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Address by Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
at the  
International Policy Conference on Micronutrient Malnutrition  
"Ending Hidden Hunger"

"The End of 'Hidden Hunger' is in Sight"

Montreal, Canada  
11 October 1991



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Address by Mr. James P. Grant

Executive Director, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

at the

International Policy Conference on Micronutrient Malnutrition  
"Ending Hidden Hunger"

Montreal - 11 October 1991

"The End of 'Hidden Hunger' is in Sight"

It is a pleasure and a privilege to be here today at this potentially historic milestone event in the long history of humankind's struggle against hunger -- in this case, the "hidden hunger" of micronutrient malnutrition. If knowledge is power -- as the wise saying goes -- this is certainly a most powerful gathering. We have here the world's foremost scientists and experts in the field to whom we owe so much for their years of dedication and often lonely pioneering work. If national decision makers are key to action, in this room we have an impressive array of government ministers and senior officials (many from countries where the problems we are addressing are most severe), high-level representatives from international agencies and public health leaders, all of whom are in a position to translate knowledge into policy consensus...common strategies...new resources and, most importantly, accelerated global and national action. If social mobilization and health education is another key, we also have in this room an impressive array of health educators, social mobilizers, and communication experts. Your agreed common goal is another key. The World Summit for Children, the greatest gathering of power holders ever, has instructed us to eliminate vitamin A, iodine and iron as major deficiencies.

Given the centrality of nutrition to virtually all aspects of human and economic development, a successful global offensive against micronutrient malnutrition will give a decisive push to human progress in the 1990s and, particularly, to meeting the broad range of goals adopted by the World Summit for Children, held just a year ago. The task awaiting us is a formidable one -- to convert the potential in this room into an historic breakthrough -- but I know you will all agree that it can and must be done.

### An enabling international environment

Our deliberations here this week are greatly facilitated by a new international climate in which truly global co-operation is possible for the first time in more than half a century: the Cold War has ended; defense expenditures are being reduced; democracy is expanding throughout the world.

In addition, we are powered by the extraordinary mandate for concerted action that all of us -- each in our specific spheres of activity -- received from the World Summit for Children following years of consultation and agreement among experts and international agencies. The success of worldwide efforts to reach universal child immunization (UCI 1990), certified and celebrated earlier this week at United Nations headquarters, provides us with a momentum of confidence, mobilization and communication on which our micronutrient offensive can build. In part -- only in part, but an important part -- it provides us also with one of the key frameworks, a set of strategic allies anxious for additional challenge, a vehicle for some strategic components of that offensive.

In fact, this is a gathering of many of the same individuals and organizations who made these recent breakthroughs possible. It was, to a great extent, the success of the immunization effort many of you pioneered and all supported that led to the setting of a broader range of new goals by the World Health Assembly, the UNICEF Executive Board and other bodies, which the world's political leaders then embraced at the World Summit for Children. The gratification of having made a difference -- of accomplishing what many thought impossible -- should now inform and energize our discussions here in Montreal.

To date, the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children and its accompanying Plan of Action has been signed by 123 heads of state or government, and initialed by senior representatives of another 27 countries. No other document in history bears the signature of so many world leaders and their commitment for specific action within a specific time period. It marks the point at which the world officially woke up to the fact that child death and child malnutrition on today's scale are no longer inevitable and are therefore no longer acceptable. Political will -- long the missing link between what can be done and what will be done -- is engaged, and it is now up to us -- up to governments, UN agencies, NGOs, industry and others in the private sector, communities and individuals everywhere, for which we in this room are the representatives -- to see to it that world leaders are helped to keep their remarkable promise made to children a year ago.

### Malnutrition: a key focus of the World Summit

The presidents, prime ministers and monarchs who attended the World Summit gave prominence to the problem of malnutrition. In the 10-point programme they adopted, they state:

"We will work for optimal growth and development in childhood, through measures to eradicate hunger, malnutrition and famine, and thus to relieve millions of children of tragic sufferings in a world that has the means to feed all its citizens".

