

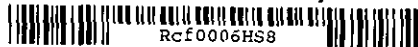
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Address by Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
at the opening of the  
Animation for Development Workshop  
"Networking Talent for Child Survival and Development"

Prague, Czechoslovakia  
26 March 1990



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Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

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"Networking Talent for Child Survival and Development"

I am delighted to join in welcoming you to this workshop, and I extend warm gratitude to the people of Czechoslovakia and Prague for their gracious hospitality to all of the participants.

It is a most exciting time to be in Czechoslovakia, both politically, amidst the surge of democracy that is so vital and fresh here, and also artistically - at the heart of the very rich heritage of the Czechoslovakian culture. We are grateful to our host country's animated film industry, which has made a strong contribution to that heritage and to the broader animated film industry, for your crucial role in making this workshop possible. In some ways, the events of the past year in Eastern Europe remind one of that great Czechoslovakian animation classic, "The Emperor's Nightingale".

UNICEF has, in fact, a direct link with Czechoslovakia in using visual images to spread the word about issues related to children. Our entire greeting card operation began with a picture painted in 1949 by a seven-year-old Czechoslovakian girl, Jitka Samkova, as a thank you for the help UNICEF had given to her war-torn village. UNICEF reproduced the design first as a poster and then as a greeting card for UNICEF's official use. Since then, proceeds from the sale of more than 2 billion cards have helped needy children throughout the world.

As we begin this last decade of the 20th century, it is clear that the field of communications, which is already a main force in social change, will gain power and influence rapidly, if used well. Whereas there used to be the equivalent of small hills of information available to humankind, in our modern day, veritable mountains of information exist, much of it relevant to the health and well-being of people everywhere. Yet never before in history has there been such a gap between existing knowledge, and its availability to those who need it most - those for whom it could make even a life-or-death difference.

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As the Director-General of the World Health Organization, Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, told 1,500 health educators in 1988:

"We must recognize that most of the world's major health problems and premature deaths are preventable through changes in human behaviour and at low cost. We have the know-how and technology but they have to be transformed into effective action at the community level. 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. Immunization alone could save 3 million lives - and another 3 million deaths a year could be prevented by oral rehydration, a simple and cheap technology.

Dr. Nakajima is referring, here, to a knowledge gap - a vast chasm between what is possible, through knowledge, and what is actually done.

Half a century ago, the historian Arnold Toynbee observed that ours was the first generation in history with the capacity to extend the benefits of modern progress to all of the world's people. Yet today, despite further advances since that statement was made, we have just emerged from a decade in which developmental progress since the 1950s has actually slowed, and even reversed, in many developing countries. One result of economic decline of the 1980s, including mounting debt, is that developing countries now transfer billions of dollars annually, net, to industrialized countries. Nearly a billion people - one fifth of humankind - live in abject poverty. They live outside of the normal channels of support systems, far from easy access to basic education, or health services.

Today, while we open this conference, listen to each others' presentations, view a film on the rights of the child and attend receptions - 40,000 young children will die, and comparable numbers will be crippled or disabled for life as a result of childhood diseases. The same was true yesterday, and the same will be true tomorrow. Yet as Dr. Nakajima said, low-cost means already exist to save the majority of these lives.

What can be done to reverse this desperately tragic situation?

Although the 1980s were dark times for the world's poor, a ray of new hope shone through, visible first in the field of child health. The possibility emerged for a virtual revolution in child survival and development, despite difficult economic constraints - a revolution so profound that health experts came to agree that child death rates of 1980 could be halved by the turn of the century.

What has made this revolution possible?

It has been the synergistic combination of two forces: the coupling of low-cost/high-impact health knowledge and technology with our new capacity to communicate among the poor of the world. Unprecedented possibilities for improving children's health could not have begun to approach reality, however,

without one more essential ingredient in the formula - and that is the will to make it happen. Thus, for example, country after country has learned to mobilize people from an array of societal sectors to immunize all of the children of the country against the six main child-killing diseases. Radio and TV broadcast the same messages which were spread through activities of non-governmental organizations, religious leaders, teachers, government agencies and labour unions.

