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Address by Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
at the  
"Children at Risk"  
International Interdisciplinary Conference

Bergen, Norway  
13 May 1992



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The Norwegian Centre for Child Research is to be commended for organizing this global event, and thanks are due to the Norwegian Commissioner for Children, Redd Barna, the City of Bergen and the Norwegian Committee for UNICEF for making it possible. The support given the organizers by the Royal Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, NORAD and the Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs — in particular, through resources made available to ensure participation by researchers from all parts of the world — reflects the Norwegian government's long-standing humanitarian commitment to children...children at home and children everywhere. Shortly, I understand, the government of Norway will reassert this commitment by issuing its National Programme of Action for reaching the year 2000 goals established at the historic World Summit for Children. Accompanying it will be a strategy for ensuring that the overseas development assistance given by Norway adequately addresses the needs — and helps secure the rights — of children in recipient countries. This will make Norway the first donor nation to review and adjust its foreign aid priorities in such a concrete and systematic way, to bring them more fully in line with the commitments made at the World Summit. I am certain that this will serve as a stimulus to other donors — who also committed themselves at the Summit to make their aid budgets more responsive to children's needs — but who have yet to deliver on their promise.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Her Royal Highness Princess Martha Louise for officially inaugurating this event and for her moving words regarding children at risk. We congratulate her on her recent appointment as Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and are certain that in this important role she will dedicate special efforts to securing the safety, health and as much normalcy as humanly possible for refugee children.

We have become accustomed to Norway's taking the lead in different global arenas, especially during the administration of Her Excellency Gro Harlem Brundtland. In addition to her leading role in international efforts to protect the environment and promote Third World development, the Prime

Minister has been a special friend to UNICEF and the world's children. Thank you, Excellency, for giving full support to this conference and giving it added weight and relevancy by personally participating in it, together with Ms. Grete Berget, Minister of Children and Family Affairs, and Mr. Gudmund Hernes, Minister for Education, Research and Church.

There are many more good friends here this week — certainly far too many to name — but I would like to warmly greet Ms. Lisbet Palme, former Chairperson of the UNICEF Executive Board; Mr. Magne Raundalen, former President of the Norwegian Committee for UNICEF; Mr. Thomas Hammarberg, member of the Committee on the Rights of the Child; Mr. Vitit Muntarbhorn, UN Special Rapporteur on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography; long-time child rights' activist, Mr. Nigel Cantwell; Ms. Fay Chung, Zimbabwe's Minister of Education... To you and to all the participants in this event: welcome and good luck in your deliberations!

I do not sense here the rarified atmosphere one sometimes encounters at scientific symposia. This interdisciplinary conference brings together experts from all over the world, from industrial and developing countries alike, who have gained their expertise not in "ivory towers" but from years of field and laboratory research aimed at understanding and improving children's lives and the lives of families and communities.

But there is something else that sets this conference apart. It is the fact that it explicitly forms part of the process of follow-up to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the World Summit for Children Declaration and Plan of Action. This relationship with two historic breakthroughs gives your discussions a real-world context of legal, ethical and political weight and consequence. Thus, the knowledge exchanged and any consensus reached here in Bergen this week can spur action along well-greased tracks for policy change and social action -- a "privilege" rarely enjoyed by researchers. I know you will take advantage of this opportunity.

As you know, the Convention's entry into force and the holding of the World Summit for Children both took place in 1990. It was no mere coincidence. The revolution that has changed the shape of the global order over the past few years is different from revolutions past. It is different, first of all, in that its principal agent is not violence but communication. And as ends are often inherent in means, it is also different in that it is a revolution which appears to be transferring power not to the few but to the many. And we at UNICEF argue that there is a revolution for children underway at the very heart of the broader historic process of change through which we are all living.

The Convention, which took ten long years to work its way through the UN machinery, became international law in September 1990 almost with the speed of light, less than a year after it was unanimously adopted by the General Assembly. This happened basically because the end of the Cold War between East and West, as well as the turn toward democracy in almost every corner of the globe, suddenly enabled a formerly polarized world to unite around a social issue of broad political appeal. The World Summit for Children, for its part, reflected a desire to test the post-Cold War waters, and children,

most appropriately, turned out to be the common denominator around which the leaders of East and West, North and South, could meet for the first time: seventy-one heads of state and government, plus senior officials from another 88 countries. I am certain that future historians of this period will note the weighty symbolism of children serving as the starting-point for this new era and will describe 1990 as the most momentous year ever for them.

