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Address by Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
to the  
National Conference on Education for All  
"The Winning Combination in Education for All"

Dhaka, Bangladesh  
30 April 1992

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Address by James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

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National Conference on Education For All

Dhaka - 30 April 1992

"The Winning Combination in Education For All"

A great deal has happened in Bangladesh and in the world at large since I had the pleasure to be amongst you in March 1990. Democracy has taken root in your country, as it has in Central and Eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States, in much of Latin America, Asia and Africa. During the same period, because of strong leadership, committed government, energetic non-governmental organizations and a resilient people, Bangladesh has shown the world -- once again -- how it could withstand and recover from a devastating cyclone.

What is most encouraging to me is that in spite of the upheaval inevitably associated with natural disasters of such magnitude, your commitment to providing regular programmes for children and women has continued. When I last visited Bangladesh, the Child Survival and Development Revolution had taken off. Today, I am happy to see that the momentum continues; that immunization coverage, which was only around two per cent in 1984, reached over 80 per cent by the end of 1990 in one Division and 80 per cent in 1991 in two of the four Divisions. Today, over 80 percent of children and women come in contact with government health services in Bangladesh, largely because of your solid achievement in the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI). And once again, it has been the "winning combination" of government and NGO efforts that made these achievements possible. Never before have so many partners come forward to give their time, energy and resources for a single social programme. And now you are launching EPI-Plus, with the promise of utilizing 108,000 EPI outreach sites for an integrated package of health and nutrition services.

Of course, in order to meet the year 2000 goals you have set, this momentum must continue and accelerate throughout the decade. Full immunization coverage must reach 80 per cent of all under-one-year olds and other services must be added systematically to EPI outreach if mortality reduction goals are to be reached. By the end of the decade, you can save the lives of upwards of 320,000 children -- more than double the terrible toll of your 1991 cyclone -- just by meeting your immunization targets.

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You have shown the way and now have the tools to ensure the survival of your children. On September 1 of this year, Bangladesh is required, by international law, to report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child on steps it has taken to respect and fully implement all of the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. First and foremost, this means the right to survival, which includes access to health care; information for families about ways of ensuring the well-being of their children; the right to protection from economic and sexual exploitation, as well as from exposure to harmful substances like tobacco and narcotics; and the right to development -- beginning with education.

Progress in the areas of survival and protection can only be sustained in the company of development. And as you know, the Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes that all children have the right to an education -- boys and girls equally.

In March 1990, over 150 governments and a similar number of NGOs (that winning combination again!) came together at Jomtien, Thailand for the World Conference on Education For All, sponsored and organized by UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO and the World Bank. Bangladesh, I am happy to say, prominently participated in that historic event and made a commitment to the development of its children through the "World Declaration on Education For All". In fact, the development of children through education is one of the cornerstones of your own National Programme of Action which was developed as a response to Bangladesh's participation in the World Summit for Children in 1990.

Education is the very foundation of economic growth and social development, and a principal means of improving the long-term welfare of individuals. We have seen clear signs of renewed interest in education as the engine of human development in recent years, at both national and international levels. This emerging consensus is reflected, as I am sure you are aware, in the series of Human Development Reports issued annually by UNDP since 1990; by the World Bank's 1990 World Development Report focusing on poverty and its 1991 study on ways of improving primary education in developing nations; in UNESCO's 1991 World Education Report, and in UNICEF's State of the World's Children reports.

At the same time, it is evident that if this consensus is to mean anything, there has to be far greater acceleration of efforts in many countries to achieve the goals of the decade. As you know, the participants at Jomtien called for:

- 1) expansion of early childhood development activities;
- 2) universal access to basic education and achievement of primary education by at least 80 percent of primary-age children through formal and non-formal education, with a reduction in the current disparities between boys and girls;
- 3) reduction of the adult illiteracy rate to at least 50 percent of the 1990 level with emphasis on female literacy;
- 4) an increase in the knowledge, skills and values required for better living, made available through all educational channels, including mass and traditional media.

These are lofty goals. If Bangladesh and 10 other large, populous countries make headway in achieving universal primary education, almost three-quarters of the world's problem in primary education would be solved. A major, permanent contribution would be made towards eliminating adult illiteracy. By the same token, without progress in these countries, the global goals for the decade will remain largely unfulfilled.

I was pleased to learn that officials from your Ministry of Education have been working closely with UNICEF, UNESCO, UNDP and the World Bank, as well as other agencies, to implement a strategy for achieving basic education for all in Bangladesh. What will it take to achieve this goal? The literacy rate in Bangladesh is around 30 per cent. The literacy rate for women is only half that of men. I understand that over 77 per cent of children are enrolled in primary school in Bangladesh.. Clearly, this figure will rise even higher as a result of your bold and laudable measures of stage by stage implementation of compulsory primary education and free education for girls up to class eight. However, we all know that enrolment rates tell us nothing about levels of retention and learning achievement; and we know that your present primary level completion rate of only 30 to 35 per cent must improve dramatically. In short, major change is required if you are to achieve the goals of education for all.

So where should you put your efforts? In Bangladesh, where 45 per cent of the people are under 15 years of age, and where life-expectancy remains relatively low, the population is predominantly young. Therefore, if you concentrate on educating the children and youth of today -- those who are ripe and ready to learn to read, write and gain new life-enhancing skills -- you will have a largely-literate adult population early in the next century.

