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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
Annual Conference of the Department of Public Information (DPI) for
Non-Governmental Organization (NGOs)
on the theme
"A World Safe for Children – Meeting the Challenge in the 1990s"

Toward a New Ethos for Children

New York
13 September 1990

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"TOWARD A NEW ETHOS FOR CHILDREN"

Why, one might ask, would the topic of this NGO forum at the U.N. be devoted to a topic as mundane, really, as children? Surely societies must, by now, know how to care for children. We have been attending to children since humanity itself was born. Why now? Why is there so much enthusiasm today surrounding issues related to children?

We could ask the same about the world's political leaders. Why will the largest gathering of Heads of State and Government in history convene in this building in two weeks to address an agenda devoted solely to child-related issues?

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 an 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. Even in the midst of regional tensions which so regretfully disturb the previous relative moments of peace, the willingness of countries to use the UN as the effective forum for negotiating solutions to political problems signals a major advance. Several commentators have called the last month the most creative in the history of the UN, as a result of reliance on the Security Council in the Gulf Crisis, and on the 5 permanent members for advances toward peace in Cambodia.

Finding the opportunities for children

How do we seize the opportunity for children? Among all of the influences affecting children today, perhaps this stark reality best leads us to why there is so much new attention to children: still today, and every day, 40,000 young children will die, and comparable numbers will be crippled or disabled for life from the side-effects of childhood diseases, the majority of them from causes for which we have long-since discovered low-cost cures and preventions. The stark contrast between what clearly can be done and what is being done is a startling comparison. Yesterday, and every day in this past week:

- some 7,000 children died from measles, tetanus and diphtheria because they were not immunized with US\$1 worth of vaccines;
- another 7,000 children died because their parents did not know how to apply the simple sugar, salt and water remedy, costing only a few cents, to combat the dehydration from diarrhoea that still is the world's single biggest killer of children;
- another 7,000 children died from respiratory infections because of the lack of early use of US\$1 worth of antibiotics; and
- finally, more than 1,000 children became blind because of lack of 10 cents worth of Vitamin A.

Why is there not more moral outrage at this obscene daily harvest of our youngest and most vulnerable? The new attention to children's issues is an indication, I believe, that we are beginning - en masse - to consider this absolutely unconscionable and unacceptable. A new ethos is beginning - just beginning - to emerge, which says that children should have a "first call" on the resources and concerns of society, and that children should be able to count on that priority in good times and in bad.

If we do not translate such readily preventable harm into moral outrage and action when relatively little effort will make such a tremendous life-or-death difference for vast numbers of the world's children, how can we expect a significant response to the far more complex social, civil and economic problems facing children today?

Synergism for children

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 meeting room this morning. 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.

Immunization coverage at the end of 1989 reached 71 per cent of the world's children - 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 World Summit, immunization coverage will reach 80 per cent globally by the end of this year - 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 - which came into force just 11 days ago after the fastest rendering of the ratification process of any human rights convention in history - would not exist in the form that it does without the active leadership of NGOs such as those represented here this morning. It was you or your colleagues 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.

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 as a result. 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

And of course, high among these key areas is progress is 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 sea-change in attitudes toward children, and toward society's sense of responsibility toward all the world's children.

The Summit in turn has already had a tremendous accelerating effect on both the Convention and on UCI. The World Summit is widely attributed with spurring countries to the early ratification in which the 20 necessary to bring the charter into force did so before the Summit. Progress is moving very quickly on UCI as well, as world leaders focus on their countries' accomplishments in both of these arenas in preparation for their own participation at the historic gathering.

Many of you gathered in this room, through your NGOs, have already found ways to contribute to a breakthrough for the children of the world through the World 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, for example, 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.

It is also most encouraging that representatives of worldwide youth NGOs will hold a Youth Round Table in Geneva next week with the theme "Children First" in conjunction with the World Summit.

In fact, as the World Summit rapidly approaches, it is becoming clear that it is the boost which it will give to action on behalf of 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.

