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Talking Points for Remarks by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
Annual Meeting of National Committees for UNICEF

Lisbon, Portugal
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1. It is a pleasure to meet once again with the heads and delegations of the National Committees for UNICEF. Do you know this is the 13th time I have spoken before this gathering? These frequent exchanges are of vital importance -- they sharpen our vision and re-charge our batteries. I, personally, always feel enriched by these meetings with old and new friends -- colleagues in the cause of children's well-being. Nobody gets rich or famous doing the kind of work you do -- and I'm certain you're not in this for glory or wealth. You are what the Portuguese call "abelhas laboriosas" -- busy bees -- hard-working, persistent, modest and heroically productive. If the world had it's priorities straight it would pay proper tribute to those who dedicate themselves to the noble work of ensuring a better life for children.

2. We are most grateful to the Portuguese Committee for drawing this branch of the UNICEF family into the spotlight that they are currently enjoying as the capital of Europe. It is very fitting, I think, as Europe is

focusing on its identity as a community, that the National Committees -- the "Community of Committees" embracing the entire industrial world -- should meet in the current capital, the hub, of the European Community.

3. Just as UNICEF itself has matured to a level at which it can no longer afford to focus only on an individual child health project; to a point at which our international civil servants, who make up the staffs of UNICEF offices throughout the world, must be aware of developments far beyond the countries of their current duty station, so too the National Committees are each a part of a broader community.

4. UNICEF looks to the "Community of Committees" to help strengthen each other...to act toward common aspirations. While the performance of each National Committee is of course extremely important, our synergistic, combined impact can be so much more than the sums of parts. Thus, National Committees can learn best from other Committees.

Committees with longstanding strengths in one area, such as fundraising, can revitalize the connection with their own purpose and effectiveness by expanding into a new area, such as advocacy, and can learn from those who have developed this particular area. So many of you have told of a new credibility and respect in your countries once the Committee has mobilized attention on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, or on the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative.

5. The "cross pollination" of consultation and coordination amongst each other and with the secretariat strengthens the whole. Yours is a unique contribution. In the grand picture, that contribution is not measured country by country, but rather by the impact that National Committees have on the well-being of children everywhere.

6. I was in Kathmandu to inaugurate UNICEF's new regional office a few weeks ago, when Los Angeles exploded in rage and violence over the acquittal of white policemen charged

in the video-taped beating of a black motorist. At the time, I was in the middle of a visit to South Asia, where nearly half the world's poor live, and the news reports from the United States served to highlight the extent to which poverty is a global problem -- more acute and widespread in the developing world, of course, but severe and growing in many advanced industrial nations as well. Against the backdrop of South Asia's terrible poverty, the news footage I saw of the killing, burning and looting in poor neighbourhoods of Los Angeles seemed like a wake-up call, a forewarning to the world -- especially the rich and comfortable world -- of what the future holds in store if we fail to address, once and for all, this central problem of our times. It was, needless to say, a sad and sobering reminder of the formidable challenges we face on the threshold of the 21st century.

7. But I would venture to say humankind is better equipped to tackle these challenges than ever before. The decade of the 1990s is one of those rare "windows of

opportunity" that open only once or twice a century to permit quantum leaps of human progress. The combined effects of the end of the Cold War and the rapid shift toward more democratic systems -- not only in Central and Eastern Europe but in much of the developing world -- promise a degree of global cooperation to deal with a range of social and economic problems that would have been unimaginable only five or six years ago. The new instabilities that have arisen amidst the dizzying changes of recent years demand urgent attention and creative solutions which do not undermine the progressive thrust of our times. With the new communication networks that now link every corner of the planet, the concept of the global village has never been more relevant or real; we must "catch up" -- ethically, practically -- with the recent developments which have changed the shape of the international order. From preserving the environment to alleviating poverty, from curbing population growth to improving the lives of children -- it is now possible to speak of realistic solutions on a global scale. And key

to our being able to face such epochal challenges is the need to beat our Cold War swords into ploughshares of human development, to free vast military resources for humanitarian purposes.

8. Amidst the multitude of issues clamouring for our attention, I would like to focus on several of pressing interest to UNICEF and, naturally, the National Committees.

9. First, the situation of children in Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States and its effect on Africa and the Least Developed Countries. This will be an important issue at the upcoming Executive Board meeting. While everyone seems to agree that assistance to the formerly socialist countries should not be taken from development assistance to the Third World, doubt and concern persist regarding aid flows and priorities. Our recent mission to the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Baltics, and earlier to Central and Eastern

Europe, showed, however, that there is real suffering among children and that something needs to be done.

Exactly what role UNICEF will play is, of course, up to the Board. But any enhanced role for UNICEF in that part of the world cannot, must not, it seems to me, divert us from our priority work of the last forty years -- assisting children in the developing countries, where the need is greatest.

10. That is why it was most gratifying to see that the Standing Group of the National Committees, in their last report, emphasized that while attention to the CIS countries is needed, it should be in the form of additional assistance, and should not detract from funds that would be dedicated to children in Africa and other parts of the developing world. It would be very useful if this position could be transmitted to the Executive Board in the June statement of the Chairperson of the Standing Committee.

