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Speaking Points for Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
for
the opening of the
36th Annual Meeting of the National Committees for UNICEF

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Opening of the 36th Annual Meeting of National Committees

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

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36th Annual Meeting of the National Committees for UNICEF
Geneva - 27 January 1991

- I. Extremely pleased to be back among the chairpersons and CEOs of the National Committees once again.

We meet at an extraordinary moment, both in global historical terms and in the arena more particular to the children of the world. It is a most propitious moment not only to re-examine the situation of the world's children, but also to take a fresh look at the role of National Committees for UNICEF in responding to the needs and rights of children.

The constellation of influences which affect the children of the world can hardly help but be largely determined by the sweeping events of historical dimension which define our era.

- Gulf crisis - besides obvious impact on children in the region, the conflict is a severe regression to military solutions to problems. The US\$30 billion war (to date) has sadly given new life to armament budgets and drained life from that ephemeral "peace dividend".

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- Eastern Europe - UNICEF is pleased to have established an office in Romania, with supporting staff in Geneva and New York. Assistance will be largely of an advisory capacity. While it is clear that UNICEF must respond to the needs of children and the requests for assistance in Eastern Europe, as endorsed by Executive Board, presence will be quite different from a full country programme. It is critical that help to Eastern Europe not be seen as detracting from assistance to developing countries.

Concurrent with these major political changes are significant development advances on behalf of children.

- II. Although less than 8 months since we met in Barcelona, an historic turn has been taken in that short interval for the children of the world.

NatComs have played no small role in bringing about the major shift.

In fact, all of 1990 may well be looked back upon as history's most important year to-date for the children of the world.

- A) UCI - miracle in the making. Increasingly aware of the scale - my moment of realization came in Nepal...immunization reaches more places than the postal system...

UCI is the result of perhaps the largest collaborative effort ever undertaken - all sectors of society within a country, plus the international community.

- B) Since we met in June, the Convention on the Rights of the Child came into force after a shorter ratification period than any human rights convention in history, with 58 countries ratifying it within 10 months. To date 69 countries have ratified. Societies are just beginning to realize the implications of this new Magna Carta for children, which establishes the obligation of societies to ensure that children's rights are met.
- C) World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien - first global meeting of experts and decision makers in the field of education - galvanized new commitment to common goals among countries and international development community.

A major benefit of basic education is empowerment of people. Extending that benefit to all of a population requires a coordinated effort to reach the poorest of the poor, and should be seen as part of a country's democratization process. Basic education for all is also the best development investment, and the underpinning of sustainable human-centered development.

- D) World Summit for Children was successful well beyond our expectations, even as recently as June. Several historical firsts:
- first truly global summit, with leaders from N,S,E, and W;
 - 71 heads of state and government attended, making it largest summit in history, with high level participation from another 88 governments;

-- output of the Summit was the most powerfully endorsed declaration ever issued, by virtue of the number of heads of state and government plus others who signed on their behalf, and also in terms of the specific commitments made.

The Declaration and Plan of Action contain promises far more bold than one could expect of a summit, based on historical precedent. Specific goals were set - including the goals for children and development in the 1990s which we just saw highlighted in the slide presentation - goals by which the leaders' own actions and the action of their countries can be measured. Paragraph 34 gives measureable standards and specific action for each country to take - both within the time frame of the decade, and by the end of 1991.

The last year has seen the culmination of an incredible process. We are in this synergism of efforts on behalf of children.

III. The implications to the National Committees of all of these advances for children, especially as they are focussed for action in the promises of the Summit, are major, indeed.

Many people ask, "How are you going to convert the 2 September coming-into-force of the Convention into action?" And the Summit Plan of Action, taken seriously, calls for a genuine re-evaluation in how societies deal with children. How do we move from resolution to results?

What is being called for in the historic societal promises enshrined in the Convention and in the Summit Declaration and Plan of Action, including the goals for children for the decade, is no less than a major revolution for children in the 1990s.

Success in keeping the promise of the Summit will mean that by the end of this decade (among many other improvements):

- some 50 million child lives will have been saved over present trends;
- the incidence of child malnutrition will have been halved;
- illiteracy for girls and women will have been more than halved; and
- polio and guinea worm will have been eradicated from the face of the earth.

Neither these reachable achievements nor significant progress on implementation of the Convention will happen, however, unless we can mobilize far more than we have to date. The agenda is obviously far too encompassing for UNICEF to even think of accomplishing with its small staff. The directive of the 1990s is a whole new order of business on behalf of the world's children. The National Committees comprise an inner circle and front line of a cooperative effort that will require

all sectors of society, within their relevant domains, to take responsibility for meeting the essential needs of children. Public opinion, through a myriad of groups, must press for action.

The role of the National Committees has been inextricably altered by events of 1990. For example, the implications of the Convention and the Summit Plan of Action open the door onto new responsibilities in developing and industrialized countries alike. There is a new obligation for advocacy on behalf of children in your own countries, in addition to a whole new order of fundraising responsibilities on behalf of children in the developing world, and a corresponding new level of outreach and advocacy related to their plight.

IV. Are the National Committees ready for this new order of business? The events which culminated in 1990 leave us in a unique position, indeed, with doors open to new and expanded initiatives to improve the survival, protection and development of children. Are the National Committees ready to seize today's opportunities for the children of the world?

What are the next steps?

The next steps have been very explicitly set out in the slide presentation we just saw, and they will be elaborated during your discussions here in Geneva. Each division with External Relations functions within UNICEF has honed in on its priority objectives, and on the key actions that can really only be taken by National Committees.

Highlights include:

- **Can you help reach the goal of 11 per cent annual growth in UNICEF income, meaning that US\$1 billion must be raised in 1993? Your active participation is essential, both for support in government fundraising, and for your own fundraising activities.**

- **Are you willing to take responsibility for the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Summit Plan of Action, both through national-level advocacy, and through international solidarity?**

- **Are you ready to insist on bringing children's issues into the mainstream of public concern through vigorous media outreach and other creative channels of information dissemination?**

- **Are you ready to assume the commitments of the Summit, including ODA restructuring in favour of children?**

- **Are you ready to take on, and maybe even surpass, the goal of doubling non-governmental income by 1995? This is a clearly achievable goal, but it is not even conceivable without your leadership.**

This meeting in Geneva is a critical one for the future work of UNICEF, and the role that the National Committees will play for years to come in efforts on behalf of children. We have before us here objectives for a decade of work. I wish you tremendous inspiration and determination in setting the course of action which will take us into the new millennium. If we are successful, it will be a world that takes for granted full responsibility for the survival, protection and development of all children.