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 today 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 World Summit surely occurs only once in a lifetime - perhaps once in a millenium. 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 our organizational affiliations and by our personal values - 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 of responsibility. 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.

GOALS FOR CHILDREN AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE 1990s

The following goals, formulated through extensive consultation, at country and regional levels and in various international fora including the relevant bodies of the UN (e.g., WHO, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF) and several international meetings including the World Conference on Education for All, attended by virtually all Governments and a large number of non-governmental organizations, are recommended for implementation by all countries where they are applicable, with appropriate adaptation to the specific situation of each country in terms of phasing, standards, priorities and availability of resources. Achievement of these goals is essential to full implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is the ultimate objective of programmes for children and development.

I. Major Goals for Child Survival, Development and Protection

- Between 1990 and the year 2000, reduction of infant and under-5 child mortality rate in all countries by one-third or to 50 and 70 per 1000 live births respectively, whichever is less.
- Between 1990 and the year 2000, reduction of maternal mortality rate by half.
- Between 1990 and the year 2000, reduction of severe and moderate malnutrition among under-5 children by half.
- Universal access to safe drinking water and to sanitary means of excreta disposal.
- By the year 2000, universal access to basic education and completion of primary education by at least 80% of primary school age children.
- 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.
- Improved protection of children in especially difficult circumstances.

II. Supporting/Sectoral Goals

1. Women's Health and Education

- Special attention to the health and nutrition of the female child, and pregnant and lactating women.
- Access by all couples to information and services to prevent pregnancies which are too early, too closely spaced, too late or too many.
- Access by all pregnant women to prenatal care, trained attendants during child birth and referral facilities for high risk pregnancies and obstetric emergencies.
- Universal access to primary education with special emphasis for girls, and accelerated literacy programmes for women.

2. Nutrition

- Reduction in severe as well as moderate malnutrition among under-5 children by half of 1990 levels.
- Reduction of the rate of low birth weight (2.5 kg or less) to less than 10%.
- Reduction of iron deficiency anaemia in women by one-third of 1990 levels.
- Virtual elimination of iodine deficiency disorders.
- Virtual elimination of vitamin A deficiency and its consequences, including blindness.
- Empowerment of all women to exclusively breast-feed their child for four to six months and to continue breast-feeding with complementary food well into the second year.

- Growth promotion and its regular monitoring to be institutionalised in all countries by the end of the 1990s.

- Dissemination of knowledge and supporting services to increase food production to ensure household food security.

3. Child Health

- Global eradication of poliomyelitis by the year 2000.
- Elimination of neonatal tetanus by 1995.
- Reduction by 95 per cent in measles deaths and reduction by 90 per cent of measles cases compared to pre-immunisation levels by 1995, as a major step to the global eradication of measles in the longer run.
- Maintenance of a high level of immunisation coverage (at least 90% of children under one year of age by the year 2000) against diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus, measles, poliomyelitis, tuberculosis and against tetanus for women of child bearing age.
- Reduction by 50 per cent in the deaths due to diarrhoea in children under the age of five years; and 25 per cent reduction in the diarrhoea incidence rate.
- Reduction by one-third in the deaths due to acute respiratory infections in children under five years.

4. Water and Sanitation

- Universal access to safe drinking water.
- Universal access to sanitary means of excreta disposal.
- Elimination of guinea-worm disease (dracunculiasis) by the year 2000.

