

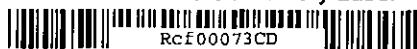
File Sub: CF/EXD/SP/1991-0042
See also: CF/EXSTMNT/1991-0013

Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
National Conference on Cooperation

Rome, Italy
19 October 1991



UNICEF Alternate Inventory Label



Rcf00073CD

Item # CF/RAD/USAA/DB01/2002-01255

ExR/Code: CF/EXD/SP/1991-0042

Italian National Conference on Cooperation. Address by Mr
Date Label Printed 20-Aug-2002

cover + 6pp + 0b



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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Recently I read that here, in Italy, winegrowers plant rosebushes at the end of each row of grapevines. This, it turns out, is not a matter of aesthetics but a practical early warning system. Rosebushes, it seems, are more sensitive than grapevines to mildew. Winegrowers are alerted, before the mildew can destroy a harvest, so they can mobilize to save the vines.

In our world, children all too often serve as rosebushes, warning us when an economy is faltering or when social development is failing. They suffer first and they suffer most. It is a cruel early warning system and one we can no longer afford — morally or practically — on the threshold to the 21st century. In recent years, I'm glad to say, we have begun to act before the mildew or frost sets in — because of recent initiatives 10,000 children didn't die yesterday — but the international community still has much work to do, if most children are not to continue to be placed last at the end of the row. 40,000 children still died yesterday and every day this year, two-thirds from readily preventable causes.

According to the World Summit for Children last year, children instead should have a first call on resources, "in bad times as well as in good times". In recent years, Italy has been in the forefront of nations helping to make this simple but revolutionary principle a reality. In recent years you have played a special role, supporting UNICEF's efforts to assist governments to save and protect their children, through nutrition, health care and especially immunization. In fact, Italian contributions for immunization were the largest received from any nation. Your support of our International Child Development Centre at the Spedale degli Innocenti in Florence has given UNICEF a whole new dimension of scientific and scholarly thought concerning many of the burning issues affecting children today. The Italian Committee for UNICEF and its Chairman, Aldo Farina, have done outstanding work, not only in fundraising and advocacy, but in helping to educate and sensitize the public, schoolchildren and politicians to key development issues.

I was here just three weeks ago meeting with hundreds of Italy's mayors, whose valuable initiative on the eve of the World Summit last year is about to extend to the global level with the establishment of a worldwide movement of "Mayors as Defenders of Children". The Chairman of ENI, Gabriele Cagliari, not only recently announced that the company will fund a major pilot project, in collaboration with UNICEF, to advance children's health in Angola, Ecuador and India, but appealed to the world's industrialists to get similarly involved -- a unique example of business at the service of children.

All of this is why I am so pleased to have the opportunity to be with you today to consider how we can go forward together in responding to the needs of children throughout the world. The appeal of children offers an entryway to meeting the basic needs of that portion of the human race that still lives in squalor and desperation as we approach the third millenium. The events of this past year create an agenda for children and women for the 1990s and beyond, complete with practical, measurable goals that can be met by marshalling resources in support of proven high-impact/low-cost methods for reaching the unreached with basic services essential to life and the well-being of children and their families. Achievement of these goals during the 1990s would save the lives of 50 million children and 1.5 million mothers, would cut malnutrition and illiteracy in half, and reduce births by 100 million as parents become confident their children will survive.

Seventy-one heads of state and government, including Prime Minister Andreotti, and senior representatives of 88 other countries set those goals in the Declaration and Plan of Action they adopted at the World Summit for Children. They agreed, as well, to provide the financial resources required and to prepare National Programmes of Action by the end of 1991 to achieve these objectives for children in their own countries. And this applies -- may I emphasize -- to industrialized and developing countries alike. We expect over 100 Programmes to be ready by the end of the year -- many others will be completed soon after. They set forth realistic measures, tailored to the cultures and experiences of each nation, drawing upon the many recent events which provide a strong momentum in actions for children.

