

File Sub: CF/EXD/SP/1992-0026

Address by Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
at the  
Inauguration of UNICEF South Asia Regional Office

Kathmandu, Nepal  
28 April 1992



UNICEF Alternate Inventory Label



**Item # CF/RAD/USAA/DB01/2002-01054**

**ExR/Code: CF/EXD/SP/1992-0026**

Inauguration South Asia Regional Office. Address by James  
*Date Label Printed 20-Aug-2002*

cover + 3pp + 06



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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I am delighted to be here, a second time in two years, in this wonderful and special country of Nepal. The historic city of Kathmandu has always appealed to me as God's own promise of a capital not only for Nepal but also for the emerging political concept of a South Asian community. At the outset, let me express the hope, shared by many in and outside South Asia, that this important process of evolution will be hastened so that this ancient region of human civilization — the land of the Buddha and so many spiritual champions of peace — becomes once again an area of peace, compassion and co-operation, a shining symbol of our common future.

My pleasure this evening in participating in the inauguration of the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia by the Honourable Prime Minister of Nepal is both personal and professional. Personal -- because I was closely associated with the decision to locate UNICEF's new regional headquarters for South Asia here in Kathmandu. Professional -- because this new office represents the commitment of UNICEF to realign its structure and style to the realities of this region.

UNICEF has been working in South Asia for more than 40 years now, starting with its offices in New Delhi and Karachi in the late 1940s, and steadily getting involved in organized support for children's development, with a presence in each of the seven countries of the region.

UNICEF is proud of the record of its continuing partnership with the countries of South Asia. I am pleased at the catalytic role played by UNICEF, in several fields of child-related endeavour. I am particularly happy at the tangible results of our co-operation, for example, in drinking water supply and immunization. South Asia is moving fast and coming close to full success in both these areas.

There are, however, other challenges to be met concurrently, from Sri Lanka to Nepal and across the vast Indo-Gangetic belt -- challenges, for example, in basic nutrition and basic education for the physical and mental

growth and development of the 450 million children under 15 years in this region. South Asia has the material, intellectual and moral resources to liberate the potential of each of these children for the common good. Yet some four to five million young children die before the age of five each year -- a daily toll of well over 10,000 each day. To the human conscience, this is unacceptable. With the capabilities at our command, this is unnecessary. The irony is that this human tragedy can be avoided. Undoubtedly, its causes are rooted in the material conditions of poverty of large segments of people in villages and towns. But the greater irony is that the life and future of all our children can be protected now -- without waiting for the end of poverty. And, in that process, we would have loosened the grip of poverty and enhanced people's capacity to cope with it and overcome it. For it is the non-development of children which perpetuates poverty from one stage of life to another and from one generation to the next.

Encouragingly, the promise of South Asia matches the magnitude of its problems. It was at the Bangalore Summit of the SAARC countries in 1986 that a decision was taken that the state of the South Asian child would be reviewed annually at the Summit so the policies, goals and programmes for children become a priority for regional co-operation. It is this South Asia initiative which stimulated similar political impulses in Africa and other continents, culminating in the endorsement, at the unprecedented World Summit for Children in September 1990, of a set of specific, time-bound goals for children and development.

These goals are not new. They relate to entirely feasible reductions in the number of infant, child and maternal deaths, to a substantial improvement in nutritional and educational levels and to the protection of children in a variety of distressing circumstances.

What is new is the affirmation of the human right of the child to basic human needs and to a life in dignity -- through the adoption by the UN General Assembly, in November 1989, of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Whether the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the World Summit Declaration of the Goals for Children remain as rhetoric, or get translated into effective action, depends on each of us, on what we decide to do, on how we co-operate with one another -- within and among families, in communities and between countries. The decade of the 1990s puts our political and social will to test and could mark a turning point in the story of human development in South Asia and beyond.

Will South Asia and the world make it? The answer has to come in the form of action. Together, we can do what singly we may not be able to do. The alliance for children has to be strengthened at the level where the children are -- in their own community. It has to embrace the relevant professions and voluntary organizations and express itself as a valid partnership between the government and the community, between those in power and those in poverty, in a democratic process of development.

In this context it is important to mention that we agree with those in power and government that we can no longer accept that the problems facing children are relegated to some single ministry or part of the bureaucracy. All must join hands and participate --- from the Prime Minister's high office to Ministries of Finance, Foreign Affairs, Education, Health, Industry, Agriculture and their joint supporters, analysts and advisers in the Planning Commission and others.

As the UNICEF Regional Director has just reminded us, South Asia has its own store of experience and wisdom to draw upon. With UNICEF playing a facilitating role, a renewed process has begun. Given the extent of the problems facing children in this region and their inter-linked causes, there could be some understandable skepticism whether the politically endorsed goals for children will be practically achieved in the expected time. In reply, let me ask you, honoured guests at this memorable function, what would be the socio-political situation in South Asia if even these basic human goals are not achieved in the measurable future. Will our own children and grandchildren be safe in the social environment we would be bequeathing to them?

May I now invite the Honourable Prime Minister to inaugurate the new UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia and to address this distinguished gathering.