

File Sub: CF/EXD/SP/1991-0036

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for
Forum Magazine

"Fulfilling the Promise:
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17 October 1991



UNICEF Alternate Inventory Label



tem # **CF/RAD/USAA/DB01/1998-02251**

ExR/Code: **CF/EXD/SP/1991-0036**

Fulfilling the Promise. Article by Mr. James P. Grant, Exe
Date Label Printed 20-Aug-2002

cover + 8pp + 8b



United Nations Children's Fund Fonds des Nations Unies pour l'enfance Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia
Детский Фонд Организации Объединенных Наций 联合国儿童基金会 منظمة الأمم المتحدة للطفولة

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FULLFILLING THE PROMISE

The 1990s in the Aftermath of the World Summit for Children

by James P. Grant, Executive Director
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History may judge 1990 as the most momentous year ever for the world's children. Beginning with the World Conference on Education for All, convened in March; running through the Convention on the rights of the Child in September, and culminating in the historic World Summit for Children on September 30, 1990 saw unprecedented attention directed toward the most defenseless and needy among us: children.

The most significant result of this concentration of energies and efforts was the articulation of new global consensus. This "new thinking" holds that social and economic progress -- and morality -- require that children's needs be elevated to the highest of society's priorities and that the young be given "first call" on resources. If the promise is kept, the 1990s can be the decade when the shameful large-scale deaths and widespread malnutrition of the world's children were consigned to history, providing a permanent gift from the last decade of the 20th century to the people of the 21st.

Education for All

The first major event of 1990 relating to children was the World Conference on Education for All, which was jointly convened by UNICEF, UNESCO, the United Nations Development Fund and the World Bank. It brought leading non-governmental organizations and international agencies together with virtually all of the world's governments. The Conference focused on the major roadblock to social progress arising from the poor's lack of access to education.

More than 100 million of the world's school-age children do not attend primary school -- two-thirds of them female. Nearly a billion people -- one out of four adults -- do not know how to read and write; again, two-thirds of them are women. This tragic waste of individual potential is, at the same time, a major disinvestment in the productivity and competitiveness of nations.

Based on an exhaustive analysis of successful educational experiences and models from both developed and developing countries, the Conference adopted a strategic framework and action plan to achieve the following goals by 2000: reduce adult illiteracy rates by half; ensure that 80 per cent of all 14-year-olds attain an acceptable rate of primary education; and provide girls and boys, women and men, with equal access to essential life skills and modern knowledge.

To accomplish these objectives, the Conference proposed a shift in national budget priorities from higher education for a few to primary education for all. It called for restructuring of international aid budgets to support this shift (at present, only one per cent of all the industrialized world's assistance goes into primary education). The conference also encouraged communities to use innovative approaches, including the creation of informal, vocational learning centers as a bridge until formal primary education can be provided for all.

The world's education ministers and leading education experts also stressed the importance of mobilizing every available high- and low-tech, new and traditional channel for educational purposes -- harnessing the information and communications revolution and mobilizing society for educational purposes.

Fulfillment of these goals would provide benefits beyond education, leading to improvements in the status of women, child survival and family health, economic growth and reductions in population growth rates.

Children's Rights

In November 1989, the United Nations General Assembly approved the Convention on the Rights of the Child -- culminating a decade of arduous negotiations complicated by Cold War politics. The treaty was opened for government signature in January 1990. Eight months later it had the requisite number of ratifications to enter into force as world law -- record speed for ratification of a human rights treaty. For the first time, universal standards for treatment of the young have now been codified and made binding on the governments that ratified the Convention. The standards set minimal precepts for health, education and survival and are designed to protect children against exploitation, violence, and sexual abuse in the home, school, workplace.

By mid-1991, 90 countries, well over half of the nations of the world, had ratified the Convention. Another 50 have signed, indicating an intention to ratify. The challenge is to bring national laws into line with the Convention and, more importantly, to have its precepts "enter into force" in the daily practice of governments, communities, families and individuals. An international committee has been elected to monitor compliance.

Despite strong support in the U.S. Congress for ratification and bipartisan agreement that children need to be given higher priority in American society, the United States is among a small group of nations have yet to sign the Convention. Treaty ratification is a slow process in the United States; however, it would be a shameful if this "Magna Carta", this historic

Bill of Rights for children, were to get bogged down in political debates alien to the spirit of a document that enjoys support among diverse ideological, religious and secular constituencies worldwide.

The World Summit for Children

The Convention's success on the eve of the World Summit for Children provided the presidents, prime ministers and monarchs who attended the September 30th gathering with a legal-ethical framework for their deliberations.

To the Summit came the largest and most representative contingent of world leaders ever gathered in one place at one time. Seventy-one heads of state or government and 88 plenipotentiaries and senior representatives came from 159 countries representing 99 per cent of the world's population. The leaders signed a Declaration and Plan of Action that committed their governments to ensure that children get "first call" on resources to meet their urgent needs "in bad times as well as good times." Thus, it was without hyperbole that The Nation described the Summit as "among the most important gatherings ever called by the nations of the world."

