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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
Mayors for Children Conference

"What Role for Mayors in the Grand Alliance for Children?"

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Rome - 30 September 1991

What Role for Mayors in the Grand Alliance for Children?

This is a doubly happy occasion. A gathering to strengthen and expand the role of mayors in the Grand Alliance for Children would be a cause for celebration at any time. But the fact that we are meeting today, September 30, on the first anniversary of the historic and unprecedented World Summit for Children, which was attended by 71 heads of state and government and 88 other senior delegates, gives your deliberations added weight and special meaning. It underscores, of course, that this discussion is not taking place in a vacuum. Just the opposite is true. For the first time in history, there is a global momentum of political will, a solid policy framework and an agenda for concrete action with respect to children that encompasses the highest and the most basic levels of government.

On the eve of the World Summit for Children last year, you launched your valuable "Mayors: Defenders of Children" initiative. Your initiative and the World Summit show that mayors working at the local level, and presidents and prime ministers working at the national and global level, are all on the same wavelength. This means we have the makings of a genuine global movement for children, and it certainly looks like mayors intend to -- and should -- be in the forefront of that movement.

The eloquent appeal you sent to the leaders attending the World Summit for Children was based, most appropriately, on the Convention on the Rights of the Child that had just come into force weeks earlier. The Convention, as you well know, is the most comprehensive human rights document ever framed, ensuring to children their rights in nearly all areas of importance to their well-being and development. The Summit provided the forum at which political leaders framed the goals and programmes necessary to implement these children's rights.

I was gratified to learn that Italy has just ratified the Convention -- the 97th nation to do so. More than 40 others have indicated they are pressing forward toward ratification. This speedy and widespread embrace of the Convention, and the signing of the World Summit Declaration by 122 heads of state or government to date, add up to the greatest promise ever made to children: that massive, measurable and sustainable improvements will be made in their lives by the year 2000.

We are also meeting at a time of a worldwide move away from authoritarianism and toward democracy. However, democracy and development for children cannot be severed; they are two faces of the same coin. Democracy cannot long co-exist with widespread malnutrition among children. Democracy cannot long co-exist with widespread illiteracy. Democracy cannot co-exist with great numbers of children who are without hope. Democracy, in short, must stand for improvements in their situation, and most important, for their having hope for their future.

World Summit for Children follow-up: seriousness of purpose

In this context I am happy to report to you that more than 100 governments are expected to complete -- by the end of 1991 or shortly thereafter -- their National Programmes of Action to implement the commitments for children undertaken at the Summit. Most countries have established high-level, inter-ministerial bodies to oversee the process of elaborating the 10-year plans of action and, in many cases, to co-ordinate other official programmes relating to children. In a number of countries -- such as Mexico and Venezuela -- these bodies include governors and other regional officials, mayors, and representatives of the private sector, trade unions, members of parliament, religious leaders and NGOs. UNICEF's offices in 115 countries are working closely with governments on Summit follow-up and implementation, and the feeling one gets from the field is of great energy, seriousness of purpose and genuine movement.

In your appeal to the World Summit for Children you pointed out, rightly, that mayors -- as democratically elected public officials -- can play an important role. By providing leadership to public opinion, you can promote growing commitment to solving the problems of children and their families. "Mayors around the world", you stated, "are ideal advocates for children, because they are in direct contact with the emerging daily needs concerning both the survival of children and their physical, cultural and social development."

The heads of state and government who attended the World Summit fully agreed and stressed, in their Plan of Action, the key role regional and local governments should play in efforts to achieve the year 2000 goals. And they pledged to "encourage and assist provincial and local governments as well as NGOs, the private sector and civic groups to prepare their own programmes of action". In June, on a visit to Mexico to discuss national Summit follow-up, I was most gratified and, frankly, suprised, when I was handed draft Programmes of Action for several states and from the mayor for Mexico City. Mexico City has already exceeded the 90 percent immunization goal for children under age one set for the year 2000. In August, I travelled to Bolivia,

Venezuela and Peru where I learned that Programmes of Action are being prepared by their capital cities and their provincial governments in the context of their National Programmes of Action. So a great deal is happening, not only at the national level, but at the level of states and municipalities. This is wonderfully in step with the worldwide trend toward more democratic, decentralized systems.

