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Introduction to 1991 UNICEF Annual Report by  
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"1990: the Most Momentous Year for Children in History"

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1990 may not have borne the official designation — that belonged to 1979 — but last year was a real International Year of the Child, perhaps the most momentous year for children in history.

It was a year of unprecedented action and promise for the young. The World Summit for Children was its high point, one of those pivotal events that shape and accelerate qualitative change.

It was, certainly, the high point of UNICEF's four-decade effort to place children's needs at the top of the world's agenda, and a source of deep satisfaction to the entire UNICEF family.

1979 was, unquestionably, a milestone in the world's ongoing attempt to grapple with the shameful "family secret" of more than 15 million children dying, of largely preventable causes, each year, and the stunting of the bodies and minds of millions more due to poverty and malnutrition.

In 1979, we already had the basic tools we needed -- the life-saving know-how and technologies, in particular -- for going about the business of improving children's lives.

But it wasn't until 1990 that other critical factors -- missing totally or partially a decade earlier -- fell into place, making it possible for civilization to move collectively to ensure a significantly better future for all children.

By 1990, the international climate had undergone dizzying, unexpected changes in the direction of freedom and co-operation.

Bold advances wrought by **perestroika** in the Soviet Union, the transformation of Eastern Europe and subsequent reunification of Germany all contributed decisively to the end of the Cold War that had divided East and West and militarized the world economy. An early and substantial "peace dividend" was expected to result from this lessening of international tensions and permit the re-direction of military funds toward social spending, increased aid and debt relief for development.

Changes elsewhere also contributed to the new atmosphere. Democrats had driven dictators from power in Latin America. The light at the end of the long, dark tunnel of **apartheid** in South Africa could be seen following the release of Nelson Mandela.

When we first began to talk about a summit meeting for children -- in December 1988 -- we sensed the time would soon be right for focusing the world's attention more sharply on the plight of its children. But, quite frankly, we did not envision a gathering of the size and scope of the one that finally took place on 29-30 September.

In the highly favorable international climate of democratic change and enhanced co-operation that developed at the tail end of the 1980s, the idea of the Summit took off -- thanks particularly to the enthusiastic backing of UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar and the courage and vision of the leaders of Canada, Egypt, Mali, Mexico, Pakistan and Sweden who called the meeting.

As the attendance list began to swell in mid-1990, it became clear to us that the World Summit had become the first major test of the post-Cold War waters, of what could be accomplished in the "window of opportunity" afforded by the end of super-power rivalry and the advance of democracy worldwide. And of all possible topics of discussion -- ranging from peace to the environment to the economy -- the theme of the World Summit for Children was clearly seen as the one around which the broadest and deepest political consensus could be developed. Political will at the highest level -- perhaps the key missing link in 1979 -- was finally being mobilized for society's youngest and most vulnerable members.

Leaders from 159 countries representing 99 per cent of the world's population -- 71 of them presidents, prime ministers or kings, and 88 senior representatives and plenipotentiaries -- from North and South, East and West, took part. It was the largest such gathering in history.

By personally signing on to a Declaration and Plan of Action that promise to assure children a "first call" on resources to meet their essential needs, "in bad times as well as in good times", the Heads of State and Government took, in effect, the first step toward establishing the well-being of all people -- of "grown-up children" as well as children -- as the central objective of development in a new world order.

Through the extraordinary media coverage it generated, the Summit focused more attention worldwide and provoked more soul-searching on the broad range of child-related issues than ever before.

In fact, momentum had been building all year. 1990 saw a remarkable convergence of events that signaled, in different ways, a collective readiness to come to grips with the problems of children, poverty and development.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, approved the previous November by the UN General Assembly, was opened for signature in January 1990 and entered into force as international law in less than eight months -- the most rapid ratification of any international human rights treaty. For the first time, universal standards for society's treatment of the young have been codified

and made binding upon the growing number of States ratifying the Convention. Although full implementation will take a long time, the Convention may well prove to be the most enduring promise for children made in 1990.