The Declaration -- more formally, the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children -- contains a 10-point program including:

- * Earliest possible ratification and implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child
- * International and national action to enhance children's health, promote pre-natal care, lower infant and child mortality, provide clean water and sanitation
- * Measures to eradicate hunger, malnutrition and famine.
- * Programmes to strengthen the role and status of women, promote family planning, child spacing, breast-feeding.
- * Strategies to reduce illiteracy and provide educational opportunities for all children, regardless of their background and gender.
- * Efforts to ameliorate the plight of millions of children who live under especially difficult conditions -- for example, under apartheid or military occupation or as refugees or laborers.
- * Measures to protect children from the scourge of war and civil conflict.
- * Steps to protect the environment to guarantee a safer, healthier future for children.

Ambitious yet do-able goals

The seven major over-arching goals contained in the Plan of Action to implement the World Declaration by the year 2000 are:

- * Reduce 1990 under-five child mortality rates by one-third or to 70 deaths per 1,000 live births, whichever is the greater.
- * Reduction of 1990 maternal mortality rates by one-half.
- * Reduction of 1990 levels of severe and moderate malnutrition among children under five by one-half.
- * Provide universal access to safe drinking water and to sanitary means of excreta disposal.
- * Provide universal access to basic education and completion of primary education by at least 80 per cent of primary school-age children.
- * Reduce 1990 adult illiteracy by one-half.
- * Protect children in especially difficult circumstances particularly in situations of armed conflict.

Skeptics charge that nobody can oppose the rights of children. But those who heard the speeches of the 71 heads of state and government -- each limited to five minutes, in itself an historic achievement -- understood that most had come to grasp the fundamental insecurity of nations rooted in undernourished, diseased, uneducated, unstimulated, neglected children. In the Declaration and Plan of Action, the leaders have assumed some political risks: they have set specific, measurable goals; established performance markers at the one, five and 10 years; asked international organizations and non-governmental organizations to work with them to achieve those goals; and requested United Nations agencies, particularly UNICEF, to help monitor, assess and report on their progress, thus inviting the United Nations to publicly hold them accountable on a yearly basis for keeping their pledges.

Hope and Reality

The World Declaration begins by stating:

"The children of the world are innocent, vulnerable and dependent. They are also curious, active and full of hope. Their time should be one of joy and peace, of playing, learning and growing. Their future should be shaped in harmony and cooperation. Their lives should mature, as they broaden their perspectives and gain new experiences. But for many children, the reality of childhood is altogether different."

Just how different is altogether scandalous and sobering. Each day this year, 7,000 children will die from measles, tetanus and diphtheria because they were not immunized with vaccine that costs \$1. Another 7,000 children will die each day because their parents did not know to administer the simple

sugar, salt and water remedy -- costing only a few pennies -- to combat dehydration caused by diarrhoea, still the single biggest killer of children. Yet another 7,000 children will die today from respiratory infections due to the lack of a dollar's worth of antibiotics. A thousand children are blinded every day because of the absence of 10 cents worth of Vitamin A.

Altogether, 40,000 children die every day -- seven days a week, 365 days a year -- and comparable numbers are crippled or disabled for life from the side-effects of childhood diseases. This would be "merely" tragic if we did not have the means to prevent this daily slaughter of innocents. But the modern world does have the means -- and they are affordable -- making this the greatest obscenity of our times.

Two-thirds of the 14 million children who die each year could be saved if their parents were properly informed and supported. According to Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), three million children could be saved by simple and inexpensive oral rehydration; three million more by immunization. In poor countries and poor communities, millions of bottle-fed infants often ingest inferior, artificial milk substitutes diluted with unclean water in unsterile containers, making them three times more likely to die in infancy than breast-fed infants. Breast-feeding provides newborns the best nutrition and highest degree of natural immunity against childhood infections, and it is free.

Two-thirds of all deaths in the United States result, at least in part, from poor diet and eating habits. One study has concluded that 600,000 deaths in India each year are tied to tobacco-related diseases. This is where education comes in. Numerous studies have shown that the more education leads to fewer children and higher survival rates. The massive suffering of the world's poor -- whether it is the 50 per cent of South Asia's population which lives in poverty or the 15 per cent of U.S. families living below the poverty line -- could be alleviated with basic education that empowers people to help themselves.

At present rates, 150 million children will die in the 1990s from preventable disease -- that is the equivalent of one Hiroshima-type bomb dropped on the world's children every three days, 120 times a year, each year. Why is there not greater moral outrage at this daily harvest of our youngest and most vulnerable?

Advances amidst crisis

Significant gains in the survival and health of children were recorded in recent decades, even during the 1980s, which for most of the developing world the "lost decade" of debt crisis, economic retrogression and shrinking social sector budgets. By continuing these improvements, we could reduce the child death toll by 20 million to 25 million in the 1990s. In one of the world's most impoverished countries, Bangladesh, for example, immunization coverage rose from two percent of the children in 1985 to nearly 80 percent by the end of 1990. In Sub-Saharan Africa, where the crisis has been the most severe and prolonged, at least 25 countries achieved 75 percent immunization in the same period.