I am thinking, first of all, of the remarkable achievement of immunizing 80 per cent of the infants in the developing world against the six foremost childhood diseases by the end of 1990, an accomplishment certified earlier this month at a major UN ceremony. I might mention, here, that Italy -- most ably represented at the ceremony by Minister Margherita Boniver -- was singled out, among the donor community, for special recognition of its outstanding role in supporting the immunization drive, the largest peace time collaborative effort in history, from the very outset. When Italy committed itself to support UCI, one of its goals was to do all that was necessary to save the lives of three million children. When WHO certified the achievement of UCI, it made the estimate that in 1990 alone, some three million children's deaths were prevented by the provision of immunization. Rarely in the last decade have goals and human achievement been so impressively brought together.

Also building momentum for children was the commitment made by governments at Jomtien, Thailand, in March 1990, to achieve Education for All, and the pledge of the major funding agencies to double the resources available to help countries meet the basic learning needs of their people.

Italy recently joined the list of 98 governments which have so far ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child; another 42 have signed, signaling their intention to ratify. This treaty -- which entered into force on the eve of the World Summit for Children, in record time -- converts needs into rights for the first time ever.

Changes in the world have made what might have seemed utopian promise a short time ago into realistic goals for children for the year 2000 and beyond. In fact, in turning from the Cold War to the works of peace, we find an urgent call upon our energies and resources. We fully share the assessment made by Foreign Minister Gianni De Michelis before the General Assembly three weeks ago, to the effect that the "main danger" we face today is the "creation of an impassable gulf between rich and poor countries..." He went on (and again, we agree) to warn that "the flow of poverty-stricken masses towards the industrialized world, from both the East and the South, will become unstoppable" if we do not "come to grips with the poverty and underdevelopment that lie at the root of the disarray we see in the world today".

He went on to suggest that Europe has emerged from the Cold War with sufficient resources "to help build a credible order capable of providing a living, in their country of origin, for the multitudes who are massing on its borders".

UNICEF has already taken up that challenge. We are strongly advocating the need to ensure that social services for children and their families do not weaken during the difficult transition the nations of Central and Eastern Europe are going through. Teams of child specialists are carrying out careful assessments of needs in each country in the region and we have produced the first major study on the transition's truly worrisome impact on the young. We now have an office in Bucharest and, in a few weeks, we will open one in Albania. As you well know, the transition in Eastern Europe is proving more painful, prolonged and complex than anticipated. We plan to seek approval from our Executive Board next spring for further assistance to sustain children's services in the region.

But support for these nations has raised legitimate concern in some developing countries that international assistance to them may suffer. It must be made clear to them -- especially Africa, where the need is greatest -- that aid to Eastern Europe will not undercut continuing support for their development efforts.

Profound reform is not only taking place in Eastern Europe. In much of the developing world, including Africa, reforms are also underway to make economies more efficient, systems of governance more democratic and development more human-centered. But internal reform needs to be encouraged and matched on the external side of the equation. If it is argued that aid budgets cannot be increased in the short-term and may even have to be diminished, then at the very least, the pie should be cut differently and priorities reoriented, to ensure that children and other vulnerable groups are protected and development can wear a "human face". Substantial debt relief and -- where possible -- forgiveness is an inescapable component of efforts to narrow the poverty gap between North and South, and UNICEF's recent Debt Relief for Child Survival initiative is one mechanism available for this purpose.

There are numerous innovative social development programmes now underway in Third World countries that, if adequately supported today, can become self-sustaining tomorrow. The Bamako Initiative is one of them -- that scheme for community management and financing of primary health care that is taking root in 16 African countries and is being considered for replication in Peru, Vietnam and elsewhere. Grassroots participation is the key to the promise of the Bamako Initiative. As Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti emphasized at the World Summit for Children, the democratic principle of open participation by local communities must be forcefully upheld as being crucial to the development process. Italy's early and unflagging support for this most promising initiative is proof, if any is needed, of the deep and strong commitment you and other nations of Europe have made to African and Third World development. The international donor's conference for African children which the Organization of African Unity (OAU) has decided to convene next year will, I am convinced, see a further deepening of this principled commitment.

At UNICEF we have a special sense of appreciation for the partnership we have come to enjoy with the Government of Italy and the Italian people. We anticipate further heightened co-operation during the 1990s, and we believe we will prove, once more, to be a useful working partner.