In March, the World Conference on Education for All was held in Jomtien, Thailand, co-sponsored by UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank. Attended by virtually all the governments of the world and a large number of non-governmental organizations and international agencies, the Conference endorsed an expanded vision of basic education and a solid framework of action for the decade. The goal: to ensure that, by the year 2000 at least 80 per cent of all 14 year old boys and girls will have achieved an acceptable national standard of primary education, adult illiteracy rates will be at least half what they are today, and girls and boys, women and men, will have equal access to essential knowledge and skills.

In April, UNICEF's Executive Board charted the agenda for the organization for the decade by approving a comprehensive set of development goals and strategies for children in the 1990s — laying the basis for the action programme later adopted at the World Summit for Children.

In September, on the eve of the Summit, experts and officials from 115 countries gathered in New Delhi to design new strategies and set realistic goals in the effort to provide safe water and adequate sanitation to the more than one billion people who lack these services. The importance of clean water and proper sanitation, taken for granted in industrialized nations, looms as a life and death matter elsewhere, with grave implications for health, the environment and economic development.

Throughout the year, the international community moved steadily toward a staggering achievement: immunization, by the end of 1990, of 80 per cent of the developing world's children against the major child-killing and -crippling diseases. Just over ten years ago less than 15 per cent had the protection of vaccines and about five million children a year were dying from preventable diseases and another 500,000 were being crippled by polio. Achieving the 1990 goal means that some 100 million infants are being reached with vaccines four or five times during their first year of life -- a total of 500 million contacts every year between children and organized delivery systems -- now saving the lives of about 8,000 children a day. That is 12 million lives since the campaign began and more than two and a half million young lives saved in 1990 alone.

Attainment of the UCI 1990 goal underscores what can be accomplished when governments, international agencies, non-governmental organizations, communities, families and the media get fully behind a common strategy for improving children's lives and provides well-trodden paths for advancing toward meeting the full array of development goals set by the World Summit.

We in UNICEF worked for the World Summit for Children -- for the Declaration and Plan of Action which it adopted, and for the Convention on the Rights of the Child which it advanced -- not simply because of the direct impact which they might have on children, as worthy a purpose as that would be. We worked for the first World Summit because we believed it also could be the first collective step toward a new ethic for humanity... and a "Trojan horse" for a new order to the world.

Success in this effort -- 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;
- \* polio and guinea worm will have been eradicated from the face of the earth;

and, as we've learned from the most successful newly industrialized countries in the Pacific, economic progress will have been considerably accelerated and population growth will have been significantly slowed. In short, sustainable human development will have been advanced.

What a tremendous encouragement successes in these efforts would be for tackling the more difficult challenges of the environment, the debt crisis, international trade, among others!

First steps are difficult and unsteady and it is easy to stumble before the second or third. As I write, children are donning gas masks and taking shelter against missiles and bombs as war revisits the Middle East and casts a shadow over the brighter prospects which the last decade of the 20th century



seemed to hold in store for humanity. Hopes for a great and early peace dividend have dimmed and recession in the North has now joined prolonged depression in the South, painting a bleak picture for the world's poor.

Our hopes and our emotions have certainly ridden a roller coaster this year. If there is one constant in the disorderly equation it is the profound and continuing need of children in the world's poorest communities for the tools of survival and development. At the World Summit for Children, the planet's leaders pledged never again to put these needs on hold and they rejected, once and for all, the traditional excuses -- wars, recessions, depressions, foreign debts or commodity prices -- for not investing in the future by meeting the essential needs of society's young.

To ensure that the commitments made to children in 1990 are not buried in the sands of war in 1991, or that new justifications for neglect and abuse do not again gain a foothold amidst economic crises in the years to come, a worldwide movement for children -- for people -- is needed... a global movement akin to the movements against slavery, colonialism, environmental degradation or women's inequality... but this time, it must be a movement *for* rather than a movement *against*, a movement allied with and giving special dimension to the movements for peace, environmental protection, population and other causes likely to dominate the world of the 1990s.

Such a movement, which was glimpsed in the grassroots support actions that took place around the world on the eve of the Summit, can enable us all to take the second and third steps toward the new life-centered world order we seek.