11. Similarly, it is a very important statement of your and our priorities that Africa will be the focus of an entire day of deliberations here in Lisbon. Since we will spend Thursday on Africa, today I will only mention a few essential points:

* The Day of the African Child — commemorated around the world on 16 June each year, this OAU-initiated event is drawing much-needed attention to the plight of Africa's children and to the valiant efforts being made by Africans themselves to protect them from the worst effects of economic crisis and natural calamities. It is our hope that the National Committees will help institutionalize this annual commemoration as part of year-round solidarity with Africa.

* We are witnessing the gradual demise of apartheid and the emergence of a new, more democratic, non-racial order in South Africa.

The recent referendum there was a clear "green light" to accelerate the transition. As the world dismantles its sanctions in step with progress being made in South Africa, the humanitarian and development agencies can focus on ways to help meet the enormous needs of the country's majority, long victims of neglect and discrimination. UNICEF is called upon to help alleviate the suffering of the children and the Executive Board, again, will define our precise role. We are counting on the National Committees to fully support our move into South Africa.

* Sub-Saharan Africa is the world's fastest growing region. At the current growth rate (about three per cent per year), the population will double in just 23 years. Africa also has the highest infant mortality rate and lowest life expectancy of any major world region, despite improvements over the last decades. In addition

to legacies of economic mismanagement and foreign debt, much of Africa is also burdened with environmental crisis -- natural and man-made -- and civil strife. On top of all this, AIDS has hit Africa harder than any other region and threatens to undermine progress made to date. WHO estimates that in the 1990s, the infant mortality rate in sub-Saharan Africa will be 30 per cent higher than it would be in the absence of AIDS. On the other hand, Africans have refused to throw up their hands and give up; they have stubbornly persisted, attaining generally high immunization levels under the most difficult conditions, innovating to maintain and strengthen primary health care as in the Bamako Initiative. They are embarked on a delicate transition away from authoritarianism toward more democratic and economically-viable systems, and they deserve our priority support. A key test of the world's political will to extend a helping hand to

Africans who are helping themselves will come at the OAU donors' conference on the African child in Dakar in November of this year. In addition to the ways you are already supporting Africa, the National Committees can help build a climate of public opinion in their own countries that will make it easier for their governments to take a strong pro-Africa position in Dakar and beyond.

12. This is an excellent time for maximizing your impact on official policy when it comes to children -- children at home and children abroad. Most of your governments are drafting or finalizing National Programmes of Action (NPAs) to implement the goals and strategies agreed to at the September 1990 World Summit for Children. Worldwide, over 120 countries are doing so. This is an encouraging follow-up to the World Summit, but I must say that the response has been stronger in the developing countries than in the industrial world. And the industrial

countries have a dual commitment to fulfill here: their NPAs must outline plans to address their own children's needs and review their ODA budgets to ensure that they support the principle of first call for children. To date, only a few donor countries have issued their NPAs and there is little evidence to suggest that either increased resource flows or significant reallocation of funds will be forthcoming. With the authority and respect you have gained over the years, NatComs are in an excellent position to remind leaders and governments of their Summit commitments and to lobby for solid NPAs.

13. Another area bridging the domestic and global dimensions is follow-up to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. As you know, 117 countries -- Portugal one of the earliest among them -- have become States Parties to the Convention and 29 others have signed, indicating an interest in ratification. No other human rights instrument has gained such rapid and widespread support. Around 30 others have neither signed nor ratified the

Convention -- interestingly, Libya 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, for our goal is not merely ratification but the application of the Convention's provisions as part of the everyday culture of individuals, families, communities and governments. The first cycle of reporting by States Parties to the Committee on the Rights of the Child begins this September and no fewer than 57 reports are due by the end of the year. This gives NatComs an excellent opportunity to advocate in favour of candid reporting and the adoption of policies to address areas in need of improvement. To one degree or another, all countries -- industrialized and developing -- have ongoing problems with respect to children and thus could benefit from international support in working to correct them. There is no international human rights police to enforce compliance with the terms of the Convention, which means that public opinion, broad alliances of NGOs, international agencies and NatComs, will play an essential

role. To those NatComs whose focus has been almost exclusively on the plight of children in the Third World -- in line with UNICEF's mandate -- this will be a new role, but one that is fully in line with the Convention and World Summit Plan of Action and with the evolution of the world situation itself. The follow-up processes for the Convention and the World Summit are mutually-supporting and -reinforcing, inasmuch as the Summit Plan of Action provides a time-bound, goal-oriented agenda for the 1990s to accomplish, in practice, many of the rights set forth in Convention; and at the same time, the Convention provides a legal framework, an ethical framework, for efforts to reach the year 2000 goals for children.

14. Changing times mean that it is a time of change for NatComs, too. As I have indicated, you are faced with new tasks in NPA and Convention follow-up. As children's issues are, in fact, included higher on the agenda in more and more places, we all must take best advantage of the

opportunities that arise. It is part of the price of success! Many NatComs will find themselves forming new partnerships in order to respond to the new prominence and relevance of children's issues in your countries.

15. In 1990, in the wake of the World Summit for Children, we saw the emergence of a "movement for children" throughout the world, something beyond and deeper than the "Grand Alliance" of institutions we have been promoting these many years. What is new about this movement are the political leadership and grassroots components: action borne of demand from below and political will from above. National, municipal and regional officials; religious leaders; NGOs and civic groups; the private sector; women's organizations; environmentalists, among others, will be looking to you for leadership more than ever. NatComs are well-positioned to nurture this movement into what could be one of the healthiest forces for progress of our time.