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Message from Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
Conference of African Water Ministers
delivered by
Mr. Stanislas S. Adotevi, UNICEF Regional Director
West and Central Africa Regional Office

Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso
3-5 February 1992



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It is an honour for me to speak to you on behalf of Mr. James P. Grant, UNICEF's Executive Director, who regrettably isn't able to be with us here today, but who very much wishes this important meeting every success. As you know, within UNICEF's mandate of concern for all the children of the world, Africa and its children are our number one action priority. It is in Africa where the crisis of the old world order is most acute and where the more peaceful, democratic and equitable new world order now struggling to be born will receive its most severe test.

For the first time in the modern era, a subcontinent is sliding back into poverty. Unless drastic measures are taken, sub-Saharan Africa will find itself more or less permanently locked out of world markets and more than half of its population will live below the poverty line by the year 2000. As we meet here today, some thirty million people risk malnutrition and starvation from the famine and drought spreading across Africa; a total of 40 million are now "displaced" by military conflict or environmental disaster.

At the same time, there is a new spirit moving in Africa, a spirit of progressive political and economic reform that makes prospects for renewed economic growth and social progress stronger in the 1990s than at any time in the last two decades. This meeting is a reflection of this new spirit and of Africa's commitment to seize the opportunity which this last decade of the 20th century represents. Mr. Grant asked me to assure you of UNICEF's strong support in the challenging task of providing all Africans -- first and foremost, its children and women -- with access to safe water and adequate sanitation by the year 2000.

Like a still pond that captures the reflection of surrounding trees and mountains, water also mirrors the state of civilization at any given time. As government ministers and officials responsible for the water and sanitation sector, you find yourselves at the strategic convergence point of three -- and

arguably, four -- building blocks of a meaningful new world order: first, what you do every day brings the goal of health for all by the year 2000 that much closer; secondly, your efforts are key to poverty alleviation and sustainable development; third, you are on the frontline of the struggle to protect and preserve our fragile environment; and, lastly, there is an increasing awareness of the centrality of progress in the area of water and sanitation to the advancement of women, especially rural women. These mutually-reinforcing roles mean that you work along the cutting edge of some of the central dynamics of our times, a fact that deserves much greater recognition by politicians, financial planners, the public and the media. As part of its advocacy work, UNICEF is committed to raising awareness of the importance of your work and the need to integrate the sector more fully into development planning, financing and programming.

Twenty-five to thirty years ago, when most of Africa was engaged in the historic struggle to gain independence, less than 15 per cent of the population had access to safe water and adequate sanitation. The intervening years have witnessed significant progress in meeting basic human needs. The provision of water and sanitation was accelerated during the 1980s' International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade, and they now reach 40 per cent and 32 per cent of the population, respectively. Many governments in Africa can justifiably feel proud of their achievements during this period. Progress in water and sanitation has contributed significantly towards the reduction of child death, illness and disability caused by unsafe water supplies and lack of proper sanitation. It has also helped reduce, in some small measure, the daily drudgery of the African woman and girl child's traditional burden of collecting water from distant sources. The Water Decade has also provided us, as policy makers, with many valuable lessons and experiences. We can now use these as the cornerstone for water and sanitation development for Africa in the 1990s.

At the same time, the water and sanitation sector stands to benefit from the political consensus that has been growing in recent years to place the human being at the very centre of the economic development process. It is significant that the world's top leaders, meeting for the first time in a near-global summit a year ago, embraced the goals set at the New Delhi conference on water and sanitation (which many of you attended) as part and parcel of the human development agenda for the 1990s. Provision of safe water and sanitation to all by the year 2000 was one of the seven over-arching goals adopted at the World Summit for Children, and we fully expect the upcoming Earth Summit in Rio to strongly reinforce momentum toward its implementation.

Notwithstanding the progress that has already been made, a tremendous task is still before us. Today, more than 264 million people in Africa still lack a basic safe water supply and almost 350 million lack proper sanitation. And with rapidly expanding populations coupled with shrinking resources due to past and ongoing economic crises, further constraints are being put on water and sanitation development. The global economic climate holds out little immediate hope for significant increases in resource and assistance flows to the developing world.

Here is where experiences from past programmes provide us with a wealth of lessons and choices on which to base realistic policies, plans and actions that take these constraints into account.

In the 1980s, some US\$10 billion a year was spent in the developing world on water and sanitation -- a not insubstantial sum. But 80 per cent of it went into high cost technology for improving services for people who already had water and sanitation. Only 20 per cent of the money spent went to low-cost, appropriate technologies for the unserved poor. If we continue this pattern in the 1990s -- given its slow implementation rate and the implacable growth of the population -- we will not only miss our target, but will actually fall behind. A continuation of the priorities of the 1980s will leave us worse off by the year 2000, with approximately 465 million people without safe water and proper sanitation in Africa alone.

