

File Sub: CF/EXD/SP/1991-0012

Article by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

for
Time Magazine

May 1991



UNICEF Alternate Inventory Label



RcF0006HTM

Item # CF/RAD/USAA/DB01/1998-02226

ExR/Code: CF/EXD/SP/1991-0012

Children and the Year 2000: Promises to Keep. Article by P
Date Label Printed 20-Aug-2002

cover + 2pp + 06

Children and the Year 2000: Promises to Keep

by Mr. James P. Grant, Executive Director,
United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
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Less than a year ago, an extraordinary promise was made: that over the decade of the 1990s, societies will do what must be done to make children a first priority. Whether times are good or bad, whether there is war or peace, the resources necessary to meet children's essential physical and mental needs should be found. Massive, measurable and sustainable improvements will be made in the lives of children by the year 2000,

The pledge was made by 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 — who met at United Nations Headquarters in New York on 30 September 1990.

The occasion was the World Summit for Children, a "first" in many ways. It was the first-ever gathering of top leaders from North and South, East and West and 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 world-wide. It was the first time that a social issue — not arms control or a peace treaty or economics or borders — was the exclusive subject of a multilateral summit. It was the first time that the needs and problems of children were examined at such a high forum.

On that Sunday, the world's leaders did not only endorse lofty principles; they also put their signatures to a document committing themselves and their governments to a Plan of Action. A very detailed Plan of Action establishing more than 20 specific targets to be met by the year 2000. A Plan of Action establishing mechanisms for monitoring progress at the one, five and ten-year points. A Plan of Action that, in effect, invites the world and the citizens of each country to hold their leaders and governments accountable for what they do or do not do for children.

Each of us — whether Head of State, member of parliament, bureaucrat or private citizen — must now work to ensure that this unprecedented promise is kept.

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;
- * polio and guinea worm disease will have been eradicated from the face of the earth;

and, as we have learned from the most successful newly-industrialized countries in the Pacific, economic progress will have been considerably accelerated and population growth significantly slowed.

By adopting such concrete, verifiable goals, the world's leaders were saying, in effect, that the status quo is no longer tolerable, that there is no reason in today's world for 40,000 children to die each day from ordinary malnutrition and disease or for 150 million others to live on with ill-health and poor growth. There is no reason for 100 million 6 to 11-year-olds to be out of school. Why? Because the means of ending what we at UNICEF call the "quiet catastrophe" are now both available and affordable.

This year is a crucial one in the process of keeping the promise to children. By the end of 1991, as agreed to at the World Summit for Children, governments and international agencies are supposed to have completed their plans, re-ordered their priorities and overhauled their budgets to make it possible to reach the year 2000 goals for children. In the midst of economic recession and the aftermath of the Persian Gulf war, with emergencies and difficulties of all kinds confronting them, politicians and governments will be thinking hard and long about where to allocate limited resources. Retreat from the promises made at the World Summit for Children will, inevitably, be a temptation in the face of competing demands.

Now more than ever, ordinary citizens and every conceivable type of organization can play a critical role, taking action to improve children's lives, advocating for new priorities and reminding their leaders that spending on children is no luxury, but an investment in the future, in the productive capacity of society as a whole. Only a global movement for children -- for people -- akin to the movements against slavery, colonialism, environmental degradation or women's inequality, can ensure that the promises made that Sunday, 30 September 1990, are kept. As Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney challenged his colleagues as he gavelled the unprecedented World Summit to a close, "The real work starts now".