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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
on
Peace Prayer Day
sponsored by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)

New York
2 December 1990



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We meet, I believe, at a great turning point in history. The turning point to which I am referring is not defined by the ending of the cold war, nor by international collaborations for national security.

Rather, I believe we are at -

- a turning point for the children of the world - the most vulnerable among us, and yet our greatest hope for the future ...
- a turning point in the preservation and reclamation of our precious earth and environment ... and
- we are at a turning point in all of the issues and problems that can only be solved by peoples working together ... by nations banding together.

Two months ago, in the World Summit for Children, we saw a new mode of operation in nations coming together.

We saw the wheels of power turn on the constructive business of peace. As President Carlos Salinas De Gortari of Mexico said during opening ceremonies:

"Today we are focusing the attention of States on the need to give priority to our children, to whom we must hand over a more humane world, infused with sensitivity. This is perhaps the first world summit of the new age. We are calling here for new times."

It was here, in this very hall where we are gathered today, that an unprecedented 159 delegations assembled - 71 of them led by Heads of State or Government - to discuss a Declaration and Plan of Action committing virtually all of the nations of our world to sweeping change...

...change in the way we respond to the essential concerns of the children of our countries -

...change in the way we respond to their suffering, to their needs, and to their rights -

...change in the way we allocate our resources - within communities, within countries, and even amongst nations - to ensure that those essential concerns are met.

All of our great religious and spiritual traditions speak of the preciousness and sacredness of life as it manifests in the child, and of the responsibility of adults to protect and care for children. The World Summit for Children is an affirmation that the primacy of responsibilities toward children extends beyond the obligation of parent to child, to be an obligation of all society - to the State, as evidenced by the new Convention on the Rights of the Child, and, increasingly, to the world community of nations, as evidenced by the World Summit.

In fact, the World Summit can be seen as a major early step toward implementing the principles codified in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Plan of Action signed by leaders at the Summit outlines extremely practical steps which would ensure that the rights named in the Convention are met in actual practice by nations and societies. It thus gives a new legitimacy to the rhetorical standards of the Convention.

Links between children and the environment are deep and intricately interwoven. Perhaps most obvious is the glaring reality that without a life-sustaining environment, there would be no future at all for children to inhabit.

The proverb at the entrance to UNICEF headquarters, across the street, states: "The earth was not left to us by our parents...it was lent to us by our children." Deterioration of the environment is clearly threatening to the future of the planet, and what jeopardizes the future axiomatically threatens children.

But the linkages between issues related to children and those involving the environment are woven deeper still into the warp and woof of our world. Unless the current situation of children changes - the reversal of their own desperate environmental predicament - we will not save the external environment as we know it.

Poverty and disease are the result of environmental neglect and degradation. If the situation is not altered, then poverty and disease will necessarily be the cause of environmental degradation.

There are two main threads in this tight weave. The first involves the environmental pollution and degradation in which so many children are born, grow up and often die premature deaths.

...It is an environment often marked by unsafe water, unsanitary surroundings, and the prevalence of such vicious yet readily preventable diseases diarrhoea, malaria, pneumonia, measles, polio and tetanus.

...It is an environment often marked by deficiencies in basic micro-nutrients vital for health, such as iodine and vitamin A.

...It is the environment of the malnourished, sick and illiterate mother - the primary environment and source of life from conception through the first half year of life.

These are age-old problems of the environment. Today they are all-the-more tragic because they 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.

Today, still, as we approach the end of the 20th century, 40,000 young children die, the majority of them from causes for which we have long-since discovered low-cost cures and preventions...many of them from these age-old problems of the environment. It is the same disastrous toll that was taken yesterday...the same that will be lost tomorrow.

Why is there not more moral outrage at this obscene daily harvest of our youngest and most vulnerable - a harvest which every three days equals that at Hiroshima? And why, one must ask, aren't religious groups and people's movements more active in reversing this great wrong?

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 environmental, social, civil and economic problems facing children, and indeed, the world, today?

The second main thread in the intricate interweaving of children's and environmental issues is that problems related to children can have a deleterious effect on the environment. In issues of overpopulation, for example, we all can see that increasing numbers of people are contributing to many grim abuses of the environment.

A great synergistic interaction exists among efforts to lower child deaths and efforts to lower population growth rates. No society has dramatically lowered its population birth rates without first significantly lowering its child death rates. Parents must ultimately become confident that their children will survive before they choose to have smaller families.

There is now strong agreement that child survival and development activities and family planning activities each help to advance the 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.

A momentum is building, I believe, to leverage the synergism of activities such as these across a broad spectrum related to children, the environment and the social concerns that are the constructive business of peace. To all of us who are committed to these issues - to peace...to safeguarding our environment...to the survival, protection and development of our world's children - I would say: this is our moment.

At the World Summit for Children we saw the most powerful forces within our societies turning to issues of children - a most fitting entry-point to the new world we seek of peace and cooperative endeavour in addressing common global problems.

But while the Summit may signal a turning point, we have not yet rounded the corner. The sweeping changes promised at the Summit could only come to life if millions and tens of millions of people around the world make it good politics for world leaders (including the successors of those present for the Summit itself) to fully live up to the promises, and bad politics for them to ignore the plight of children.

It was peoples' movements and the political climate - and pressure - they created that brought leaders to the World Summit for Children...that forced this historically new type of gathering and commitment into existence. It was social mobilization in the field of child health that made remarkable progress possible during the last decade, and it was the success of those movements that made it good politics to voice a strong position on behalf of children.

It is time for people everywhere to force an advance to a whole new level. It was peoples' movements that made the Summit possible, and it is people who hold the power to create the climate in which leaders will deliver on the promises of the Declaration and Plan of Action. It is for us, now - for people like us gathered in this room - to use the legacy of the World Summit to create an ever stronger popular movement. It is up to us to insist that issues of children, the environment and peace - issues which are inextricably interwoven - receive the priority attention and resources of our societies.

While the commitments of the world's leaders are vital, it is the attitude of the many millions that will determine whether they are carried out.

Just before Prime Minister Brian Mulroney of Canada closed the World Summit and invoked the blessing of God on all involved, he stood in the front of this room and spoke the last five words of the historic gathering: "The real work starts now."

The opportunities which such an historic gathering lay before us surely occur only once in a lifetime...once in a millenium. This moment is a turning point if we decide that it is so. Are we ready to make the brakthrough? ...to round the corner into the new world? For the children - and the future - of our world, working together, I think we can.