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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
Learning for All: Bridging Domestic and International Education Conference

"Education for All: the Global Challenge"

Alexandria, Virginia
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Education for All: the Global Challenge

In Jomtien, Thailand, a year and a half ago, I said at the World Conference on Education for All that together we had the potential — indeed, the responsibility — to write an important part of the next chapter in the history of human progress: the "Education for All" Chapter. We at UNICEF — who co-sponsored the Conference with UNESCO, UNDP, the World Bank, USAID and others — are happy to report to you today that that chapter is being written. On a scale of one to ten for the progress that we believe could have been reasonably hoped for to date since Jomtien, I would rate the progress at seven, possibly eight. The chapter has begun to be written on a global scale, as one country after another begins to frame and set in motion development and development assistance plans for the 1990s embodying the principles and pursuing the goals set forth at Jomtien.

At Jomtien, as many will remember, 1,500 representatives of 155 countries and as many organizations reached a broad consensus, for the first time ever, on a framework of action for tackling key educational problems associated with underdevelopment and poverty, in particular, but also for addressing important learning deficits that persist in the more affluent world. Jomtien has generated powerful new political momentum and practical initiatives that are beginning to add up to a global push to make basic education universal and massively reduce illiteracy by the year 2000. This First Annual Conference of the United States Coalition for Education for All is part of this new momentum, and your deliberations here this week can, in turn, send out fresh impulses of energy and light along a broad spectrum of critical learning issues. It is a pleasure and privilege for me to be here with you today.

The timing of Jomtien couldn't have been more propitious. It took place in March 1990, as the Cold War was ending and one of those rare "windows of opportunity" was opening in history, permitting quantum leaps of human progress. What better moment to seek to advance the principle of Education for All than amidst the democratic upsurge that is transforming societies, not only in Eastern Europe but in most of the developing world!

Jomtien also took place just in time to show us ways to implement every child's right to education, one of the major rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child which had been approved by the UN General Assembly the previous November and which came into force as international law for the ratifying countries just a few months later, in September 1990. To date, 98 countries have ratified the Convention and 42 others have signed it, indicating their intention to ratify. It ordinarily takes a decade or more for so many countries to ratify an international human rights treaty, but the consensus around the Convention has been unusually broad and strong. Speaking parenthetically, I know this audience shares my concern over the fact that the United States remains among the handful of countries that have neither signed nor ratified. It would be a shame if, in the nation of the Bill of Rights, the Convention were to fall victim to political or ideological disputes completely alien to its balanced and ecumenical spirit and letter.

The Convention is particularly strong in regard to education. States Parties to the Convention recognize the right of the child to education -- in effect, they pledge to make primary education compulsory and freely available to all. This month the Convention's Committee on the Rights of the Child has been holding its first substantive meeting in Geneva. Its ten members are outstanding authorities on children; they have the role of examining how effectively governments fulfill their responsibilities to children. In the future, when the Committee looks at the field of education, they will have -- thanks to Jomtien -- yardsticks by which to measure progress or the lack thereof for each country during the 1990s.

Perhaps most importantly, Jomtien helped lay the groundwork for the World Summit for Children. As you know, the World Summit, convened by six initiating heads of state and government and held at U.N. Headquarters on 29-30 September 1990, brought together 159 nations, 71 of them represented by their presidents or prime ministers, including President Bush. It was the first North-South-East-West summit, the largest gathering ever of heads of state and government, the first testing of the post-Cold War waters by the world's leaders. The outcome -- an action programme for, among other things, ending mass malnutrition, preventable disease and widespread illiteracy before the end of this decade -- amounted to a detailed description of a new order for the world's children. And the approach to education embraced at the Summit by the world's leaders was the approach that had been hammered out six months earlier at Jomtien.

To date, 123 heads of state or government have signed the Declaration and Plan of Action of the World Summit for Children -- more world leaders committing themselves in a single document to specific action to achieve quantifiable goals during a specific time-frame than ever before. They all pledged to become leaders in the struggle for preventive health care, adequate nourishment, clean water supply and women's equality. They pledged to give children's essential needs -- including their educational needs -- a "first call" on society's resources, whether times are good or bad, whether there is war or peace.

A moment's reflection will tell us what a truly revolutionary principle this concept of a "first call" would be if implemented. One does not even need to be a cynic to question the prospects for converting these words, these pledges, into reality in a world of governments which, all too often, have placed vulnerable children last in their action priorities. Clearly there is much work to be done by all of us to see to it that these words, these pledges, become the world's practice. In seeking this, we are greatly aided by the requirement in the World Summit's Plan of Action that each country, by end 1991, prepare a National Programme of Action on how they plan to get from today's situation to the desired year 2000 goals. The Summit not only called on local governments, NGOs and international agencies to help in this process, but, importantly, also asked the U.N. system to monitor progress being made, with the first reporting due in 1992.