With the audacious yet feasible goals adopted at the World Summit, it is conceivable that we could actually double the rate of improvement over the 1980s, so that at century's end the daily child death rate by preventable disease would be reduced by half to 20,000. If we to succeeded, we would save the lives of 50 million children in the 1990s. The time has come to place mass deaths of children by immunizable diseases alongside slavery, colonialism, racism and apartheid, as simply unacceptable practices.

Some observers have asked why save children if only poverty awaits them and their survival will lead to even greater population pressures and environmental stress? Of course, the children "not worth saving", in the minds of the sceptics, are not their own, who receive every benefit modern society can offer. The ones who should be denied vaccines and oral rehydration therapy are poor children, who do not merit the world's best efforts on their behalf.

Aside from the morally skewed premise of the question, the fact is that reducing child deaths is essential to reducing birth rates. The Summit's Plan of Action noted that "the achievement of these goals [of lowering death rates for children] would also contribute to lowering population growth." As we approach the third millenium, birth rates are falling in most countries. Developed industrialized countries have lower child death rates and lower birth rates than developing countries. But in China, Sri Lanka, the Indian state of Kerala, for example birth rates have been greatly reduced in the absence of significant gains in per capita Gross National Product. In each case, there is an even greater reduction in child deaths. China, Sri Lanka and Kerala are among the 40 developing countries/regions with the lowest per capital incomes, the 20 with the lowest under-five mortality rates, and the 10 with the lowest birth rates. If social progress had brought all of South Asia to the point at which under-five death rates and birth rates were at the levels prevailing today in Sri Lanka, then the region as a whole would experience 5.2 million fewer child deaths each year - and 14.3 million fewer births.

Among the mechanisms at work in fostering this twin phenomenon of lower death and birth rates are these: (1) the death of an infant ends the suppression of ovulation caused by breast-feeding, making a new pregnancy more likely; (2) a child's death can prompt couples to replace the loss by a new pregnancy sooner than they might ordinarily intend; (3) in areas where child death rates are significant, many parents compensate for the anticipated loss of children by giving birth to more as "insurance" for the future. Combined with lack of family planning, these are the major reasons for high fertility rates. Conversely, as the United Nation's Population Division has concluded, "Improvements in child survival, which increase the predictability of the family building process, trigger the transition from natural to controlled fertility behavior. This in turn generates the need for family planning."

Putting children first would help humanity address many vexing problems, from poverty and overpopulation to women's disenfranchisement. Population explosion and the destruction of land, air, water are "children's issues", for without a life-sustaining environment, what future can children expect to inhabit? And while industrialized countries struggle against the problems of

consumption -- pollution of rivers and lakes, the "greenhouse effect," smog and acid rain -- the billion people who comprise the poorest one-fifth of humanity have never had access to the clean water that a simple hand-pump would bring. Nor have they had access to the basic hygiene information that could save millions of lives each year.

A movement for children

Historical moments of societal change such as we are now experiencing -- the end of the Cold War; the upsurge of democracy from Southern Africa to South America to Eastern Europe; the popular knowledge of the fragility of the planet with its dwindling resources and endangered ecology -- occur only twice or thrice in a century. This is what Norman Cousins called the "open window in history." We now have a chance to redirect society's priorities toward people-oriented development. Building a "new world order" worthy of 21st century humanity will mean that nations will have to find a different way of interrelating than marching across borders, carpet-bombing, plundering the earth, sea and air, and starving civilians, the majority are children and their mothers. Hunger, illiteracy and infant mortality choke freedom and opportunity as much as tyranny. The price of preoccupation with war and preparing for war in the past half-century has been paid in the distortion of our science and technology, in the absorption of our management and political skills, the waste of our energies and ingenuities, and the distraction of vision and imagination. With the end of the Cold War, the dividends of peace could be paid to humanity in many currencies, starting with the liberation of financial and human resources to meet social needs.

There are always reasons to deny resources -- recessions, national debts, austerity budgets, national security needs. But as Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere rhetorically asked: "Must we starve our children to pay our debts?" First call on resources will mean providing the additional \$20 billion per year throughout this decade required to implement the World Summit's Plan of Action. This demand is hardly utopian if the popular will is there to back up the signatures of the presidents, prime ministers and kings. Only a vigorous, peaceful movement for children, in rich and poor nations alike, will keep alive the political will shown by the world's leaders on September 30, 1990 and make its translation into action possible. As stated in the 1991 State of the World's Children Report:

"In our national societies, and in the international community, we have the knowledge, the techniques and the organizational capacity. We are therefore confronted with a stark question: do we have the will?...We are now talking about a particular opportunity to save the lives of approximately seven million young children a year, and to protect the normal development of many millions more, at a cost which certainly does not exceed a fraction of one percent of the world's gross international product...It is unlikely that there will ever again be such an opportunity to do so much for so many, and for so little."

Parents have a responsibility to raise and nurture their children. This responsibility is no less is this true of adult society toward the children of the world. As loving and caring parents have established priorities down

through history, giving "first call" to their children, the decision that society will ensure the well-being of children for generations to come will offer evidence that we as a species are ready to ascend to a new, more just and humane civilization.