In a section dedicated specifically to food and nutrition, their Plan of Action states:

"With the right policies, appropriate institutional arrangements and political priority, the world is now in a position to feed all the world's children and to overcome the worst forms of malnutrition, i.e. drastically to reduce diseases that contribute to malnutrition, to halve protein-energy malnutrition, virtually to eliminate vitamin A deficiency and iodine deficiency disorders and to reduce nutritional anaemia significantly".

These goals -- endorsements, really, of targets adopted prior to the World Summit by the governing bodies of WHO and UNICEF -- are, in effect, both our "marching orders" and our political opportunity. That is why we are here, to strategize on ways of "keeping the promise" in implementing the Summit goals related to iodine, vitamin A and iron deficiencies, in the framework of efforts to cut malnutrition in half by the end of the decade.

The fight against malnutrition lies at the very core of human development, with intimate linkages to the entire array of goals for the 1990s. Because of their exceedingly high impact and low cost, efforts to eliminate micronutrient deficiencies can constitute the cutting edge of the attack on malnutrition, and -- as with UCI -- provide the encouragement that comes from knowing that what once seemed unattainable can, in fact, be accomplished.

#### Micronutrients are really "super-micronutrients"

As will be made abundantly clear here this week, and as USAID's Richard Bissel correctly insisted months ago, the term "micronutrients" hardly does justice to the significance of these essential dietary constituents. Named that way because of the minute amounts of them we require each day and the difference they make to our well-being, they are really "super-micronutrients", or "super-nutrients", if one takes into account their great importance for the economic and social development of a country, as well as for the welfare and quality of life of its people. Deficiencies in iodine, vitamin A and iron constitute three out of the four nutritional problems of most public health significance today. Dr. Nakajima has already explained the magnitude of this problem facing fully twenty per cent of the world's population -- concentrated primarily in the developing countries. And what makes this situation all the more unacceptable is that this massive loss of life and waste of human potential is entirely preventable...at a genuinely "micro" cost.

Prevention of "micro" deficiencies will result in major macro benefits. It will raise the average intelligence quotient among deficient populations,

reduce infant mortality and boost work productivity. Just a few weeks ago, the Leeds Castle International Conference on the Prevention of Disability underscored the advances that could be made against physical and mental disabilities through provision of this triad of essential nutrients.

#### An eminently "do-able" proposition

What makes our effort against micronutrient malnutrition so eminently "do-able" is the fact that nothing new has to be invented: the tools we need are already in the workshop — effective and low-cost remedies which have existed for many years. Where they are applied, the results are truly extraordinary. Two vitamin A capsules, costing four US cents, can stave off deficiencies in an individual for a year. The iron pills needed for the recommended three to four month treatment period cost a quarter of a US dollar. Iodization of salt works out to about 5 US cents per person per year. Of course, there are other costs associated with training and distribution, and establishing local production capabilities, but to the extent that the fight against micronutrient deficiencies is integrated into other programmes, these costs can be kept quite low. It would be difficult to find a health intervention more cost-effective than the nutrition education, the dietary fortification and supplementation remedies now available for the global effort against hidden hunger.

#### The way forward

While the conditions prevailing in each country will, of course, determine the concrete strategies to be adopted for each micronutrient (and a situation analysis in each country is the first requirement), the way forward thereafter is clear: the solution lies in the proper combination of dietary diversification, food fortification, supplementation, and public health strategies that address the factors preventing adequate absorption or utilization of micronutrients. However, long-term sustainable approaches to prevention and control will need to be accompanied by short-term measures to assure achievement of our year 2000 goals.

Interventions can address multiple deficiencies at the same time. Public education campaigns can promote dietary changes to correct iodine, vitamin A and iron deficiencies; salt can be fortified with both iodine and iron; clean water programmes can include an iodization component. Some existing channels -- such as the Expanded Programme on Immunization -- can and should be used to deliver, where needed, all three micronutrients. To be successful, our offensive against hidden hunger will need to be conducted, in most cases, through primary health care systems and agricultural extension services, and through schools, commercial networks, the communications media...strengthening their capabilities in the process.