Summit follow-up is going better than many would have thought likely. By the end of the year, we expect more than 100 countries to have approved and started implementing action plans to make good on the promise to realize the goals set for children. Very soon, other countries will follow suit. UNICEF's field offices in 128 developing countries and our National Committees in 33 industrial nations report considerable -- if uneven -- enthusiasm and seriousness of purpose. And, perhaps most importantly, there is widespread confidence among many, if not yet a majority, that the Summit agenda is a "doable" one, because -- among other things -- its goals are realistic and the strategies outlined for reaching them involve the application of low-cost/high-impact interventions of proven efficacy.

The achievement of the Universal Child Immunization (UCI) goal of immunizing 80 per cent of the developing world's children by the end of 1990 contributed greatly to this global sense of confidence. On October 8th, the Director-General of WHO and I certified to the Secretary-General of the United Nations that, by the end of last year, 80 per cent of the world's under-one-year-olds had been immunized against the six foremost child-killing and -crippling diseases. To date, some 12 million young lives -- more than 3 million last year alone -- have been saved thanks to the world's new capacity to deliver, and people's new willingness to demand, the vaccines developed by modern science. Reaching infants five times each year with vaccines is no simple task -- as any inner city physician in the United States will tell you. But the UCI campaign is now reaching more than 100 million infants five times each year -- half a billion contacts annually despite the difficult conditions prevailing in much of the developing world. It has only been possible through the largest global collaborative effort ever made in peacetime...but it has been possible. Now the goal is to immunize 90 per cent of all children by the year 2000, and to eradicate polio as well. The success of UCI gave the World Summit participants the confidence to set other goals -- 27 in all, many mutually supporting -- to be achieved in this decade.

Goals relevant to basic education, all derived from the Jomtien consensus, include:

- expansion of early childhood development activities, including appropriate low-cost family- and community-based interventions;

- universal access to basic education, and achievement of a primary education by at least 80 per cent of primary school-age children through formal schooling or non-formal education, with emphasis on reducing current disparities between boys and girls;
- reduction of the adult illiteracy rate to at least half its 1990 level, again emphasizing female literacy;
- increased acquisition by individuals and families of the knowledge, skills and values needed for better living, made available through all educational channels, including mass media, other forms of modern and traditional communication, and social action.

Momentum for pursuing these goals has been continuing since Jomtien. Almost immediately after the Conference, the international organizations that had sponsored the event established an Education for All Network to facilitate follow-up and co-ordination of efforts. Further, to reinforce this momentum, UNICEF and UNESCO created the Joint Committee on Education from their two governing bodies to promote greater co-operation at inter-agency, regional and sub-regional levels. The Second Conference on Least Developed Countries, held in Paris in September 1990, embraced the Education for All goals. Scores of national and regional conferences, seminars and roundtables, workshops and symposia have been held -- including this gathering -- specifically to follow-up on the Jomtien Framework for Action. The climate for pursuing basic education for all has been further strengthened by UNDP's Human Development Initiative so well captured in its Human Development Reports for 1990 and 1991, and by the World Bank's World Development Reports of the last two years, with their emphasis on development depending on two synergistic legs: human development of the entire population and economic growth.

We within UNICEF and other United Nations agencies have been gearing up, hiring and training additional staff, gathering data, holding meetings and building infrastructure necessary to carry forward implementation of the Education for All goals. This is not the stuff of drama but necessary groundwork if we are to begin the vast expansion -- globally -- of education projects and programmes. In UNICEF's case, it could mean devoting as much as 25 per cent of our resources to education by the year 2000, up from 7 per cent last year, if suitable programmes can be developed. The World Bank is doubling its lending for educational projects to an annual total of US\$1.5 billion, and within this amount, loans benefitting primary education are expected to increase threefold. And there are promising early signs that basic education will receive a greater proportion of funds in Third World government budgets and in the development assistance budgets of donor nations. USAID has doubled its funds for basic education, from US\$85 - US\$90 million in 1990 to US\$185 - US\$190 million in 1991.

At Jomtien, I said that UNICEF's experience in primary health care and child survival taught us that in dealing with a complex, multifaceted development phenomenon, it is necessary to forge a cutting edge that can penetrate the multi-layered obstacles to progress. We need to find the most crucial of that which is doable and do it well, to achieve success that builds

credibility and confidence for further success on a broader front. That is what the universal child immunization effort has done for us the health field.

