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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
International Council
of the
National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences

New York
25 November 1991



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Just over a year ago, 71 Heads of State and Government attended the World Summit for Children at United Nations Headquarters in New York. It was the largest gathering of world leaders in history, the first to test the post-Cold War waters. The presidents, prime ministers and monarchs -- along with senior representatives of another 88 countries -- adopted a Declaration and Plan of Action setting major goals for child survival, development and protection to be reached by the year 2000, and charting a course for the future.

Television cameras were there to record the promises made by the world leaders. Broadcasters brought children's concerns into living rooms of people all over the world.

The event provoked unprecedented media coverage in the industrialized world and developing countries alike. Never before had so much attention been focussed on children's issues. The media also highlighted the importance of the grass-roots activities around the globe which led up to the Summit.

Right now, more than 100 countries are putting the finishing touches on ten-year action plans to fulfil the goals set out in the World Summit's Declaration and Plan of Action.

Translating these plans into reality and fulfilling the promise of the World Summit will require massive social mobilization. It is a job for everyone - governments, communities, international agencies, non-governmental organizations, and families. The power of the mass media - especially television - is vital to the success of this movement. Through educating and monitoring progress, through pointing out failure to carry out commitments for children, the broadcast industry can make an invaluable contribution. It can create awareness and promote the changes needed to put children first.

We have started on the road to implementing the Summit goals, and the broadcast industry has helped. In the months since the Summit, public awareness has been raised by many important programmes which focussed on children's issues. We thank you for working with us along the way, and we are counting on you to help us go further.

Last month, UNICEF and the World Health Organization certified that 80 per cent of the world's children had been immunized against six killer diseases. This was the biggest international peacetime collaboration in history, crossing combat lines and suspending bitter civil wars, reaching remote hamlets where even postal services do not operate. Governments, media, health workers, community groups, religious leaders, schoolchildren and many others were an integral part of the effort. Broadcasters were there, not just to record history being made, but to help make it happen.

In tense and difficult conditions in Lebanon in 1987, for example, four "days of tranquillity" cut across factional lines in the 10-year-old civil war to allow children to be vaccinated. Time was short, and it was essential to ensure people knew where and when to bring their children. Television and radio mounted an information "blitz" to get children to vaccination points. Soldiers at checkpoints repeated immunization slogans to motorists and pedestrians. Health staff were allowed to work despite a major strike. And vehicles which normally carried weapons of war brought children to immunization centres.

The key to reaching the 80 per cent immunization target - saving 12 million young lives over the past decade, 3.2 million last year alone - was the use of channels of communication. It will be critical to realizing the next immunization goal outlined in the Summit Declaration - achievement and maintenance of 90 per cent immunization globally against the six diseases by the year 2000.

Communication has been central to the passing of another milestone on the road to giving children a better future. A few days ago, we celebrated the fact that 100 countries have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. More and more, television has brought injustices to light in what were once far-flung corners of the world. Growing awareness of child rights has helped to prevent injustices and plead the cause of children. In the industrialized world, too, it is essential to ensure that hard-won gains for children are not lost and that unseen dangers are brought to public attention.

The broadcast industry also has a role to play in imparting knowledge, in areas such as:

* Letting mothers know about the value of breast-feeding - did you know a million child deaths could be prevented each year if breastfeeding was more widely practiced and that breast-feeding can reduce the risk of cancer among women by as much as 40 per cent?

* Informing about micronutrients like Vitamin A, iron and iodized salt - did you know that small doses of these micronutrients costing only pennies can avert blindness, curtail goitre and mental retardation?

* Raising awareness about Oral Rehydration Therapy - did you know that dehydration due to diarrhea is still the biggest killer of children, and can be stopped with a 10c packet of oral rehydration salts?

One challenge in using television as a means of communication and education has been how to get messages across in an entertaining way. Now, animation is increasingly being used as a vehicle. In 1990, two of the world's leading animation studios, Walt Disney and Hanna-Barbera, pledged to assist UNICEF with their training and production expertise. Today, co-productions involving Disney and Hanna-Barbera are under way in several developing countries.

We are also looking at ways of introducing children's issues into the storylines of soap operas, the TV format with the highest rating in Latin America. A UNICEF Soap Opera Workshop for Latin American script-writers has just taken place in Brazil.

Through the years, we have also worked with other partners - the BBC, Norwegian TV, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the Discovery Channel and TV Globo among them.

At a time when all of us, and especially our children, are becoming concerned about the fragility of the environment and the very future of this planet, we are working with Television Trust for the Environment in England on two major projects. And in a major co-production, Children's Television Workshop and Televisa are preparing a fourth series of 130 half-hour programmes of the Spanish-language version of Sesame Street.

Another strong link between UNICEF and the broadcast industry has been our goodwill ambassadors. The first of these, Danny Kaye, set a shining example for the years ahead. The Danny Kaye Awards Gala, which celebrates young musicians and raises much-needed funds for UNICEF, has been broadcast all over Europe and will be shown in the U.S. for the first time next year.

The outstanding work for the world's children by Audrey Hepburn, Liv Ullman and Sir Peter Ustinov is well known. And now, Roger Moore has come on board as UNICEF's Special Representative for the Film Arts. Already, Roger has thrown himself with great enthusiasm into his new job. He has visited Central America, been a presenter on the Danny Kaye Awards show, and will be your host at the International Emmy Awards Gala tonight.

We thank you for bringing children's issues to the fore, for highlighting the plight of hungry children, children caught up in wars, children without homes, children who die needlessly of preventable diseases. The broadcast industry has helped us fight children's battles and to celebrate the victories. During the World Summit, children's concerns were on everyone's minds.

One of the most wonderful things about the Summit was that it wasn't just about world leaders. For a weekend in September 1990, everyone was involved. There were candlelight vigils and other events around the world, and it wasn't only Heads of State and Government who made commitments to children.

I would like to ask the broadcast industry to consider the idea of having one Sunday each September as a worldwide Children's Television Day. This would be a specially-designated day in which the broadcast industry would focus on children and children's issues. Programmes for children could run early in the day. Prime time programmes could have episodes focussing on children's problems. There could be documentaries on child-related topics, and updates on progress since the World Summit. Such a day would mean that children would be first in people's thoughts all over the world.

UNICEF would be happy to help The International Council and the broadcast industry to institute such a day. Organizing something like this would be an enormous task - some would say it was impossible. But then, that was what some people said about the World Summit for Children.

Once again, I thank you on behalf of UNICEF -- on behalf of the children of the world -- for the way television rose to the occasion of the World Summit and for your ongoing efforts to keep the world's attention focussed on our greatest treasure, our most valuable resource: the children.