Italian mayors in the forefront

The Convention on the Rights of the Child reinforces this trend through its emphasis on the child's right of participation. From the outset the initiative of the Italian Mayors has specifically aimed at accomplishing this purpose. A precedent has been established for other nations by your approach of including all schools in your municipalities in preparing programmes for children. Students, educators and parents discussing together the situation of children in their community, brings a strong note of realism to deliberations of your Municipal Councils. Further, it ensures a greater sense of understanding on the part of those who must make the programmes work effectively.

I believe there has been a great deal of wisdom in naming Mayors the "Defenders of Children". As the elected officials closest to the people, you bring an insight and commitment possessed especially by those directly involved and responsible to the people.

In all this, special tribute should be paid to Arnolando Farina, the President of the Italian Committee for UNICEF, and Franco Carraro, the Mayor of Rome. Their vision and untiring efforts have made possible this initiative, last year and throughout this year. Your actions have been in the best spirit of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and have begun to make a reality of the grand purpose envisaged by the heads of state at the World Summit for Children.

All of you who participated in last year's meeting and have since begun actions for children in your own municipalities deserve a special note of appreciation for creating an example for the world. Also, the Minister of the Interior should be praised for his initiative encouraging participation of Prefects in assisting the development of local initiatives. This set in motion a fruitful interplay between governments at the national, provincial and local levels on behalf of the children of Italy. I understand that political parties have also begun supporting this initiative.

The meeting yesterday with the municipal organizations is the beginning of the larger undertaking to spread your experience to other nations of the world. I am especially grateful that Mamadou Diop is with us today, both in his role as Mayor of Dakar and as current President of the World Conference of Mayors of Capital Cities. As you know, our deliberations here are a preparation for the global conference next January in Dakar - the International Colloquium of Mayors. All mayors of the world will be challenged to embrace the "Mayors as Defenders of Children" initiative, within the framework of their own respective political systems.

You do not have to "re-invent the wheel"

Not only is this the right political moment for pushing ahead toward the year 2000 goals for children -- we already have the basic knowledge and tools in hand for reaching them. We do not have to "re-invent the wheel". In particular, the success of the global undertaking to bring immunization to children everywhere gives us confidence that the broader range of goals can be reached. As you perhaps know, next week the World Health Organization and UNICEF will certify attainment of the 1990 goal for Universal Child Immunization (UCI). That is, over 80 per cent of the children of the world had been immunized against six childhood diseases by the end of 1990, quadrupling coverage from the 20 per cent level of only a decade ago. The lives of more than twelve million children have been saved since the campaign began -- 3.2 million last year alone.

Essential to this achievement has been social mobilization, especially the role played by political leaders at every level and grassroots organizations in many countries. Without their political will and commitment, the goals of the Expanded Programme on Immunization could not have been attained. We have learned much from this effort and are now ready to apply this new knowledge and understanding toward achieving the other goals that have been set for the 1990s.

Allow me to cite two Latin American examples. Mexico City did not reach the 80 per cent immunization goal by the end of 1990, so its Mayor decided following the World Summit to present the world's largest city with an even greater challenge. He proposed going beyond the 1990 goal to reach the 90 per cent coverage level the world's leaders had established as one of the year 2000 goals -- and it would be reached, promised Mexico City's mayor, not in a decade but in only nine months' time. Well, they pulled out all the stops and, at the end of those nine months, this September, they have told us they made it. And if 90 per cent of the children in that sprawling mega-city could be reached in so short a time, there is absolutely no reason why dynamic municipal leadership cannot produce similar miracles elsewhere. New York City, where less than 50 percent of under-ones are fully immunized, just last week launched a massive catch-up city wide campaign.

The second example. Thanks especially to the use of oral rehydration therapy reinforced by community action -- led by women's groups in most cases -- the overall case fatality rate during Latin America's current severe cholera epidemic has been kept well below one per cent, whereas in past epidemics, death rates ranged from ten to forty per cent. In Peru, they were able to keep the death rate down even though the great majority of the country's health workers were on strike -- again, by relying on "people power" (particularly "women power") and low-cost health interventions.

