

File Sub: CF/EXD/SP/1990-0040

Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
Rotary International's "Preserve Planet Earth" Conference

Dag Hammarskjold Library Auditorium
United Nations – New York

23 October 1990



UNICEF Alternate Inventory Label



Item # **CF/RAD/USAA/DB01/1998-02208**

ExR/Code: **CF/EXD/SP/1990-0040**

Rotary International: Preserve Planet Earth Conference. P1
Date Label Printed 20-Aug-2002

Cover + 6pp + 0b



United Nations Children's Fund Fonds des Nations Unies pour l'enfance Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia
Детский Фонд Организации Объединенных Наций 联合国儿童基金会 منظمة الأمم المتحدة للطفولة

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Preserve Planet Earth...For the Children

It is a great pleasure for me to meet and address my good Rotarian friends once again, especially so soon after the World Summit for Children, because Rotary International -- one of our most valued allies in the global struggle for child survival -- certainly helped make the Summit possible and successful.

The extraordinary commitment to child health and survival of Rotary International's more than one million businessmen and women in 25,000 communities in 172 countries and geographical regions, over a period of more than eight decades, is now, at last, the common commitment of the 71 Heads of State or Government and the representatives of an additional 80 countries who attended the World Summit for Children.

It is doubtful that so many world leaders would have made such a personal commitment to children if powerful humanitarian service organizations like Rotary International had not demonstrated, first, that saving and improving children's lives is eminently "doable" and, second, that it is "good politics" to give high priority to children.

Through the prominent role it has played in the child survival and development revolution -- most notably, through its PolioPlus immunization programme -- Rotary International has proven beyond all doubt that non-governmental organizations are key partners in implementing the goals endorsed at the Summit.

The world leaders attending the Summit explicitly acknowledged as much in the far-reaching Plan of Action they adopted along with The World Declaration

on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children. The Plan of Action states that "National governments should encourage and assist provincial and local governments as well as NGOs, the private sector and civic groups to prepare their own programmes of action to help implement the goals and objectives..." of the Summit. It adds: "The experience of the 1980s shows that it is only through the mobilization of all sectors of society...that significant progress can be achieved..." in child survival, protection and development.

This is what we at UNICEF have called the Grand Alliance for Children and, for many years, Rotary International has been one of its pillars. We feel confident that, with the impetus of the Summit and your continued dedicated endeavours, the alliance will broaden and deepen as never before, reaping untold benefits for children over the next decade.

Rotary International has long been in the forefront of efforts to achieve Universal Childhood Immunization/UCI-1990, raising and dedicating a most impressive \$240 million to polio eradication alone! Thanks to the concerted efforts of governments, NGOs, international agencies, communities and families, as well as the added boost given by the Summit, the UCI goal is now within reach and is likely to be attained by year's end. What a success story! In only a decade, we've gone from less than 20 per cent immunization coverage to nearly universal coverage of 80 per cent, now saving more than 2.5 million of the five million children in developing countries who had been dying each year from measles, tuberculosis, whooping cough, tetanus, polio and diphtheria.

But, as you know, achievement of UCI-1990 will represent only 80% coverage. That is why Summit participants committed themselves to maintaining a high level of immunization coverage, extending it to at least 90 per cent of children under one year of age and, in the case of poliomyelitis, seeking total eradication by the year 2,000. Were it not for Rotary International's dramatic successes, especially Rotary's support in combating the scourge of polio, I am certain the world community would never have adopted such bold -- yet now realistic -- goals.

The political breakthrough represented by the Summit and the adoption of the Declaration and Plan of Action gives rise to hope for other equally historic breakthroughs for children in the scientific and technical field. One such hope is the so-called "Children's Vaccine Initiative" launched jointly on the eve of the Summit by WHO, UNDP and UNICEF.

Development of a new multiple antigen vaccine that can be delivered in fewer doses than are required at present -- ideally, a single oral dose given at birth, inexpensive and stable at ambient temperature -- would save an additional eight million lives annually by the end of the decade and make the Summit goal of a one-third reduction in under-5 child mortality rates by the year 2,000 that much easier to reach. And as we work towards an "ideal vaccine", existing vaccines will almost certainly be improved, so that greater immunity can be afforded from fewer doses to ever larger numbers of children.

Just as in your work you attempt to address the many-faceted needs of humanity -- your programmes seem to cover everything from clean water and sanitation to world peace! -- the Summit also adopted a holistic approach to children. Thus, the actions and goals emanating from the Summit cover a broad range of inter-related activities, from immunization to debt relief, protection of children in times of war to education and women's empowerment. It is, in short, a practical, low-cost, perfectly "doable" agenda adding up to giving children a "first call" on society's resources, in good times and bad.

You have convened here to discuss the imperative, "Preserve Planet Earth", a theme Rotary International has adopted for a new three-year pilot programme during which time Rotarians will increase the number and diversity of environmental service projects around the world. The environment, too, is a "children's issue" and, as such, was dealt with by the presidents, monarchs and prime ministers who gathered at the Summit. Allow me to read to you the relevant paragraphs from the Plan of Action:

"Children have the greatest stake in the preservation of the environment and its judicious management for sustainable development as their survival and development depends on it. The child survival and development goals proposed for the 1990s in this Plan of Action seek to improve the environment by combating disease and malnutrition and promoting education. These contribute to lowering death rates as well as birth rates, improved social services, better use of natural resources and, ultimately, to the breaking of the vicious cycle of poverty and environmental degradation.

