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Speaking Points for Statement by Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
to the  
International Save the Children Alliance General Assembly

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

speaking points  
International Save the Children Alliance General Assembly

Geneva - 14 June 1990

I. Greetings

Delighted to join with Save the Children groups and your guests from child-related NGOs, during the General Assembly of the Alliance. Save the Children was really the first to establish national children's organizations - dating back to the immediate aftermath of World War I. They are in many ways the precursor on the private side of what gave rise, on the governmental side, to UNICEF. We consider Save the Children to be one of our own historical tap roots in giving form to the human desire to ensure that the needs of all children are met.

II. Time of change

We meet at a crucial moment for the children of the world. The beginning of the last decade of the 20th century is not only a great symbolic moment, inviting a dramatic last chance to crystalize the legacy of our century to the next. It is in reality a time of phenomenal change and opportunity. In any century, only twice or thrice does the possibility of fundamental and essential improvement in our global situation lie close at hand. Now is such a time. Whereas often great opportunities must be painfully won from the anguish of war or drastic economic depression, the dynamism of this moment in history is born against a background of relative peace.

- warming - almost evaporation - of the cold war and easing of East/West tensions
- sweeping changes in Eastern Europe - avalanche toward democratic processes
- progress on disarmament with its promise of a significant peace dividend ... affects whole world, not just East-West
- joyous birth of a new nation, Namibia, achieved at a time of considerable experience with independence by other African nations
- visible progress toward dismantling of apartheid
- easing of regional tensions - S. Africa, Western Sahara, Iran-Iraq, Central America, Horn of Africa, Indo China, Afghanistan
- new concern with the future of our global environment

### III. Finding the opportunities for children

How to seize the opportunity for children? It is still sadly true that, on the one hand, some 40,000 young children die each day, the majority of them from causes for which we have long-since discovered low-cost cures and preventions. These tragic and unnecessary deaths are but one indication of the disproportionate burden of suffering borne by the most vulnerable among us, especially children and women.

On the other hand, it is equally true that many of the broader problems visible on the horizon can not be solved without more progress in the well-being of children. This is especially evident in:

- linkages with environment;
- linkage with economic growth;
- linkage with the morality of our civilization.

### Synergism

Fortunately, this open moment in history holds the potential of ushering in the most important breakthroughs for children ever experienced. Momentum has gathered at a rapidly increasing pace in recent years on a number of child-related issues - due in no small part to efforts by organizations such as those represented in this hall tonight. Today, a critical juncture has been reached. A dynamic synergism is accelerating progress on child-related issues at a rate that would simply not be possible for any one issue alone.

It would be difficult to say which issue started it all. We are at a point now where key initiatives are becoming mutually reinforcing - they are accelerating each other.

### CSD/UCI

Thus, for example, progress in child survival and development (CSD) activities, and especially the massive effort and success toward achieving universal child immunization (UCI) against the six main child-killing diseases by the end of 1990, has brought many new participants into involvement in child-related issues, from Heads of State and Government to religious leaders, non-governmental organizations such as yourselves, the media, school teachers and more.

- coverage at the end of 1989 reached 71 per cent globally - a major achievement in itself, considering that only some 20 per cent of the world's children were immunized at the beginning of the decade, before acceleration efforts began. If we can maintain the current momentum (and take full advantage of the forthcoming World Summit for Children), immunization coverage will reach 80 per cent globally by the end of 1990 - an achievement which will prevent more than 3 million infant and child deaths annually.

### Convention on the Rights of the Child

- The vast new alliance of participants in the UCI effort, once familiar with an all-out effort on behalf of children, became predisposed to take very seriously the Convention on the Rights of

the Child. I must say that I myself, in 1979, did not think that the Convention would come into being during my lifetime. And while success in CSD and UCI gave us increasing confidence in the mid to late 1980s that the seemingly overwhelming task of bringing the Convention into force could actually be accomplished, and helped involve Heads of State and Government in promoting the Convention - e.g., the SAARC Bangalor Summit in 1986; OAU Summit in 1988 - new attention to children's rights stirred by activities in support of the Convention in turn raised people's awareness that providing health services for children was not just a nice thing to do: it is the obligation of adult society.