To make a long, exciting and continuing child survival and development story short, the result is that lives are being saved. Whereas at the beginning of the 1980s fewer than 10 per cent of the world's children were immunized against diseases that were taking the lives of 10,000 children each day, today, more than 70 per cent are protected, and there is every indication that, with a strong effort, coverage will increase to 80 per cent by the end of this year - the global target set by the United Nations. By 1989, 2 million child lives were being saved annually as a result of immunization alone. Another million child lives were being saved each year as a result of similar social mobilization efforts to spread the use of oral rehydration therapy in response to childhood diarrhoea.

It is a sobering fact that these lives would simply not have been saved without innovative use of media and communications technology.

Successes in child survival and development, significant as they are, are just the beginning. They give an indication of what is possible when all channels of communication are mobilized in common health efforts, but they have not yet begun to scratch the surface of potential.

That, really, is why we have gathered here in Prague. Animated film is emerging as an extremely effective - though still undeveloped - means of bridging the health knowledge gap, for several reasons. For example:

- Because it does not require literacy, animation is an excellent tool for reaching poor populations, many of whom are illiterate, with important health messages.
- Because visual images are not bound to one culture or language, and because a story line can be carried by an unseen narrator, animations can address a problem that affects people in several countries, and can be easily and inexpensively adapted. Even universal health messages can be effectively communicated through animated film, if they are accompanied by appropriate local follow-up activities. The style of characters can capitalize on cultural similarities that extend beyond political boundaries. They also have the potential to illustrate, through characters of varying ethnic dress, the universality of some health problems, their solutions, and common human values.
- Animation gets the message across. It has high attention-getting value, as demonstrated in the broad appeal and 20-year life of "Sesame Street". The form especially lends itself to teaching simple abstract concepts, as we've seen with numbers and letters; it brings these concepts to life, and injects humor into what otherwise might be an uninteresting lesson.

- Animation is well suited to demonstrating a process. Several countries have found success using animation to demonstrate how to mix oral rehydration salts and give it to a child.
- Animation can show what is invisible to the human eye, such as a germ, or the inner workings of the human body, and it can make clear how the body is affected by actions we take or fail to take.
- Because viewers know that animated characters are not real, they more readily accept humor, exaggeration, or behaviour that might be embarrassing or offensive if performed by an actor. For example, Canada's IDRC produced a film, "Prescriptions for Health," which graphically illustrates the problem of polluted water. It depicts the journey of the germs from people and animals, through the river, to a family's dinner plate.
- The same animated film can be used for a wide variety of purposes. A 3-minute piece on immunization or breast-feeding might be used as a filler between television shows, it might be incorporated into a broader health presentation, or used in health clinics to be viewed by parents while they are waiting for services. It can even be used in the increasingly popular video parlours as a "short" before or between feature movies.

It is noteworthy that animation was first used for advertising. Its potential to teach, and to persuade people to change their behaviour was recognized from the beginning. Still today, sophisticated advertisers use animation because they know it works. Is it not time to harness this potent form of art and communication for education and behaviour change that can save and improve people's lives?

If 40,000 children were dying each day from causes which we could do nothing to prevent, the situation would be tragic, indeed. But when 7,000 children die each day for lack of 50 cents worth of vaccine, and when 8,000 children die each day because their parents don't know how to make and administer oral rehydration therapy at home or because they don't know to wash their hands in conjunction with using latrines - and for this to occur with the full awareness of those of us who possess that knowledge and the means to convey it - the situation is not merely tragic. It is UNICEF's conviction that today's health knowledge gap is obscene. Morality marches with capacity, and ethics with awareness.