"With their relatively low use of capital resources and high reliance on social mobilization, community participation and appropriate technology, the programmes designed to reach the child-related goals of the 1990s are highly compatible with and supportive of environmental protection. The goals for the survival, protection and development of children as enunciated in this Plan of Action should therefore be seen as helping to protect and preserve the environment. Still more action is needed, of course, to prevent the degradation of the environment in both the industrialized and the developing countries, through changes in the wasteful consumption patterns of the affluent and by helping to meet the necessities of survival and development of the poor. Programmes for children that not only help to meet their basic needs but which inculcate in them respect for the natural environment with the diversity of life that it sustains and its beauty and resourcefulness that enhance the quality of human life, must figure prominently in the world's environmental agenda."

And in the Declaration, the world leaders solemnly pledged:

"We will work for common measures for the protection of the environment, at all levels, so that all children can enjoy a safer and healthier future."

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.

First among these is the life-threatening deterioration of the environment in which we all live. Much alarm has been expressed in recent years about the population explosion and, increasingly, about the degradation of land, air, water and other natural resources -- that category of problems that could be termed the "loud emergencies" of environmental concerns.

In the entrance of UNICEF headquarters in New York, an African proverb in 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.

A second perspective is that there is also an ongoing "silent emergency" of environmental pollution and degradation that affects the environment in which children are born, grow up and often die premature deaths. This is the environment, for example, of the malnourished, sick and illiterate mother, on whose care an infant is totally dependent from conception up to about six months of age. It is an environment marked by unsafe drinking water, unsanitary surroundings, the prevalence of the deadly or crippling diseases I mentioned earlier, and the deficiency of iodine, vitamin A and other micro-nutrients vital for health.

Many of the environmental problems of this second category 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 often 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 of 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 toll of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima every three days -- from adverse environmental factors such as polluted waters and from preventable diseases in the environment. More than 100 million children will die in the 1990s from these factors unless the goals endorsed at the Summit are implemented.

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 know how to approach these problems as development issues, and through low-cost means that are also environmentally friendly.

The protection of children from the negative consequences of these "silent" environmental threats is no less important than efforts to deal with the "louder" environmental emergencies. In fact, lasting success in dealing with some of the louder environmental emergencies is very much dependent on

improvements in the silent emergencies. For example, if families have access to sanitation facilities and know basic hygiene practices, the water supply will be cleaner. And by extension, people sensitized to the importance of clean water are more likely to demand that industry use environmentally sound practices as well.

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 most readily apparent in issues of overpopulation, and in the wide recognition that the increasing numbers of people are contributing greatly to many of the world's environmental problems -- the disappearance of the rainforests, the denuding of the Himalayas, the despoiling of coastal waters, and the deforestation of Africa, to name just a few.

It is also sadly evident that when a population consists of a significant proportion of people whose needs, as children, were not met -- people who bear for their lifetime the debilitating after-effects of childhood disease and malnutrition; people who have never been empowered with basic education regarding their own health and their capacity to have an impact on the world around them -- 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.

On the overpopulation issue, it is clear from the demographic and economic experience of developing countries that efforts to lower births, however well planned, cannot fully succeed unless they are accompanied by basic programmes to protect child health and ensure child survival.

That is not surprising since most families, before sharply reducing their number of births, must be confident in the health of their first-born children. To quote the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of India, "Parents are more likely to restrict their families if they have reasonable assurance of the healthy survival of their two children," and as former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere said, "The most powerful contraceptive is the knowledge that your children will survive". The report quotes a major U.S. Academy of Sciences study which concluded that:

"Policies and programmes aimed at reducing infant and child mortality may be an essential underpinning of government programmes for fertility control... As death rates are brought below 10-15 per 1,000 (live births) in present high-mortality countries, birth rates should be correspondingly reduced."

As child death rates are reduced toward the level at which parents are confident that their first children will survive, the number of births avoided becomes even much greater than the number of deaths prevented. If all countries were to achieve the same under-five death rates and the same birth rates as Chile or Sri Lanka, for example, then the world would see approximately 10 million fewer deaths each year -- and approximately 20 million fewer births.

There is strong agreement that child survival and development activities and family planning activities -- among them, birth spacing, breast-feeding and female education -- interact synergistically, each helping to advance the end goals of the other. The two types of activities together will contribute to population stabilization sooner and at lower levels than either type of programme alone.

The three major perspectives on the environment which I have outlined can hardly be viewed in isolation from one another -- our network of interdependence is far too intricately interwoven at this stage. In any serious consideration of children and the environment we must emphasize that not only are efforts aimed at improving the environment good for children; efforts aimed at improving the health of children ultimately have a positive impact on the environment.

Although it was properly billed as a World Summit for Children, the historic gathering of world leaders at the United Nations three weeks ago may turn out to represent one of the most significant events of the 1990s toward improving the environment -- if the goals for children it endorsed are implemented, leading to dramatically lower child death rates, with the corresponding slowing of population growth rates, improvement of basic health conditions and raising of educational levels. In the same way, I am equally sure that the landmark International Conference on Environment and Development, scheduled for 1992 in Brazil, will be yet another milestone in humanity's efforts to protect and nurture its children.

So, as Summit Co-Chair Brian Mulroney, Prime Minister of Canada, said at its conclusion, "The real work starts now." Implementation of commitments made by the world leaders must be monitored and followed up, as set forth in paragraphs 34 and 35 of the Plan of Action, which call on all the partners in the Grand Alliance for Children to prepare, before the end of 1991, plans and mechanisms for reaching the full range of year 2000 goals.. The challenge we face is to see that the legitimization of the principle of "first call" for children, that was accomplished through the Summit, is translated into practical and effective action.

UNICEF, the United Nations system's lead agency for children, will do everything in its power to build on the new political momentum that has been generated for children. It is comforting to know that a million Rotarians -- whom I once called "fellow revolutionaries" in the global struggle for child survival -- are always prepared to do what needs to be done... and then do so much more!