What should our cutting edge be in the struggle for Education for All? Research shows that investment in developing countries in primary education provides very high returns to society. And the first three years of education provide the highest returns of all. The 1991 World Development Report published by the World Bank estimates that a 9 per cent increase in gross domestic product (GDP) can be expected for each additional year of the labour force's average educational attainment -- during the first three years of education. The return on an additional year of schooling then diminishes to about 4 per cent a year. So the first three years of education translate into a 27 per cent increase in a country's productivity, as opposed to 12 per cent for the latter three years of a six year primary education.

That is why we need to make a special concentrated effort to ensure that the great majority of children everywhere acquire a certain minimum level of learning by the year 2000, while pressing forward to meet basic learning needs of all segments of the population. Success in providing children with a basic and primary education should be the cutting edge for opening the way for success in broader and more complex educational efforts.

Placing the focus on children achieving a primary education means exploring all available means of giving them a certain minimum level of basic education -- through formal systems, non-formal education and a variety of traditional and modern means of communication which we in UNICEF call the "Third Channel". At the current level of enrollment and state of economic difficulties, it is unlikely that many low-income countries can afford to open enough primary schools to accommodate all children of school-going age. The national authorities will have to explore other ways of giving children a level of basic education especially through non-formal schools with flexible school hours, condensed but relevant syllabi, etc. Such schools are likely to play a prominent role in the universalization of primary education until the time when formal schooling can be promised to all children. As set forth in the Jomtien Framework for Action, the key is to ensure that an agreed percentage of an appropriate age cohort, defined by each country -- say 80-85 per cent of all 12 or 14-year-olds -- attains or surpasses a specified level of achievement, through which building-blocks of useful life knowledge and the basics of the three Rs are learned. And we need to design and introduce in each country simple, objective and widely applicable systems of assessment of performance by both individual learners and the various learning systems.

I should mention here that setting a goal of 80 per cent does not mean the remaining 20 per cent are consciously left out. As we learned in the immunization effort, in order to ensure that 80 per cent of all children receive the full course of all vaccines in the programme, we had to reach upwards of 90 per cent of all children, some of whom do not return for the entire series of immunizations. So too in education: in order to ensure that no fewer than 80 per cent attain a basic level of education, we must try to reach all children through one channel or another, recognizing that, in practice, some will not be reached and others will drop out before attaining the minimum standard of learning desired.

Placing the focus on children achieving a primary education also necessarily means improving the quality and heightening the relevance of education. Schools would exert far greater magnetism, and pull in and retain larger numbers of children, if the quality of education were not as poor as it is today in many countries. At present, attending school is no guarantee that learning will take place or that what is learned will be of much use to the child. In some places, the quality of education is so poor that children can "graduate" without learning to read or write, or do basic math, and without acquiring a series of other skills that would enable them to vastly improve their lives, as well as the lives of their families and communities.

I am convinced, therefore, that one of the most enduring legacies of the Jomtien Conference was the attention given there to "learning achievement". The new focus on learning shifts the emphasis away from measuring education merely in terms of enrollment rates, years of schooling and examination pass rates -- our main indicators of educational attainment until now. A shift to actual learning achievement will have significant implications for the whole way we plan, manage and organize basic education everywhere.

A sine qua non will be the provision and timely distribution of relevant textbooks, learning materials and supplies to enable each participating child to have the basic things needed for learning to take place. It would make strategic sense to provide, say, up to US\$5 per additional pupil where it is essential, in order to see to it that the low-income countries -- Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia first and foremost -- can support the expansion and quality improvements required to achieve the basic education goal. There is also a special need, in much of the developing world, to reach out to girls and women, and to other disadvantaged groups, in order to remove disparity in access, participation and achievement as early as possible.

Placing the focus on ensuring that virtually all children achieve a primary education of attaining or surpassing a specified basic level of achievement also suggests that beyond formal schooling, the entire fabric of society can be mobilized for basic education and that parallel "Bailey bridge" solutions can be highly successful while permanent structures -- quality school systems for all -- are being built. Tried and well proven approaches already exist for reaching children who do not have the chance to enter or remain in formal schooling. The alternative primary school system created by BRAC -- the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee -- is one of a number of outstanding examples. As most of you are aware, BRAC has had remarkable success in providing basic education to children by tailoring the elementary grades to the community, rather than forcing a school system not suited to present needs upon parents and their neighbours .