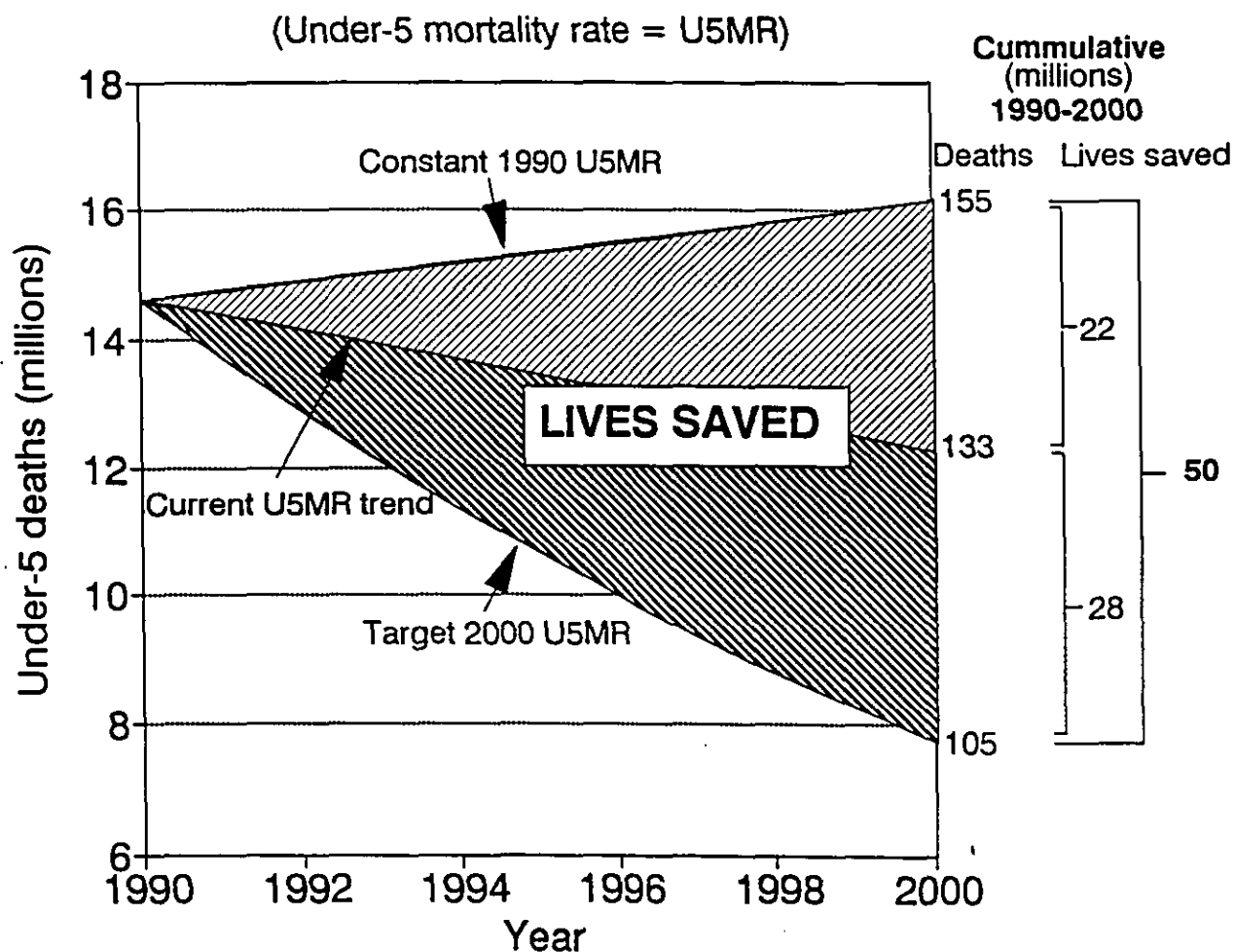
5. Basic Education

- Expansion of early childhood development activities including appropriate low-cost family and community based interventions.
- Universal access to basic education, and achievement of primary education by at least 80 per cent of primary school age children through formal schooling or non-formal education of comparable learning standard, with emphasis on reducing the current disparities between boys and girls.
- 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.
- Increased acquisition by individuals and families of the knowledge, skills and values required for better living, made available through all educational channels, including the mass media, other forms of modern and traditional communication, and social action, with effectiveness measured in terms of behavioural change.

6. Children in Difficult Circumstances

- Provide improved protection of children in especially difficult circumstances and tackle the root causes leading to such situations.

Saving children's lives in the 1990s



Target 2000 U5MR

Between 1990 and the year 2000, reduction of under-5 mortality rate in all countries by one-third or to 70 per 1,000 live births, whichever is less