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A Message Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
Youth Non-governmental Organization (NGO) Round Table

Geneva, Switzerland
15 September 1990

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

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I very much regret that I am not able to be with you today, as I place great hopes in the initiative which you, as young leaders from around the world, are launching today. However, it is another exciting and unprecedented event, the World Summit for Children, which at the moment demands my attention.

If I use the words "exciting" and "unprecedented", it is not lightly. For today more world leaders have agreed to gather to discuss child-related issues than have ever come together, for any purpose, in history. It may well be that dealing with a subject such as children - the most vulnerable among us, and yet our greatest hope for the future - creates an atmosphere in which the world's most powerful can agree.

What will count in the final analysis, however, is not what is said at the Summit, but what is done afterwards. And this is where the World Initiative you are about to launch is extremely important. For while we place great hope in the Declaration and Plan of Action that will come out of the Summit, we all know that political leaders face constant demands from many directions. It will be up to all of us to ensure that children remain high on their agendas and that they are not allowed to forget that many children live in poverty, that many are without families or homes, that they work in hazardous jobs and in inhumane conditions, are psychologically and physically abused or neglected, or are disabled and traumatized by the armed conflicts in which they are helplessly caught up. It is, of course, not only world leaders who must remain mindful of these sad realities.

Keeping the attention of both governments and the public on such crucial issues is, frankly, a role which societies have come to rely on networks of young people such as yourselves, to fill.

The second and vital role for young people is, of course, taking action yourselves. I know that one of the outcomes of your Round Table will be an Action Plan that you will take back to your own youth organizations, and that you will disseminate among others. We in UNICEF need no convincing that you have the capacity for striking results. The entire world has already witnessed the courage, the tenacity, and the creativity that youth can bring to a cause in which they truly believe.

And who could help but believe in the cause of children?

It is only by caring for children that we can build the kind of world in which we all want to live. You give a child the attention, the love, the tools he or she needs in order to grow, to develop, to mature, and she will return many times over the investment you have made, through his own commitment to building a world of justice, truth, respect, and freedom. But a world in which children are neglected, abused, and exploited, is a world that shows cruelty, tragedy, violence, and hatred.

You, as young people, know best how to reach out to other young people in order to inspire and mobilize them to work with you - with us - in building the kind of world of which we all dream. It is a most exciting prospect, that of adding fuel to the fires of this positive action, and that, I believe is just what you are creating the capacity to accomplish with your World Initiative.

A new tool is available for this work - a tool that only two weeks old, officially - and together we can use it to tremendous advantage for the survival, protection and development of children. That tool is, of course, the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Never have governments acted so swiftly to bring such a comprehensive human rights treaty into effect. The fact that they did is without a doubt in part thanks to the efforts of NGOs such as yours.

However, the Convention guarantees children's rights only in those countries where it has been ratified. Much, therefore, still remains to be done - first, to ensure its ratification in all of our countries. Secondly, implementing the Convention is up to all of us. It is up to us to fulfill its provisions by reaching out to the many children who do not yet have adequate health care, basic education, the right nutrition, safe drinking water, proper sanitation, adequate housing, and a family environment that is nurturing.

The challenge is enormous. To meet it, your insights and action are vital. You are the ones who are the closest to children and to young people; you are the ones who understand their situation from a most unique and sensitive vantage point. Your active participation and help are crucial to finding the best ways to improve the situation of children.

Your experience is needed. Your presence here, among those gathered for this important youth round table in Geneva, testifies to the fact that you have already held positions of leadership in your countries. You have already proven your ability to inspire, to lead, to organize.

Perhaps most important for the successful implementation of the Convention, it is necessary that you seize your rights, and set an example of empowerment for other and younger youths. It is only you, after all, who can live to the full your right to participate in your world.

We in UNICEF stand ready to work with you. We look forward to an increasingly strong partnership with you. We look forward to taking - together - a major step forward towards a better world for children.