Let's briefly examine why. First, the Convention on the Rights of the Child... Much can be said about the Convention and its 54 articles. What is most important about the Convention, it seems to me, is that it takes the traditional category of children's essential needs and elevates them to the category of rights, codifying them along with adult society's responsibilities to ensure they are respected. The Convention stresses that this must be done on the basis of "the best interests of the child", rejecting, at the same time, all forms of discrimination based on sex, race, colour, language, religion, etc. Can anyone doubt that this represents a major legal-ethical breakthrough for humankind? After all, not very long ago in the sweep of human history, children were considered to have no inherent rights whatsoever, not even the right to life. The notion that the State has a legal obligation to protect the young and help parents and communities provide for their well-being is a modern innovation. In the past, only utopians and idealists could entertain such a notion, whereas it has become a practical proposition in the 20th century, due, fundamentally, to the many advances in science, medicine, transportation and communications that have brought even the most remote mountain hamlet and jungle village within reach of the basic fruits of progress. To paraphrase the historian Arnold Toynbee, ours is the first generation that can dare dream of extending the benefits of civilization to all people. And because it can now be done, not doing so becomes immoral. In other words, morality must march in step with changing capacity -- and the Convention is the world's way of playing ethical "catch-up" with the liberating potential of technology and scientific progress.

Another point worthy of reflection: that the welfare of each individual child should be the subject of an international treaty -- under which States voluntarily surrender some small portion of their sovereignty -- well, this is an advance whose ultimate implications will become evident only with the passage of time. For now, it is sufficient to note that the Convention goes a step further than any previous international human rights instrument, inasmuch as it merges -- for the first time -- civil and political rights, on the one hand, and economic, social and cultural rights, on the other. By treating this broad range of rights as an indivisible whole, the Convention eloquently puts an end to the sterile debates of the Cold War-era, in which ideological adversaries championed one set of rights to the exclusion or relegation of the other -- to the detriment of children in both systems.

To date, 117 countries -- Norway among them -- have become States Parties to the Convention by ratification or accession. Twenty-nine others have signed, indicating their interest in ratification. This means that a total of 146 countries have adopted a positive stance with respect to the Convention. No other human rights instrument has gained such rapid and widespread support.

Thirty-six countries have neither signed nor ratified the Convention -- interestingly, India, Iraq, Lybia and the United States co-exist on this list of "hold-outs" whom we must encourage to come on board. The Convention itself needs to be widely publicized, where it is officially in force and where it is not. Clearly, we are talking, here, about a process of profound social change -- formally adhering to the Convention or passing laws is just part of what needs to be done. The key challenge is to ensure that the provisions of the Convention progressively work their way into the institutional life of nations and the everyday culture of individuals, families and communities. When children are no longer subject to abuse and degradation; when their basic health and nutrition are sufficiently guaranteed to enable them to fulfill, through access to learning, their genetic potential; when girls enjoy equal access to all that modern life has to offer; when families and societies start listening to what children have to say and start treating them with respect -- only then will the promise of the Convention be kept. It is obvious that with our current state of affairs -- I need only say that 40,000 children will die in the course of this day of largely preventable causes -- it is obvious that we still have a long way to go.

As you know, there is no mechanism -- no international human rights police -- to enforce compliance with the Convention. Nevertheless, the terms of the Convention do require States Parties to submit periodic progress reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, composed of ten independent experts elected by States Parties, and simply having to submit to international scrutiny can motivate a degree of positive action. The first cycle of reporting begins in September and no fewer than 57 reports are due by the end of the year. We foresee a cooperative, constructive monitoring process -- one that can bring recognition to countries making progress and assistance to those that require help. But if it is going to be a serious process -- as opposed to a pro-forma exercise -- country reports must frankly discuss areas in need of improvement as well as progress. To one degree or another, all countries -- industrialized and developing -- have ongoing problems with respect to children and thus can benefit from international support in working to correct them. No single country or group of countries need fear that openness in reporting will be used against them. I especially hope that during the monitoring process, the voices of NGOs -- those which have staunchly defended children's rights these many years -- will be heard, inasmuch as governments alone cannot do what needs to be done and common objectives for social progress need to be forged in each society through democratic consensus. UNICEF is working closely with many governments, at their request, in the Convention follow-up process and, as mandated in the treaty itself, with the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

In several weeks, UNICEF and other UN agencies with programmes in Latin America and the Caribbean will host an informal consultation for the Committee in Quito, Ecuador. Its members will be briefed on the situation facing children in the region and will have an opportunity to see for themselves what life is like for children in rural and mountainous areas of the country. This will be the first time a UN human rights body is embarking on such a field trip to gather first-hand information in order to fulfill its mandate.

Now, here is where the World Summit for Children and its follow-up process fit into the picture. The world leaders who gathered at UN headquarters in New York on the weekend of 29-30 September 1990 essentially did two important things.

\* First, they agreed on the principle that children's basic needs must be given a "first call" on society's resources, in good times or bad times, in war or in peace. This is a remarkable, really a revolutionary principle, when we consider that children are powerless and do not vote, and that they are routinely the first to suffer when there's a downturn in the economy, when drought or blight limits food supplies, when war ravages nations.