- It is well-known that the Convention would never have come as far as it has without the active leadership of NGOs such as those represented here tonight. It was you who, with a handful of states, nurtured and pressed for the Convention in the early to mid 1980s when the conventional wisdom was that the Convention had little if any prospect of early acceptance.

In fact, besides the credit for forceful advocacy and leadership in insisting on the Convention's progress through formal channels, credit is also due to Save the Children itself for historical codifying of children's rights. Eglantyne Jebb, who founded the first Save the Children 71 years ago, drafted a document in 1923 called "The Rights of the Child", which was approved a year later by the League of Nations as its Charter of Child Welfare - the first international instrument concerned specifically with children. As many of you know better than I, these rights still today form the basis of the work of Save the Children organizations around the world.

- While the Convention would never have come as far as it has without organizations such as those represented here, it also would never be ratified by the 20 nations necessary to bring it into force without you. And there is every hope and expectation that, with efforts on many fronts, that will be accomplished before the World Summit for Children on 29 and 30 September. It is you who breathe life into the Convention by insisting that children's rights are met in every country where you work.

Each of these issues - CSD and the Convention - was accelerated by the momentum of the other.

#### Education for All

- On another front, the experience and credibility gained through CSD and UCI successes have given the confidence to move ahead on the basic education front. Many of the groups represented in this room were among the 140 NGOs who joined 155 governments to participate in the World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand in March, and I think we are all aware of a quantum leap that has been made in commitment to basic education. Especially

significant at Jomtien was the strong and widespread commitment to universal primary education by the year 2000 - to achieving a minimum level of learning for the great majority of children in literacy, numeracy and basic life skills - with the clear understanding that levels of achievement, rather than enrollment figures, must be used as assessment criteria. I might note that the new level of global commitment to basic education for all is vividly reflected in greatly increased allocation proposed for education in the coming years and a new partnership by the four principal sponsors: the UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank.

It is noteworthy that the lessons learned in the health field through using UCI as a cutting edge of primary health care inspired the commitment to universal primary education for all by 2000 as the cutting edge of basic education for all. In this mounting synergistic interaction, progress in education can be counted on for a profound sustainable contribution to children's health, the assurance that their rights are met, and maintaining their rightful place, high on the world's political agendas.

#### Goals for children and development in the 1990s

- On another front, credibility and experience gained through CSD and UCI, movement in the education field, in water, and new awareness of our obligations to ensure that children's rights are met have all contributed the impetus and the confidence required for experts and policy makers to come to consensus on a challenging yet feasible set of "goals for children and development in the 1990s". The goals are the result of an extraordinarily extensive consultative process at country, regional and international levels. They establish priorities among what is do-able for children. They represent groundwork laid by the world's leading experts, and it is hoped that each country will use them to arrive at an appropriate set of priority goals for their own needs in the main sectors of health, education (with an emphasis on gender equity), water and sanitation and nutrition.
- The main priority goals among what is do-able for children between now and the year 2000 (with more details in Annex) are:
  - 1) reduction of infant and under-5 mortality rates in all countries by one-third or to 50 and 70 per 1,000 live births respectively, whichever is less;
  - 2) reduction of maternal mortality rates by half;
  - 3) reduction of malnutrition among under-5s by half;
  - 4) universal access to safe drinking water and to sanitary means of excreta disposal;
  - 5) universal access to basic education and completion of primary education by at least 80 per cent of primary school age children;

- 6) reduction of the adult illiteracy rate (the appropriate age group to be determined in each country) to at least half its 1990 level with emphasis on female literacy.
- 7) improved protection of children in especially difficult circumstances.