In fact, ensuring that knowledge about child health is made available to families everywhere is not simply a nice or benevolent thing to do. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted unanimously by the United Nations General Assembly in November after 10 years of international deliberations, and which is currently undergoing the process of ratification by individual countries (once 20 countries take that step it will come into force for signatories) establishes the rights of the child to health education and services. And children's rights translate, in reality, to obligations by adult society.

Throughout the world, commitment is growing to bridge the knowledge gap. Earlier this month, for example, the largest conference on basic education ever held took place in Jomtien, Thailand - the "World Conference on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs". Among the many powerful conclusions to come out of Jomtien was a clear understanding that the wealth of modern communication and media form a major mode of education - one that is becoming rapidly more important as its effectiveness is revealed. The distinction was drawn between, first, formal education, such as traditional public and private schools; second, non-formal education, which encompasses everything from primary education arrangements which are flexible enough to schedule around crop seasons, or families' schedules to hygiene classes organized through health centers; and third, the relatively new "third channel" of education (formerly referred to as informal education), which involves utilization of all forms of communication and media to contribute to defined education goals.

It is also noteworthy, as an indicator of the importance of education and communications to development, that the four sponsoring agencies of the conference, the World Bank, UNDP, UNESCO and UNICEF, all pledged extremely substantial increases in their support for education, including support to the newly legitimized third channel.

Furthermore, the conclusions of Jomtien will become part of deliberations at the first ever summit of leaders from North, South, East and West - a summit which will deal exclusively with issues related to children. The World Summit for Children, to be held in New York on 29 and 30 September, testifies to the increasing realization that children's issues belong high on the world's political agendas and agendas for action.

According new prominence to issues related to children - our greatest hope for the future, and yet the most vulnerable among us - is indicative, I believe, of a major step forward for our civilization. It is a step made possible by increased awareness - collectively, as a people. And I believe it is safe to say that we could not have made the broad-based strides for children of recent years without the role of modern communications in "shrinking the globe", i.e., bringing people's problems and concerns to public awareness.

Gathered at this conference in Prague is precisely the collection of experts in the animation field, communicators, those involved in development work, and decision makers, who, together, can make a significant difference in the use of this powerful art and communications tool - both to directly improve the health and well-being of children, and to mobilize public support around children, and human development issues.

What is it, specifically, that you - we - can do?

Are you willing to use your expertise to ensure that animated films for child health are of a level of sophistication and quality that can compete with commercial products for people's attention? I must say that UNICEF is most encouraged by a pilot project with the Walt Disney Co. which has just been slated for Ecuador.

We all know that producing an animated film is expensive. If each of the 45 countries represented in this room had to produce their own films to adapt to country health programmes, chances are very good that most of the films would be of poor quality, due to lack of funds, the amount of research and work and the level of skill required to produce an effective piece. But if you were to pool your collective resources, do adequate research to discern which messages could make the greatest impact, and design appropriate guidelines for local follow-up activities, then an ultimately cost-effective communications/education tool could be created.

Collaboration is vital in animation for another reason. It is a field in which there are talents scattered around the world. The challenge is to organize and co-ordinate the talent and good will from distant corners to address problems common to children from many lands.

Are you willing to go ahead and strive for the very highest quality product possible, and then arrange the funding to support it? Might some corporation provide the funding for this noble cause? Could it be presented as a noted project through UNICEF? What portions of the necessary research can piggy-back on other health surveys and research? Might some of the artistic and communications skills required be donated by the companies who employ qualified people?

As we begin the last decade of our millennium, it is the challenge of our generation to finalize the legacy left by the 20th century to the 21st. What more exquisite symbol of the interdependence of our world could we manifest than to form the delicate network among artists, financial contributors, health experts, decision makers, researchers, communicators and technicians from many lands which would be needed to adapt this high technology art form to the cause of saving the most precious treasure of humankind - its children - our hope for the future?

Will we, as Toynbee envisioned mid-century, find the means to extend the benefits of modern progress to all of the world's people? For the children - and the future - of our world, together, I think we can.