#### The need for public education and mobilization

Micronutrient deficiency does not produce hunger as we know it; it gnaws at the core of health but not in the belly. Most of its consequences are not

readily perceived; like the iceberg, its bulk lies beneath the surface. Even its most apparent effects -- such as blindness and cretinism -- seem to most people to be unrelated to diet. That is why we call it "hidden hunger" and why such an extraordinary effort must be made -- through every available channel -- to drag it into the open, make it visible as an issue at the political level, and empower families with the prevention knowledge they need.

Communications is our most powerful tool. Take the case of the remote Andean mountain regions of Ecuador, where a million people were believed to be iodine deficient in the mid-1980s. Remarkable progress has been made there -- in a short time -- in getting the local population to switch over to iodized salt and, where appropriate, be injected with iodized oil. This was accomplished through a sophisticated -- but low-cost -- social marketing strategy relying on a flexible combination of radio broadcasting of nutrition messages (in Spanish and Quechua), health education by schoolteachers and intensive training of village leaders and health workers in the most change-resistant communities. Over 80 per cent of those formerly at risk are no longer so, and complete coverage is on the horizon.

The time for bold action is now

What is now required to win our war against hidden hunger is a global mobilization of the type and magnitude that has made the immunization programme such a success story. Much greater cooperation and acceleration of governmental, private sector, NGO and community efforts is now needed. Aggressive policy action and regulatory enforcement on the part of governments is necessary; greater initiative and co-operation on the part of the food industry will be critical; and all the time-tested techniques of public education and social mobilization will need to be employed to facilitate the transition from supply-oriented to demand-based programmes.

I am pleased that there is a new major private sector initiative that will give our offensive against "hidden hunger" a real boost. The pharmaceutical giant, Hoffman-LaRoche, has informed WHO and UNICEF that it will be providing, free of charge, sufficient vitamin A to dose 115 million children in 37 countries over the next three years. This generous donation is aimed, specifically, at giving impetus to a newly-launched WHO/UNICEF initiative linking vitamin A supplementation with measles immunization.

This "piggy-backing" approach points us in the direction we need to be headed: integration and coordination of programmes for resource savings and maximum efficiency. Where relevant and feasible, countries should consider using existing programmes of high coverage, such as the EPI, for reducing and eliminating micronutrient deficiencies -- along with fortification and other dietary strategies.

Most governments now preparing their 10-year Programmes of Action to implement the goals of the World Summit for Children will want to include detailed plans for eliminating hidden hunger. Upon returning to their countries, I am sure that many health ministers and other government officials

attending this conference will want to ensure inclusion of such plans in these national programmes, due by the end of this year.

Many industrialized countries are now reviewing their development assistance budgets to ensure that they are supportive of the Summit goals, and I am confident that the donor community will act decisively to see to it that programmes to address micronutrient malnutrition will be adequately funded. And it is not only money that is needed: your scientists who are doing such promising research in the micronutrient field can share their expertise with their developing country counterparts. Producer countries can supply nutrients needed for our accelerated effort.

This conference could not have taken place at a more opportune moment -- just when human development and aid plans are being drafted for the decade ahead. But this also means we have no time to lose. Most often there is a lag of many months and even years between the holding of a major international policy conference and the implementation of the agenda it adopts; in the present case, given the "window of opportunity" we now have, this is a luxury we simply cannot afford. We must get things rolling on an entirely new qualitative level, starting right now.

Many countries may wish to accelerate plans to achieve the micronutrient goals well before the year 2000 -- indeed, some have already set themselves such targets. Bolivia, for example, now seeks to achieve the goal for iodine deficiencies by the end of 1993. Earlier attainment has political attraction; it will provide encouragement by example, permit action to enter a "maintenance" phase, and enable priority attention to be given to Summit goals yet unreachd.

The Grand Alliance for Children which has gathered new partners and unprecedented strength in recent years can be the foundation and springboard for a powerful Global Alliance to End Hidden Hunger. This week the leadership of this alliance has assembled in Canada, most appropriately, inasmuch as Canada, together with the United States, has taken a leadership role in this "super-nutrient" effort. The end of hidden hunger is in sight in this decade of the 1990s. We know what must be done and how to do it, and our presidents and prime ministers have committed their support. I am confident that, together, we can meet the great challenge posed by micronutrient malnutrition, leaving this conference with common strategies and strengthened resolve to succeed in this great undertaking to eliminate this hidden enemy.