As many of you know, BRAC has been implementing two types of alternative primary school models directed to two different age groups. One is for children 8 to 10 years old who have never enrolled in school or who have dropped out during the first year. Classes meet for two and a half hours each day for the first and second grades and three hours for the third and final year of the programme. The second model is a two-year programme for children 11 to 14 years old who have never attended school. In both cases, the schools are under community management, and classes are held at times convenient to the students and their families.

The non-formal education, offering a curriculum appropriate to the lives and needs of rural village children, is aimed particularly at girls. Seventy per cent of the teachers are women, of modest education themselves, para-professionals, recruited in the community, simply trained in a two-week period and subject to intensive supervision and monthly in-service training. The drop-out rate of students is only two per cent, and their success rate in passing national exams and going on to enter the regular school programme exceeds 90 per cent of the original entrants. BRAC has already opened some 7,000 of these non-formal primary schools, showing that popular participation, with the community "owning" the school, can overcome limited resources, with considerable educational success. BRAC's next goal is 12,000 schools by the end of 1992.

The BRAC experience belies the assumption that it is impossible to get girls -- especially poor, rural girls in an Islamic society -- into school and keep them there. Two-thirds of the students are girls and they stay for three years, then are sufficiently motivated that the great majority go on to enter the formal school system. BRAC's sensitivity to the needs of the local community shows how a carefully-designed non-formal school programme can greatly increase effective access to primary education. If this can be done in Bangladesh, it can be done anywhere.

As I mentioned earlier, there is also a whole new, third dimension to education now available to us, the "Third Channel". This is neither formal nor non-formal education, but the entire range of means of communicating essential information to everyone, everywhere, using both traditional and modern channels now available. These varied channels of communications are already the most informative and most formative influences on the development of individuals and societies. Their present use, willy-nilly, is shaping our future, for better or for worse. Their potential for basic education and communicating life-supporting knowledge has yet to be fully tapped, but their efficacy has been amply demonstrated in the success of the universal child immunization effort in the past ten years. It has relied heavily on informing and motivating family participation through extensive use of television, radio, priests and imams school teachers and the press. As a result, more children are fully immunized at age one in Nepal, India, Nigeria, and El Salvador than are the children of New York, Washington and London at age two!

In building bridges, domestic and international, it is worth emphasizing that many successful Third World experiences could be adapted for application in the crisis-ridden inner cities of industrial countries, where schools also must compete with poverty for the minds and bodies of children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child applies globally, not only in developing countries, and the right to a decent education is by no means assured in poor communities of the affluent North. In his new book, Jonathan Kozol reminds us once again that minority children in urban U.S. schools are not getting the education they need to help lift them out of poverty. And the recent Federal report, "Trends in Academic Progress", found that students in the United States in general are not being prepared for the complex and demanding world of the 21st century.

Crossing the North-South divide in this shrinking world of ours are vital issues of peace, the environment, overpopulation, drugs, AIDS, economics and other common issues -- all crying out to be addressed in creative ways through new approaches to public education. Human survival, not to mention progress, increasingly depends on the inculcation in the young of values emphasizing the essential oneness of humankind, the fragility of the planet on which we live, the need for family and community co-operation, and the dignity and rights of each individual. Although we have a long, long way to go on this score, valuable new experience is being gained in developing and industrial countries alike regarding the design of curricula and civic education campaigns that target specific age groups, sectors or sub-cultures within the general population with each message couched in language different groups can understand and relate to. There needs to be greater sharing of these experiences on a global scale.

I look forward to the initiatives for shaping and supporting education reform here and abroad which will come out of this meeting. At Jomtien we embarked upon a great co-operative adventure for all, that needs the participation of all, in rural villages and great cities. Most of all, we need political and moral leadership, in every nation -- leadership that is not afraid to re-think priorities in step with changing times.

We cannot accept the argument that the resources are not there. The lifting of just some of the rich world's protectionist barriers -- which cost the developing countries upwards of US\$55 billion a year -- could easily cover the US\$5 billion per year needed to extend primary education to all children in the developing world. Just half of one per cent of the world's current military spending would be enough to finance the Jomtien agenda. In announcing major cut-backs in nuclear weapons recently, President Bush spoke of this leading to a more peaceful, hopeful future. Significantly, he concluded: "We cannot give a more precious gift to the children of the world". The ending of the Cold War and the turn toward peace does promise a more hopeful future. But we must insist on, and help to assure early investment in that future, through the health and education of the boys and girls who will be the men and women of the 21st century. I urge you to apply your experience and wisdom to that task and bring forth new ways of Learning for All. Together we can make a great difference.