\* Secondly, the world leaders agreed on a strategy for making this principle operative, complete with measurable goals, timeframes for achieving them and mechanisms to monitor progress along the way. They committed themselves to meeting 27 goals by the year 2000, an agenda for action that we estimate will save the lives of no fewer than 50 million children (who would otherwise have died) and help hundreds of millions more to live significantly better lives. It is an agenda that not only is fully compatible with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, but it amounts to the international community's consensus on what can be done, practically, over the decade, to fulfill those rights.

Where the Convention is general and "timeless", the Summit Plan of Action is specific and time-bound, especially in the areas of child health, nutrition and basic education. Where Article 24 of the Convention stipulates children's "right to health", for example, the Summit Plan of Action establishes the goal of reducing under-five mortality by one-third and raising immunization coverage to 90 per cent of all under-one-year olds by the year 2000. But there are other areas, however, especially concerning the rights of children to protection and participation, where the Convention represents much more of a practical tool for implementation than the Summit Plan of Action. I am attaching to the distribution copy of my remarks a chart which places the seven overarching goals of the World Summit side by side with the corresponding rights embodied in the Convention, underscoring the overlap and complementarity of the two documents and follow-up processes. Clearly, to an enormous extent, compliance with the Convention will mean reaching or surpassing the goals set forth in the Summit Plan of Action -- which is why UNICEF has suggested that the Committee on the Rights of the Child make use of the goals for children in the 1990s as a basis for assessing how well States are doing, during this decade, in implementing the related provisions of the Convention.

Over 120 countries have either completed or are now drafting National Programmes of Action (NPAs) to implement the Summit Plan of Action. These are critically important documents, for they translate global goals into do-able propositions under the unique conditions of each country. To the extent possible, NPAs should reflect the linkages between strategies for implementation of the Convention and the Summit Plan of Action.

What can each of you do, as researchers from a variety of disciplines, to improve compliance with the provisions of the Convention and help bring the year 2000 goals within reach of nations and communities? To a great extent, you are already contributing. Judging by the array of themes you will be examining here this week and the topics of the papers that will be presented, you have individually and collectively accumulated and analyzed an extraordinary amount of data that will help us better understand -- and therefore reduce -- many of the risks that confront children today. Primo Levi wrote that once we know how to relieve torment and fail to do so, we become tormentors ourselves. Well, your research into child abuse in its many forms; into the impact of environmental degradation on children; into the problems of single-parent families; into gender bias; into the plight of AIDS orphans; into child malnutrition and disease, etc...your research into these and so many other problems will inform us how to relieve and prevent much torment, and greatly increase the pressure for action, if we are to be kept out of the ranks of the tormentors.

A most fruitful sharing of experiences can take place between researchers from the developing and the industrial worlds -- at this conference and, hopefully, on an ongoing basis through some mechanism of exchange of information and knowledge you may wish to create. I am thinking, especially, that the industrial world could benefit greatly from the experiences of a growing number of developing countries in social mobilization and low-cost, alternative models for providing primary health care. Levels of immunization at age one are, after all, now significantly higher in the developing world as a whole than in such industrial countries as the United States. In turn, the vast amount of research done in the industrial countries into the benefits of good diet and regular exercise, into prevention of substance abuse, into family violence and early childhood education -- to name but a few areas -- needs to be shared and applied, where appropriate, to Third World conditions. I urge you to increase this kind of "cross-pollination" and mutual learning, for the sake of the world's children.

There is another vital way you can contribute. As authorities in your different fields, as respected members of professional organizations and institutions of all kinds, as parents and members of the community, you can serve as effective advocates in the public arena for the shift in priorities that will be needed in order to meet our goals. You can influence public opinion and governmental policies. You can help make it "good politics" -- and good economics, too -- for politicians to keep their promises to children and reallocate resources to effectively put children first. You can help leaders through the painful but necessary process of pounding the swords of the Cold War era into ploughshares of human development. You can raise your voices in favour of effective action to protect child rights. In short, you can take your findings from the field, from the laboratory, into the political arena, and make a difference. In this era of democratization, failure to take up the challenges of good citizenship amounts to an abdication of responsibility.

The 1990s represent one of those rare windows of opportunity which open once or twice a century to permit quantum leaps of human progress. Looking through that window we can see a better future for children. We cannot afford to allow the opportunity to pass.

In closing, permit me to cite a recent and dramatic example of "children at risk". It seems that a pregnant woman who had been shot in the abdomen during the violence which took place in Los Angeles a couple of weeks ago gave birth, ten days later, and the bullet was found lodged in the soft tissue surrounding her newborn's elbow. Even in the womb, that child found little protection from the awful perils of this world of ours. Let us all remember that tiny victim of adult folly, as a symbol of all "children at risk", and let us accelerate our efforts to protect them. Oh, and yes, the good news...the bullet was removed without causing permanent damage; mother recovered, and both of them -- despite the trauma of their experience -- are reportedly doing just fine!