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Article by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
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UNICEF's Agenda for a New Order

by

Mr. James P. Grant

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A quarter of a million of the world's young children are dying every week, and millions more are surviving in the half-life of malnutrition and almost permanent ill health.

This is not a threatened tragedy or an impending crisis. It happened today. It will happen again tomorrow. And by any objective standard of scale or severity, this issue would rank in importance with any on the human agenda. But in practice, such problems have had little purchase on priority because they are primarily the problems of the poor and the powerless.

The children who are the victims of preventable malnutrition, disease, and illiteracy are being most shamefully failed by the present world order. But in the last three years, that failure has begun to feature more prominently on the international political agenda than ever before.

The first important signal of that new priority was the convening of the World Summit for Children on 29 and 30 September, 1990. Over those two days, the first ever gathering of heads of state from North, South, East and West met to consider the possibility of bringing to an end, in our times, the long-running tragedy of mass child death from largely preventable disease and malnutrition.

The Summit met at point when it was becoming clear that one of the greatest humanitarian goals of this century - immunizing 80% of the world's children against six major diseases by the end of 1990 - was going to be met. That achievement is now saving the lives of over 3 million children each year. It has also demonstrated, after a decade-long effort, that the world now has the outreach capacity to bridge the gap between mass-scale problems and inexpensive solutions.

Influenced by that example, the Summit concluded with a commitment, now signed by more than one hundred and thirty heads of state, to begin applying today's accumulated knowledge and inexpensive techniques to the range of basic problems facing the world's children.

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The immunization achievement had also shown the usefulness of having a quantifiable target as a focus for national efforts and international support. The Summit therefore formulated its commitments as a range of specific goals which all nations would strive to achieve by the end of this century. Those basic goals include: a reduction of child death rates by at least one third; a halving of maternal mortality rates; a halving of severe and moderate malnutrition among the under-fives; 90% immunization coverage; a 95% fall in deaths from measles; an end to polio and tetanus; clean water and safe sanitation for all families; a basic education for all children and completion of primary school for at least 80%; the availability, to all couples, of family planning services; and observance by all nations of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

These goals were arrived at by a process of consultation between governments and various agencies of the United Nations. They are based on a review of the specific, low-cost opportunities now available. They therefore represent a comprehensive programme for narrowing the gap that has been allowed to open between the availability of low-cost technologies and their application to those in need.

The agreement to that programme, by virtually every nation, marks the rejection of the long held notion that the problem of malnutrition and disease is so vast and inevitable that nothing significant can be done. In its place has come the recognition that the great majority of child deaths, and of the vast weight of illness and malnutrition which lie behind them, can now be prevented relatively cheaply and easily.

The World Summit for Children paved the way for the historic Earth Summit in June, 1992. This time it was the environmental crisis that brought the world's top political leaders together. In Rio, they could have dealt exclusively with such mounting global threats as ozone depletion, global warming, deforestation, and pollution of land, sea and air; but the great breakthrough made there was to treat these problems in the context of economic and social development, outside of which there can be no enduring, equitable solutions. Appropriately, they embraced each and every one of the year 2000 goals adopted at the earlier World Summit for Children and incorporated them as an essential component of Agenda 21, the plan of action agreed to in Rio. In doing so, they were recognizing that we must preserve our planet in order to nurture our children; by the same token, we must nurture our children if we are to preserve our planet.

This awareness is emerging at a time when the world order which has dominated the political and economic life of the 20th century is visibly dying.

In the blink of an historical eye, the world has witnessed the beginning of the end for apartheid, the collapse of Communist systems in Central and Eastern Europe, the ending of the 40 year cold war, the beginning of significant reductions in arms expenditures, the virtual abandonment of the idea of state economic monopoly, the narrowing of ideological divides, the strengthening of the economic heartbeat of Asia, the turn away from dictatorship in virtually every republic of Latin America, and a new impulse towards democracy, pluralism, and economic reform in Africa.

The period of history that is most difficult to understand is always one's own, but the suddenness and scale of these changes, in a landscape previously considered glacial in its rate of progress, suggests that we are living through a revolution.

The vulnerability of this process of change can be seen, tragically, in the recent proliferation of civil conflicts, from the former Yugoslavia to Somalia, where children and other innocent civilians are doing most of the dying and starving. We cannot begin to speak of a more meaningful world order until this obscenity of violence unleashed against the young is halted once and for all.

In spite of these and other humanitarian emergencies, I would still argue that there is more cause for hope on the human horizon than perhaps at any other time in this century. It may be that the years ahead will show such optimism not to have been justified; but what is not in doubt is that a new era is emerging in our times.

A new page in world history is being turned, but if the needs of the poorest quarter of mankind, and of the children who are the most vulnerable of all, are again relegated to the footnotes of that page, then the new world order which is written there will be neither worthy of its times nor capable of meeting the challenges of the future.

In UNICEF's 1992 State of the World's Children Report, we formulated a ten-point proposal for a more meaningful world order (see box). In it, we argue that ending the absolute poverty of one quarter of mankind - the more than one billion people who still live and die with preventable hunger, disease, and illiteracy - should rank alongside the issues of preserving the peace and protecting the environment as priority items on the agenda of a new world order.

Contrary to widely held opinion, this great cause is far from being hopeless. 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. And there is no technological or financial barrier to prevent the completion of that journey in our times.

Reaching these age-old goals is not a discrete cause and does not stand as a distraction from the new challenges of our times. 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 those new 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 to slow population growth; and as it gives the poor a stake in the future, so it helps to safeguard the environment.

For almost half a century, the world has been distracted from these great tasks by military conflict and ideological division. War and the threat of

war have diverted our physical and financial resources, our science and technology, our ingenuity and imagination, and our human capacity and concern. That threat is receding. The time has therefore come for the world to recommit itself to the task of ending the age-old evils of absolute poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, and preventable disease and to build again towards a new world order which will reflect mankind brightest hopes rather than our darkest fears.