How can this be achieved? Well, I believe that Bangladesh already has the answers and is well ahead of a number of countries in similar circumstances. Here in this document, I see a solid National Programme of Action. I also see a powerful social mobilization strategy. It is known internationally that Bangladesh is a leader in social mobilization for the cause of children, having shown the world what can be achieved for EPI and having recently launched a similar movement for universal sanitation. Social mobilization, together with sustained, high-level advocacy and appropriate programme communication, are certainly making a difference in Bangladesh.

In order to change the present situation in education, the awareness and energies of the entire nation have to be aroused and organized. All sectors of the population have to come to seek -- and come to participate in -- "Education for All". People from all walks of life, across all sectors and groups must become involved, both in creating the demand and in taking part in delivery of services. By its very nature, it is not, of course, a job the Ministry of Education can tackle on its own. Many potential allies can and must be mobilized, including other social sector ministries, divisional and district commissioners, local government officials, service organizations like the Rotary, Lions, Boy Scouts and Girl Guides; community leaders such as imams, and, of course, national and grassroots NGOs.

The achievements of NGOs in Bangladesh and their co-operation with government programmes have caught the world's attention. In addition to their solid support for immunization and other health and income-generating programmes, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), has demonstrated through its non-formal schools that NGOs can contribute a great deal to our goal of universal literacy. I am pleased to let you in on a "secret" that will soon be made public internationally: the Executive Board of UNICEF has ratified our selection of BRAC as recipient of this year's Maurice Pate Award -- UNICEF's "Nobel Prize" -- this June in New York. The Maurice Pate award, named in honour of the first Executive Director of UNICEF, is conferred every year upon an organization or individual for extraordinary or exemplary leadership in, and contribution to, progress in the survival, protection, and development of children.

BRAC, naturally, is not alone in NGO contributions to education in Bangladesh. You have dozens of NGOs and service clubs committed to the goals of basic education, many of which belong to the Education for All (EFA) Forum. The list is too long to repeat here, but I would like to congratulate them all and reiterate the fact that, because of the depth of capability and experience you have attained, the potential is enormous here for establishing a true "Grand Alliance" for basic education in Bangladesh. If there is one thing that Jomtien brought home to us, it is that governments are rarely able to go it alone in the field of education. A combination of formal, non-formal and "third channel" approaches are the only way to achieve the ambitious education goals which we have set for ourselves in this decade.

I do not have to remind you, however, that whether the schools are formal or non-formal, adding buildings and classrooms will achieve nothing unless the curriculum is relevant and the class schedule flexible enough to keep children in school, especially girl children. Adding classrooms will achieve nothing unless teachers are committed to spending more hours actually teaching and unless teachers and those who supervise teachers are held accountable for the actual learning that takes place -- or doesn't take place -- in their classrooms.

Models for successful learning achievement are not exclusively the product of NGO efforts. Here is a book which documents what has been accomplished in eight government primary schools with completion rates of 90 per cent or more. What's their "secret"? The first answer is that these schools are administered by dedicated individuals who can inspire teachers. The second lesson is that they have learned to innovate, even in isolated rural areas where resources are meager. A third lesson is that the staff have instilled a spirit of pride in the physical facilities, and sanitary latrines are available to the students. Fourth, a range of extra-curricular activities -- some of them even income-generating -- attract the students. Fifth, the community is fully involved in school life, to the point of supplying resources that overburdened central budgets cannot provide. The sixth and final lesson is the priority these schools have placed on attracting and retaining girls in their classrooms. These lessons gleaned from successful government schools need to be shared throughout the national system of

education. In fact, they deserve to be shared on an international level. An International Conference of the nine largest and most populous countries of the developing world -- including Bangladesh -- might well be the best opportunity for doing so. At such a meeting -- which could be held in 1993 -- government leaders and heads of the concerned international and donor agencies would share national experiences, review progress and consider subsequent national and international action.

However, international conferences are no substitute for national action. The problem you are tackling is so important for the future of your country and so pervasive, that no stone must be left unturned, no effort must be spared. You will have to galvanize public opinion, using modern and traditional channels of communication; you will have to dynamize the leadership and capacity of public offices charged with responsibilities in the field of education; and you will have to cement and harmonize the co-operation of all national and international partners. In order to accomplish these inter-related, indispensable tasks, you face many challenges, including:

1. The need to make sure that all of the diverse primary education activities are guided by a common national strategy and a strong, harmonized leadership at all levels. This is crucial.
2. If this effort is to succeed, it must be given a government-wide and nation-wide priority. The cabinet of ministers must make it a central concern and Zilla and Upazilla executive heads and the chairmen of union councils need to be held responsible for developing and implementing plans for their areas, within national guidelines and with the involvement of the communities they serve.
3. NGOs and other partners need to be integrated into implementation strategies and provided with the necessary financial support.
4. Village level mobilization for education -- perhaps through village education committees -- will obviously be key. Such grassroots mechanisms can support efforts toward meeting other goals as well.

Bangladesh has had a positive experience in social mobilization for children's programmes. You now have a social mobilization plan for basic education. You have excellent examples of success in both government and NGO sectors. You have the "winning combination" to succeed. I wish you every success in your noble endeavour.