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Remarks by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
upon receipt by UNICEF of the
Inaugural Earth Prize

United Nations
5 June 1991

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It is a great honour, indeed, for me to accept this award today on behalf of the United Nations Children's Fund, and to do so together with Lisbet Palme, Chairman of UNICEF's Executive Board and wife of my friend of 40 years, Olof Palme. I want to express UNICEF's profound gratitude to United Earth for bestowing one of its Inaugural Earth Prizes on an organization devoted to "uniting the earth" for the survival, protection and development of the children who will inherit the earth.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate our fellow laureates and their representatives: President Salinas, whose commitment to saving the environment goes hand in hand with an equally extraordinary commitment to improving the lives of his country's children; Prime Minister Brundtland, who has long played a strategic leadership role in formulating a global agenda for the environment and development, and Mr. Ted Turner, who has harnessed the information and communications revolution in the service of the well-being of the planet and its inhabitants. We are honoured to be in such distinguished company.

When my predecessor, Henry Labouisse, accepted the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of UNICEF, in 1965, he spoke of the award as "the solemn recognition that the welfare of today's children is inseparably linked with the peace of tomorrow's world." Updating this just a bit, I would say that this new award for UNICEF constitutes the solemn recognition that the welfare of today's children is inseparably linked not only with the peace of tomorrow's world, but with our planet's survival through sustainable development and the re-establishment of a healthy environment for all its peoples.

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. As we have inscribed as a permanent reminder in the entrance to UNICEF's headquarters: "The earth was not left to us by our parents...it was lent to us by our children."

There is a second level of concern. It is for the immediate environment in which more than a billion people — humanity's poor, who represent fully a fifth of the planet's population — live out their days. Theirs is for the most part an unhealthy and unsanitary environment and 40,000 children still die every day, largely from adverse environmental factors such as polluted water and from preventable diseases in the environment. We at UNICEF call this huge but preventable daily loss of children's lives the "silent emergency". The poverty and disease which result, in large measure, from environmental neglect and degradation contribute, in turn, to further deterioration of the environment.

A grand alliance of nations, international organizations, NGOs and individuals is beginning to make significant progress on this front. The World Summit for Children is one magnificent manifestation. Just this morning I left Lagos, Nigeria, after 3 days of discussion and planning on those issues with 35 heads of State and Government attending the OAU Summit. There was bad news — the debt crisis, low primary product prices, drought and war. But there also was good news such as the success of the immunization effort. African children ages one and two now have immunization levels equal to or higher than the United States, and the lives of 2,000 children are being saved daily as a result. Oral rehydration is saving the lives of another 1,000 daily. African leaders are leading on behalf of children.

A third concern is that the 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 between efforts to lower child deaths and improve basic education on the one hand and efforts to lower population growth rates on the other. No society has dramatically lowered its birth rates without first significantly lowering its child death rates to desired levels. Parents must ultimately become confident that their children will survive before they choose to have much smaller families. There is a welcome synergism between child wellbeing and family planning. Thanks to such combined efforts, birth rates are now dropping sharply in such African countries as Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco and are beginning to drop in such sub-Saharan African countries as Kenya and Zimbabwe.

This is where efforts to ensure child survival and development dovetail with efforts to safeguard the environment and it is, I suspect, why UNICEF is receiving this award today. The growing movements to improve children's lives and preserve the environment are overlapping and mutually-reinforcing movements. The 71 presidents, prime ministers or monarchs who attended the historic World Summit for Children in September last year fully recognized these linkages and designed a Plan of Action whose more than 20 child-related goals for the 1990s are, in their words, "highly compatible with and supportive of environmental protection". While calling for increased action on the environment, they also stressed the need for the world's environmental agenda to include "programmes for children that not only help meet their basic needs but which inculcate in them respect for the natural environment...".

At the World Summit, and in the Convention on the Rights of the Child whose entry into force just preceded it, a new and revolutionary principle was endorsed: that children's needs should be elevated to the highest ranks of our priorities and concerns. We at UNICEF are convinced that giving children a "first call" on the resources of society and the earth -- in good times and bad, in times of peace and in times of war -- would take us a long way toward protecting, nourishing and sustaining our human and natural environment.

As part of the United Nations system, UNICEF will continue to play its modest part for the environment -- with UNEP in the leading role on this critical issue -- and we are doing our best to help make the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development an historic turning-point.

The Earth Prize will serve as an incentive for us to work still harder to make the world a safer place for children and help make children into healthy, vital and educated environmental activists -- good citizens of Mother Earth.