Within local governments, Mayors are aware of the need to mobilize people politically but may not have mobilized them for social and health purposes, for education and for helping develop skills to improve their conditions of life. The programmes of action for the 1990s set forth an agenda for attaining the goals people want, for themselves and for their families, and the challenge facing local leaders is to mobilize communities around this politically-attractive and economically-viable agenda.

Improving life for people where they are now

The new world in which we are living opens the possibility of changing the way people live now. Neglect of the rural areas in development led millions of people over recent decades to flee to the bright promise of the cities, creating shanty-towns, slums, runaway sewage, disease, unemployment, exploitation, crime, drugs and despair. Children are the most vulnerable and the first to suffer under such conditions.

Another kind of flight from underdevelopment has alarmed Europe, even as people look to a bright future in the new European Community. Immigration from the poor nations to the prosperous is creating a politics of resentment, raising new social and political problems. The solution both to migration from the countryside to overpopulated cities and from poor countries to the well-off lies in improving life for people where they are, so they will not want to leave and go elsewhere.

A transformation of the urban landscape, beginning with the people of a community seeking an improved quality of life, can become the agent of change fundamental to development. The question immediately is raised, where are the resources to come from, where are the funds needed to bring about this transformation? Your experience and UNICEF's experience show that there can be new cost-effective ways of meeting the basic needs of children and their families with basic services. Increased participation of urban dwellers and the people of rural areas alike provide a resource not heretofore fully tapped -- the energy of the people themselves. As they improve their communities they create new services at less cost and are ready to pay for the services themselves.

New allies, innovative collaboration

Also, the Grand Alliance for Children is finding important new allies. You may have noted the important contribution announced two weeks ago. The Italian conglomerate ENI, in collaboration with UNICEF, will fund a major pilot project to advance children's health in three countries -- Ecuador, Angola and India. It will implement low-cost preventive techniques aimed at reducing infant mortality. Following evaluation, the project will be expanded to all locations in the world where ENI operates.

As we go forward with the mayors' initiative, I am sure many of you will want to join in the "twinning" of cities -- as we are celebrating tomorrow with Dakar and the region of Abruzzo joining in such a symbiotic relationship. A great deal of mutual benefit -- and learning -- can come from "twinning" and other such "cross-pollinating" exchanges. This has been done already, sometimes on a large scale, but among cities of the industrialized world. I suggest it should be done worldwide. I am thinking, for example of sharing experiences in dealing with the special problems of street children, drugs, AIDS prevention, of "healthy life-styles", among others common to North and South.

Breastfeeding presents another challenge common to industrial and developing countries. For lack of it, more than a million babies -- between

three and four thousand a day -- die each year. We have recently gotten assurances from infant formula manufacturers that they will end their pernicious practice of giving free or low-cost supplies of formula to hospitals. Together with the World Health Organization and a broad coalition of NGOs, we are now promoting a campaign to make all hospitals "baby-friendly" -- that is, to get them to fully support breastfeeding from birth by taking ten actions proposed by WHO and UNICEF. Wouldn't it be possible, shouldn't it be possible, for each mayor who attends the Dakar meeting in January to report progress, in their own municipality, toward making hospitals "baby-friendly"?

Onward to Dakar with Programmes of Action

In fact, the challenge is broader and deeper. The challenge you face is to make your cities truly "bambini-friendly". In Dakar, a global movement of mayors for children will be launched. What better way to do so than by each mayor presenting his or her own city's Programme of Action for meeting the year 2000 goals! Through your initiative, Italy can motivate and provide examples to Mayors throughout the world. Just as in the Renaissance, when this country's ideas, art and music influenced and helped civilize our world, now, too, by making each municipality and every institution in it "bambini-friendly", with healthy mothers and educated mothers, the great majority of babies breastfed, virtually all children protected by vaccination, all young children in school, ample playgrounds for children and the like -- you can help civilize it even further.

I appreciate greatly being with you today, and look forward to the future development of the initiative you have begun here in Italy: "Mayors: Defenders of Children." and from which tens of millions of children in other countries can also benefit.