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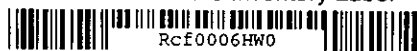
Address by Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
to the  
United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED)

"Saving Our Earth by Nurturing Our Children"

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil  
8 June 1992



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Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
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"Saving Our Earth by Nurturing Our Children"

The world's leaders are gathering here in Rio de Janeiro to tackle two interrelated, interacting clusters of environmental problems of vast significance for children. The first is made up of the new global threats caused largely by patterns and models of industrialization, consumption and economic growth that are degrading natural systems and depleting natural resources. Industrial pollution of the air we breathe, the water we drink, the land that gives us our daily bread; the thinning of the protective ozone shield and the warming of the earth's atmosphere; the disappearance of rainforests and the mass extinction of species of plants and animals -- these are among the most serious threats we face. Even though the full impact of some of them will not be felt for several or many decades, we must respond to these threats without delay, for none of them will respond to "quick fixes" and nothing less than the survival of life on earth -- and of the prospects for human progress for our children -- are at stake.

To some, these problems are the environmental crisis. They fail to see the equally important, equally threatening second cluster of environmental problems of readily avoidable gross underdevelopment and poverty that cause boundless suffering to billions of people and cast a long shadow over all our lives. This environmental crisis is with us now: as a consequence, tens of thousands of children died yesterday, more tens of thousands are dying today, and will again tomorrow.

We have the name of this historic conference to remind us of the inescapable interrelationship between environment and development. If we neglect either side of the equation, we will be unable to stave off the global threats emanating from both clusters of environmental problems.

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Nowhere is this challenge more daunting than in Africa. For this reason, UNICEF associates itself totally with the priority recognition of Africa's special needs called for in the inspiring opening addresses by Maurice Strong and Prime Minister Brundtland.

I come before you today with a special appeal on behalf of the world's children: let us address the older face of the environmental crisis with as much seriousness of purpose, with as great a sense of urgency as we grapple with the newer environmental problems we have created for ourselves. I am talking about malnutrition and disease, early death and life-long disability, paucity of choices, discrimination against women and children, and structural violence -- all the consequence of, or closely associated with, poverty and underdevelopment. This is a readily avoidable environmental obscenity that takes the lives of more than 10 million children annually.

When the idea for this conference began to be discussed, few, if any, anticipated the chain of epoch-making events that would change the shape of world affairs in just a few years. The enormous political and economic changes the world has seen in the last four years have turned the early 1990s into one of those rare windows of opportunity that seem to open only once or twice a century to permit quantum leaps of human progress. It has turned this event in Rio into a potential forum of hope and optimism, rather than of frustration and despair. We now have within our power -- if we have the will -- to address, once and for all, the twin evils that are holding up global progress and threatening our collective future.

Never before has so much global change occurred in so short a span of time; not in the past 1,000 years has the "window of opportunity" been open wider: the end of the cold war; the imminent end of apartheid; the liberation of Eastern Europe and the break-up of the Soviet Union; the turn toward democracy there and in much of the developing world; the move away from centrally-managed economies; the start of significant reductions in arms expenditures; the strengthening of the United Nations -- to mention only some of the transformations that have taken place in the blink of a historical eye. We are living through, and participating in, a worldwide revolution, a revolution unlike those of the past in at least two important respects. First, rather than with guns and guillotines, this revolution has been ushered in, almost miraculously, with televisions and satellite links, fax machines and computer modems; the remarkable fruits of the communications and information revolution which multiply the strength of movements for change and make economic and political disparities between and within nations increasing intolerable. And second, since 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.

The "global village" predicted thirty years ago is becoming a reality today. The world is beginning to talk and act -- haltingly, it is true, but increasingly -- in ways that recognize the linkages and interdependencies that make us all neighbours. It is as if the first village meetings are taking place.

This new awareness of global community and the new capacity to act like a global village comes none too soon. Alleviating the worst consequences of poverty and promoting development is not a discrete cause and, fortunately, does not stand as a distraction from the new environmental problems I mentioned earlier. As stated in *For Earth's Sake*, a new report which the Commission on Developing Countries and Global Change prepared for this conference, a major part of the solution to the global environmental crisis lies in the alleviation and ultimate elimination of poverty, inequity and dependency. Creating the conditions in which people can meet their own and their families' needs for adequate nutrition, health care and education is an essential underpinning of efforts to meet the newer challenges. As that investment liberates people's productivity, so it helps to stimulate economic growth; as it includes rather than excludes people from political and economic life, so it helps to nurture the democratic process; as it gives people the confidence and the means to reduce family size, so it helps slow population growth; and as it gives the poor a stake in the future, so it helps safeguard the environment.

