda in the fora where policies for the future are made. In so doing, you give reality to the principle of "first call".
- (6) Take the leadership on Education for All. Ensure that it becomes a reality wherever you enjoy influence. Find out what the Jomtien Conference produces in terms of principles and guidelines; study them for application in your own countries and to discover what role you might play in making this age-old dream of humanity, finally, a reality.

Amid so many other pressing concerns, it is difficult to find time on the world's agenda for the problems of children - problems which, it may be argued, have always been with us and cannot therefore be regarded as exceptional or urgent. But for the children who will unnecessarily fall to malnutrition, disease, disability, and an early death in the decade ahead, and for the families of those children, such an argument will carry very little weight.

From the broader perspective of our common future, ensuring the healthy physical and mental development of children is the most important investment that can be made in the healthy social and economic development of our societies, and for the preservation of our environment. Doing what can now be done to achieve that goal is therefore an issue worthy of its place on the agenda of the world's political leaders, its spiritual leaders, the world's press, and the world's public, as we enter the last decade of the twentieth century.