#### Children in difficult circumstances

New attention to children in difficult circumstances, e.g., street children, disabled and most particularly to those trapped in war, such as El Salvador, Lebanon, Afghanistan and the Sudan. Attention has been drawn by both the Convention, and by increasing awareness, gained through CSD activities, of how much can be done for children.

#### World Summit for Children

Finally among these key areas is progress toward the World Summit for Children. A new status for issues related to children and an increasing awareness of how very much is possible on behalf of children for so little cost, both of which have grown out of all of these efforts on UCI and primary health care, the Convention, and primary education, have contributed greatly toward progress on the Summit. How truly remarkable that the first-ever global summit of leaders from North, South, East and West should devote their full agenda to child-related issues. It indicates a major shift in the wind.

The Summit in turn is now having an accelerating effect on both the ratification and implementation of the Convention and on CSD activities, especially UCI, as world leaders focus on their countries' accomplishments in these arenas in preparation for their own participation at the historic gathering.

Many of you gathered in this room, through your NGOs, have already begun the process of contributing to a breakthrough for the children of the world through using the opportunity of the Summit. The statement forwarded to the Summit by participants in the 28 May meeting in Geneva of Chief Executive Officers of 30 major international humanitarian and development NGOs is a powerful and insightful step. It is precisely the actions which you called on world leaders to commit to, and actions which you pledged to take, which will make possible achievement of the goals for children for the 1990s. The statement called on governments for such actions as ratifying the Convention, taking appropriate steps to address the debt issue by ensuring support for specific actions such as debt relief to benefit children, giving the highest priority to children when establishing socio-economic development plans, and prioritising primary health care and education for all, to name but a few. Some of the measure which NGOs present pledged themselves to include:

- establishing and developing national, regional and global coalitions to actively promote the ratification, implementation and monitoring of the Convention;
- strengthening and developing partnerships with governments, intergovernmental organizations, other NGOs and communities, in order to respond more effectively to the priority needs of children;;
- disseminating information of common concern ...;

- mobilizing political will and resources to strengthen East/North/South/West networking in order to help achieve the international community's development goals for children in the 1990s;
- promoting those ethical and humanitarian values which enhance the dignity of children and protect them in their vulnerability...

The statement should be shared through your networks to the national level to inform and gather support for Summit objectives.

It is also most encouraging that representatives of worldwide youth NGOs will hold a Youth Round Table in Geneva on 15-18 September with the theme "Children First" in conjunction with the Summit.

In fact, as preparations for the Summit and its follow-up progress, it is becoming clear that it is the boost which the Summit will give to action on behalf of the children which now brings within human reach the goals and strategies for children in the 1990s (which gained their initial momentum from CSD activities). While each of the goals is, in itself, feasible during this decade, it will take a significant restructuring of societal behaviour to accomplish them all - a restructuring of the magnitude that could perhaps only be triggered by an immediate global coalition such as that signaled by the Summit. The import of this synergistic interaction of efforts is reflected in the projection that, if the goals are realized, the lives of 50 million children will be saved during this decade.

For all of us who are committed to the survival, protection and development of the children of the world, the big challenge at this unique moment in history is how to make the most of the Summit and its follow-up. How does each of us use it to take a quantum leap in the direction that we believe to be most important for children? How do we accelerate each other's agendas to take the fullest advantage of the Grand Alliance for Children?

Immediately following the Summit, governments will be committed to a new plan of action. How do we bolster their commitment, influence their prioritizing, and develop a powerful common front in each country? Public opinion should be far more supportive than usual, and it should, for example, be easier than usual to raise money for child-related issues. It should be easier to mobilize. Are we ready to find and seize the opportunities in this historic moment of change?

#### Questions and answers

- Before we begin a discussion here tonight, I would like to respond to five questions of Save the Children that Nicholas Hinton posed to me recently for this evening.

Your first question asked how UNICEF intends to address some of the basic needs of children during the 1990s. My remarks on the goals for the 1990s, education, the Convention and the Summit give the larger perspective on this. To the aspect of that question that asks how basic health services can be sustained by developing countries, I would say this will require a restructuring of domestic and international aid budgets so that higher priority goes to the relevant sectors. Secondly, it will require a restructuring within those sectors so that a higher priority goes to basic services, such as the shift from construction of hospitals to primary health care services.