Nowhere is the linkage between environment and development more tangible and dramatic than in the issue of population. The present global pattern of human activity at current population levels is rapidly depleting resources and placing natural systems under extraordinary stress. No one knows exactly what our earth's carrying capacity is, but there is no question that growth rates that are now doubling the world's population in the space of only 35 years present a challenge which needs action at the global, national and household level. Stabilizing the earth's population is possible -- the experience of the industrial world and of a number of developing countries attests to this -- but the sharp reductions that will have to take place in the developing world will require a massive assault on poverty's worst consequences, a major improvement in basic health care, education and the status of women -- a revolution in social values and reproductive behaviour.

When child death rates are high, parents insure against an anticipated loss by having more children. But when parents have a basic education and are confident their first children will survive, they tend to have fewer children. Thus, one of the key methods for slowing world population growth -- and, in turn, easing the stress on the ecosphere -- is to ensure that children stay alive and healthy, and receive a basic education, so that they may grow into productive adults. As UNCED Secretary-General Maurice Strong has written:

"The effort to reduce child illness and malnutrition and to reach the goals of the World Summit for Children is crucial not only for its own sake but also as a means of helping to slow population growth and make possible environmentally sustainable development in the 21st century and beyond."

And demographer Paul Erhilich rightly stresses that "the education and liberation of women is the single most important thing to do" to curb population growth. We are seeing results wherever health, education and family planning have begun to reach a clear majority; it is being demonstrated on every continent in recent years -- in Asia, as evidenced by China and Sri Lanka; in Latin America, as evidenced by Costa Rica, Chile and Cuba; and most recently in Africa, in Kenya and Zimbabwe.

We are making progress. Over the last 30 years, average life expectancy has lengthened from 53 to 65 years. This means that each week, a newly-born child can expect to live an additional two and a half days on average; a child born tomorrow can expect nine more hours of life than one born today -- remarkable progress made possible largely through a reduction in child deaths. At the same time, the birth rates of countries as disparate as China, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Mexico, Costa Rica and Cuba have been more than halved, dramatically slowing their population growth. If in 1990 all of South Asia had Sri Lanka's child death rate, 4.5 million fewer children would have died; if all had its birth rate, 15 million fewer children would have been born.

We have already travelled three quarters of the way towards a world in which every man, woman, and child has adequate food, clean water, basic health care, and at least a primary education. There is no technological or financial barrier to prevent the completion of that journey in our times. We now know how to relieve massive suffering; we now know how to extend the benefits of modern science and medicine to all. We have demonstrated this by the attainment of our global child immunization goals in 1990, an effort that has saved the lives of some 15 million children in a decade, some three million now per year! To do this, we mounted the largest -- and probably least expensive -- global collaborative mobilization in peacetime history, a mobilization so massive and so universal that vaccinations in countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Nigeria, Indonesia and Nepal now reach more hamlets and villages than that heretofore most universal service, the postal system.

And yet, while the industrialized countries struggle to cope with environmental problems caused by over-consumption and the consequences of unhealthy life-style choices, many millions in the developing world still live in a degraded, fragile environment of hunger, illness and illiteracy which reduces life-style choices to a cruel struggle for survival and which fans the desire for more and more children. In spite of all that we now know ... in spite of all the simple, low-cost, life-saving tools we now have in our

tool kit that could readily prevent two thirds of current child deaths, 14 million children will die again this year, a quarter of a million again this week, 40,000 again today, of largely preventable malnutrition and disease. This is an obscenity, a moral blemish unworthy of civilization on the threshold of the 21st century. Primo Levi once said if you know how to relieve torment and do not, you join the ranks of the tormentors. What this means is that morality marches in step with changing capacity -- and the sad fact is that our morality -- while changing -- has not yet been brought up to pace with the extraordinary capacities we have developed, and the vast consequences are human tragedies, population explosions and environmental degradation.

We at UNICEF are privileged to work to improve the lives of the youngest and most vulnerable inhabitants of the global village, children who represent 20 per cent of its population but 100 per cent of its future. We have seen, in recent years, a remarkable leap forward in society's capacity and willingness to protect and nurture those who represent our collective future.

Within the political and economic revolution is changing the shape of our times, a revolution for children is also under way. Its momentum can and must join that of the environmental movement to synergistically accelerate human progress in this unprecedented decade of opportunity.