To our working relations, UNICEF brings 5,000 international and national staff working in field offices in 128 developing countries, in 203 locations -- many outside capitals. National staff are particularly important to our work, as they know the languages and peoples of their own country, allowing them to work among them with a grass-roots sensitivity that complements the global understanding of our international professionals. This mixture of international, including many Italians, and national staff enables UNICEF to operate in the most far-flung corners of the globe with efficiency, cultural awareness and high impact, while decentralization and operational flexibility permit our field offices to respond quickly and concretely to evolving country realities.

UNICEF has other complementary capacities which could enable us to harmonize, whenever possible, our work with Italian development co-operation assistance; even assuring, if you would consider this useful, local extension of your bi-lateral aid. In cases where Italy may choose to place emphasis on providing "hardware" -- equipment and technical expertise for drilling wells and installing pumps, for example -- local UNICEF staff could supply the "software" -- the training, public education and community mobilization that can optimize the impact of a given programme. This kind of co-operation could usefully be carried out in diverse sectors, such as health, water and sanitation, education and programmes for women and children in especially difficult circumstances.

Multi-lateral cooperation can often usefully serve as an extension of bilateral assistance, with complementary goals and methods. In UNICEF's country programmes, the visibility of donors to specific projects is always ensured. There is also the possibility, whenever a government does not or cannot assist bilaterally in a given country -- yet wishes to maintain some kind of presence -- of contributing through UNICEF programmes there.

Another strength of our organization is the Packing and Assembly warehouse in Copenhagen which permits us to move approximately US\$300 million a year in supplies with rapidity and flexibility in responding to calls for help, especially in emergency situations. While closely coordinating with sister agencies in the UN system, UNICEF is often able to respond with supplies first and to deploy adequate numbers of experienced personnel on the ground. In recent years this supply capability has been drawn upon by numerous NGOs and governments on a reimbursable basis. May I underline that contributions for emergencies bear no overhead charges. For regular programming there is a charge of only 6 per cent. In terms of procurement, we look forward to working with you to increase UNICEF purchases in Italy, on a mutually-advantageous basis.

Working together, we can take advantage of the new possibilities in these fast-changing times. Foreign Minister De Michelis pointed to one of them during his General Assembly speech, when he noted that "...the right to intervene for humanitarian ends and the protection of human rights is gaining ground". As you know, UNICEF and WHO led a convoy into Iraq with medical supplies and a team to assess the needs of children, in the middle of the war, with authorization of the Security Council and a guarantee by the coalition of protection against bombing. In other conflicts in recent years -- in El Salvador, Lebanon, Sudan, Angola, Uganda, Afghanistan and elsewhere -- UNICEF has worked for humanitarian ceasefires, making possible "days of tranquillity" to immunize children and "corridors of peace" for bringing relief to children and their mothers. And as conflicts are resolved, we will help normalize lives that have never known normalcy. Lebanon is one of those cases and we look forward to cooperating closely with Mr. Bettino Craxi in his capacity as the Secretary-General's Special Representative for the reconstruction of that war-torn nation.

The world still spends US\$3 billion daily on military expenditures, US\$500 million of it by developing countries. Reductions in armaments open real opportunities for building peace. Not least of these is investing in the adults of tomorrow. There is growing consensus regarding the need to find resources for human development by holding the line on that most rapidly growing arms race -- the purchase by developing countries of armaments far beyond their needs. The goals set by the World Summit for Children and the national programmes of action now nearing completion set an agenda for the 1990s that is "doable". All could be financed annually during the 1990s by less than what the world now spends each week on arms. The health goals alone, to save the lives of 50 million children and 1.5 million mothers, require only what the world spends in one day on arms.

In the wake of the changes of recent years, the 1990s represent one of those rare "windows of opportunity" that seem to open only once or twice during a century to permit humankind to leap to a whole new level of progress. It is no accident that children were the subject of the first global summit, the first post-Cold War testing of the waters. Working now to meet the year 2000 goals for children provides us with a strategic framework for global cooperation, a vehicle for beginning to tackle -- through our assistance to children -- the more complex problems of poverty, overpopulation and environmental degradation that are at the root of children's plight...and which are priority concerns for Italy and Europe.

UNICEF very much looks forward to continuing this constructive dialogue with you. We can and will find new ways of expanding our complementary partnership during the 1990s that will help transform the world in which today's children will live during the 21st century. Together we will take advantage of the open "window of opportunity". Let that be our welcome challenge.