-- To your second question, which asks how UNICEF intends to develop its collaboration with other organizations, I would say we intend to continue to join us in building a Grand Alliance for Children, along the lines of our activities of the past 6 or 7 years, but we also intend to help build collaborations for achievement of specific tasks. Thus, one set of partnerships was developed to collaborate on the Convention, another for child survival and development activities, and another for the World Conference on Education for All and its follow-up.

-- You asked a special question about financing, stating that there is little cause for optimism. We find, however, that when strong collaboration is developed and governments are committed to specific priority and do-able goals, the money does flow. We are also enthusiastic that the Summit will help establish the principle of high priority - a first call - for children on the resources of society. It is noteworthy that in relation to the successes of child survival activities, we all have been getting increased funding e.g., UNICEF's income has tripled in terms of current dollars in the 1980s.

-- Your third question refers to the true implementation of the Convention throughout the world. I have already addressed this, but I might emphasize that obviously, the Summit is a first step toward raising awareness about children's rights and generating vital, living commitment to action in fulfillment of adult responsibilities in relation to the rights of children.

-- Your fourth question asks whether UNICEF is developing strategies for Eastern Europe. UNICEF is of course concerned that children do not bear the brunt of suffering in these times of change, and it is important the economic adjustments in Eastern Europe be done with a "human face". Our Executive Board in April authorized a new level of activity in Eastern Europe, amounting to expenditures of US\$1 million a year for the next 3 years from our general resources, with additional amounts to be raised additionally as needed for emergencies. We have sent survey missions in, and we intend to respond accordingly. I might add, however, that we have found a deep apprehension in developing countries, particularly in Africa and Latin America, that interest in Eastern Europe by the industrial countries and international organizations - that such interest will be at their expense. This latter must be avoided at all costs.



-- Your last question asks for feedback on the Education for All conference, and on funding for Third World education. Our experience in the health field points to the importance of a coherent strategy, but also to the effectiveness of using a cutting edge to prepare the way for broader goals. Thus the decision to start with a top priority, feasible part of the plan - universal primary education. It is worth emphasizing that a major reason for the success of Jomtien was the valuable contributions of NGOs, including painstakingly developed field programmes such as that of BRAC.

- UNICEF expects considerable attention to be focused on basic education in the years ahead by a broad spectrum of groups. Our own financial plan is to increase funding from 7 per cent of programme expenditure in 1989 to 15 per cent by 1993, and to 25 per cent by the year 2000.

#### The challenge

To all of us who are committed to improving the conditions of children in the world I would say this is our moment. - When I began speaking to you tonight I noted that historical moments of societal change such as we are now experiencing may occur only twice or thrice in a century. An opportunity for major breakthrough in our area of interest - children - which is being presented to us with the Summit surely occurs only once in a lifetime.

This one arrives at such a hopeful moment for the children of the world - whole nations have rallied and wars have paused for the immunization of children; the Convention has been adopted and is moving toward ratification and implementation, including new attention to children in especially difficult circumstances; a new urgency is felt for quality education for all. It is the optimum moment for societies to shift their priorities in favor of children, and the future. We may truly be on the brink of becoming a civilization that gives first call on its resources to children.

We are at the threshold, but we have not yet crossed into the new world. It is we, we of this generation who have declared ourselves committed to children's issues - declared ourselves by the NGOs and organizations we have chosen - we who hold the key to the door that stands beyond that threshold. It is as if the lock of that door were secured by secret combination, and each of us held one part of the formula. The crucial steps through that door can only be taken with the full leadership of all of us gathered here - each in his or her respective domain.

We are faced in this moment with the challenge and the responsibility of unprecedented opportunities on behalf of children. Can we make the breakthrough? For the children - and the future - of our world, working together, I think we can.