Just as the cold war was ending and movements for democracy were gaining ascendancy in so much of the world, the global immunization effort I mentioned before was demonstrating how much good we can now do for so many. This convergence of events gave leaders and governments, in the new atmosphere of global cooperation, the additional confidence and the political mandate needed to tackle a broad range of problems facing children. Thus, in 1990, the historic Convention on the Rights of the Child became international law and the first-ever global summit was held, in the name of children -- setting a pattern of collective commitment which this Earth Summit now pursues. Through the Convention and at the World Summit for Children, the global village was able to come together and pledge to give children's essential needs a "first call" on society's resources -- the beginning of an ethical breakthrough of enormous import. What's more, the heads of state or government committed themselves to implement a detailed Plan of Action with measurable goals and proven strategies for radically improving children's lives by the year 2000, complete with mechanisms for monitoring progress and ensuring accountability along the way. If the promise of the World Summit for Children is kept, the lives of 50 million children will be saved over the decade and births will be reduced by a far larger number; the deaths of 1.5 million mothers will be averted; access to basic education, safe water and sanitation will be vastly increased. Now signed by 137 heads of state or government, the World Summit for Children Plan of Action states:

"Children have the greatest stake in the preservation of the environment and its judicious management for sustainable development, as their survival and development depend on it. The child survival and development goals proposed for the 1990s in this Plan of Action seek to improve the environment by combating disease and malnutrition and promoting education. These contribute to lowering death rates as well as birth rates, improved social services, better use of natural resources and, ultimately, to the breaking of the vicious cycle of poverty and environmental degradation."

The Plan of Action goes on to affirm that:

"Programmes for children that not only help to meet their basic needs but which inculcate in them respect for the natural environment ... must figure prominently in the world's environmental agenda."

There is now universal agreement that we must accelerate progress in combatting the worst consequences of poverty if we are to get meaningful progress on the environment. It was at the World Summit for Children that detailed agreement was reached on what needs to be done on the poverty and development front in the 1990s, putting children first, and a good start is under way. It is logical, therefore, that:

\* The follow-up programme flowing out of this great Earth Summit should incorporate the list of "do-ables" already embraced by the world's leaders in September 1990. The key document you have before you -- Agenda 21 -- contains the basic health and education goals so essential to environmental protection and sustainable development which are set forth in the World Summit for Children for Children Plan of Action. Every post-UNCED progress review every post-UNCED progress review should thus include a review of actions taken by governments in fulfillment of the global checklist for children.

\* UNICEF's first hand experience underlines the importance of having appropriate institutional mechanism and clear responsibilities within the UN system to monitor and carry forward global activities resulting from this Conference. Clear responsibilities for follow-up have proved to be critical in ensuring positive action for implementing the goals of the World Summit for Children.

\* It is our fervent hope, moreover, that in your final document you will recognize children not merely as victims of environmental degradation -- as it currently reads -- but also as protagonists of the participatory process for development and environmental improvement. Children and youth are often the environmental conscience of their families and communities. If their enthusiasm

and energy are engaged by solid environmental education at home and at school, they will start "saving the earth" in their daily lives and grow into environmentally- and socially-responsible citizens.

\* There is a new concept being developed that merits our support. It is called primary (I personally prefer "preventive") environmental care (PEC), and it builds on our experiences in primary health care over the past few decades. The idea is to empower communities to take preventive or remedial action at the vital points of interaction between people and their immediate environment. While vast sums of money and new technologies and will ultimately be needed to reverse global warming, halt ozone depletion and curb industrial pollution, we already have in our arsenal simple, low-cost and high-impact technologies and know-how that can do much, at the grassroots level, to save lives and spare the environment: equipment to bring clean water and ensure adequate waste disposal; means to control disease in humans, animals and plants; and vaccinations, to mention but a few. With its emphasis on prevention, appropriate technology, community and individual participation, PEC -- if given the necessary support -- can become a powerful force for sustainable development, providing encouragement for tackling the more difficult tasks that lie ahead.

\* And this is where the critical issue of resources comes in. New resources will be needed to obtain the improvements in human development which are preconditions for sustained protection of the environment. All the goals which the world's leaders at the World Summit for Children promised to meet for the developing countries by the year 2000 can be funded with an additional US\$20 billion per year during the 1990s, two-thirds from developing countries and one-third from the industrial countries, -- equivalent to a week's global arms spending and a fraction of the savings already being generated in both North and South by military cuts made possible by the end of the cold war. Expenditures on children's and women's development are among the wisest, highest-yield investments the world can make and we urge you to earmark the necessary resources that we trust will come out of this conference.

As we heal the wounds we are causing in the earth, let us also heal the earth's rightful owners, the children. If we can't heal them through readily "do-able" actions already agreed upon at the first truly global summit, what will the prospects be for healing the planet as we follow up on the more difficult undertakings of this second historic gathering? And success in these "do-able" actions would represent a vast forward step for this Earth Summit in slowing population growth and advancing sustainable development.

We must preserve our planet in order to nurture our children; equally, we must nurture our children if we are to preserve our planet.