Moreover, the cost of providing these services using the strategies of the past has become unsustainable; by the mid-1990s, they would cost a staggering US\$70 billion per year. If, however, we concentrate our efforts on providing the poor with water and sanitation through optimal use of intermediate and low-cost technologies, we could reach universal coverage by the year 2000 for a fraction of the cost.

That is the first and perhaps most important lesson learned in the 1980s. We must now focus our efforts on reaching the unserved, the poor whose numbers are rapidly growing. The second lesson concerns the role of governments. We have found that unless there is an active involvement of governments in sector promotion, little attention will be given to this politically voiceless population. The guiding principle for national governments must be "some for all, rather than more for some," that is, ensuring at least a minimum amount for those who have no access to clean water, instead of improving the supply for the relatively privileged. In this period of renewed appreciation of free-market approaches, we must not lose sight of the importance of the public sector's role in promoting human development, with special emphasis on the poor. There is an important role for the private sector, however; this is our third lesson of the 1980s. Here the potential of the private sector in the delivery of water and sanitation services to the better-off needs to be more fully tapped. At present, this population enjoys government subsidies which they could very well do without, while the poor often pay exorbitant prices for poor levels of these services.

The fourth lesson we have learned concerns the need to build into water and sanitation programmes some elements of cost-recovery, based on the high level of demand for improved services. Experience has shown that where services have been provided totally free of charge, the upkeep and recurrent costs soon prove problematic and there is a sense of lack of "ownership" on the part of the local population. The lessons learned from Africa's Bamako Initiative in the area of primary health care clearly indicate that local management and financing greatly contribute to the sustainability of services. Income that is generated through cost-recovery schemes is recycled for maintenance of services and provides additional input for grassroots

development. Just as Africa has innovated for the world with the Bamako Initiative, you can break new ground by applying similar principles to the water and sanitation sector. This is already happening in several countries in Africa, with promising initial results.

Another important lesson is the need to use appropriate, low-cost technologies. We now have at our disposal a series of models for water supply and sanitation developed during the 1970s and 1980s which are efficient, easy to maintain and inexpensive. The use of these appropriate technologies must be greatly expanded if we are to meet the goal of universal access by the end of this decade. You know better than anyone else the reluctance by some to accept handpumps and latrines as a solution, and yet without such transitional technologies the poor have little hope for advancement. Until such time as the gap between rich and poor has narrowed, no nation can afford to deny some basic level of services while, in the longer term, aiming for the best that modern technology can provide.

The fragmentation of the water and sanitation sector has proven to be a major handicap for development and must be overcome in the 1990s. Currently, water and sanitation projects are often implemented by different actors working in isolation from one another, resulting in waste and duplication of scarce resources. Governments, international agencies and donors should give high priority to coordinating the presently dispersed activities within the sector. It is impossible to "go to scale" in the absence of a clear strategy and government leadership that facilitates the optimal use of human and financial resources.

Another key lesson of the past is that development is contingent upon the active involvement and empowerment of women. Just so long as Africa's women and girls must spend a major portion of their time and energies on water collection, human and economic development will continue to lag. Only by involving women in the decision-making process of water and sanitation programming can we expect sustainability of services. There are numerous examples in Africa and elsewhere showing that women's involvement in the planning, implementation and maintenance of water and sanitation systems has been the linchpin for success.

Finally, experience has shown the importance of water and sanitation sector monitoring. Establishing a baseline is obviously critical to the setting of goals and determining what resources are required to meet them. Systematic but simple and easily implementable monitoring is indispensable as a management tool at every stage of the process.

The 1990s present us with a window of opportunity to improve the well-being of the majority, through the provision of water and sanitation services. This can be done by:

- * focusing on the rural and peri-urban poor;
- * employing low-cost and appropriate technologies on a massive scale;
- * promoting the participation of households and communities in planning, implementing, financing and maintaining water and sanitation projects.

Countries that apply this approach in the coming years can rightfully expect increased donor support for their efforts. Moreover, I have been instructed by our Executive Director to propose a challenge along these lines to this important gathering. If your governments were to actively pursue such a strategy, by preparing a plan for safe water supplies for all who remain unserved today, at a per capita cost of US\$30 or less, and by demonstrating national commitment by putting resources behind such a strategy, UNICEF would be willing to spearhead an international drive to cover at least half of the cost through external assistance. The balance would be covered by national governments and beneficiary communities. Such a plan could be incorporated in the National Programmes of Action to implement the goals of the World Summit for Children, currently being developed by most countries around the world. If you see the value in such an African initiative, you might wish to establish -- with the support of the UN system -- a task force to develop a more detailed proposal that could be taken up by the International Donors' Conference for African Children called by the OAU for later this year. This could become an important African sectorial initiative for the world.

We have a choice. We can continue with "business as usual", neglecting the poor majority, or we can shift our focus to providing "some for all, rather than more for some". By opting for the latter, we can help shape a better and more just new world order and contribute to environmental sustainability into the 21st century.