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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
Meeting with the President of Mexico, Mr. Carlos Salinas de Gortari
on the occasion of the
Fourth Evaluation of the Follow-up to the
World Summit for Children

Mexico City, Mexico
7 October 1992



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To be here in Mexico with you, at this Fourth Evaluation of the Follow-up to the World Summit for Children, is an inspiration as well as an honour. I very much appreciate the remarks I have heard on the achievements which they represent.

The inspiration I feel comes from your commitment to do even more to attain the goals of the World Summit for Children, an effort in which Mexico is an acknowledged leader. When I look back over what has been reported at these meetings twice a year with you, Mr. President, to review progress on your National Plan of Action, I see that the pace and the intensity of effort are quickening. The results are more and more profound. Since 1985, Mexico has reduced its under-five child mortality rate by more than one third, the fastest rate of improvement among the 12 most populous countries in the Americas.

The attention you have devoted to strengthening the mechanism for follow-up is impressive, a positive experience to be shared with other countries in the region. I would like therefore to give special recognition to you, Mr. President, for your initiative to establish the National Commission for Follow-up to the National Plan of Action, under the guidance of Dr. Jesus Kumate Rodriguez.

Allow me to underscore a few of the main achievements, before discussing the challenges that remain.

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For instance, with regard to achievements in Health, I am inspired by the fact that here in Mexico, as part of the follow-up to the World Summit:

* 10 million children under five have been vaccinated against 6 diseases, a 95% immunization coverage, which is up from only 50% five years ago. No case of polio has been reported since 18 October 1990 — a remarkable accomplishment.

* Breastfeeding, with its concomitant health benefits for both children and mothers, is being promoted on an impressive scale; I understand that 30 hospitals, in less than 18 months, already qualify as "Baby -and Mother Friendly"; 214 more are in the process of converting their programmes to meet requirements; a national breastfeeding center has been created here in Mexico City; producers of baby formula have agreed to stop distributing free samples in all hospitals. Might it be possible that by end of 1994 80% of all Mexican hospitals would be Baby-Friendly?

* Your "Health Starts at Home" project has already trained 374,000 mothers as health promoters. Tlaxcala, which has given a special focus to this project, has already seen a dramatic reduction in its under-five mortality rate -- by 12% in the past two years -- four times the national reduction rate.

* 15,000 of some 25,000 traditional midwives, identified so far, have already been trained in modern methods, and in the use of the health system when necessary. The importance of this is great, since as recently as 2 years ago some one third of births in Mexico were without benefit of modern knowledge and methods.

* Diarrhoeal deaths have been reduced noticeably in recent years, thanks to increased availability of clean water and sanitation, and an increase in the use of Oral Rehydration Therapy to 66%, up from 13% in 1985. Despite this progress, 16,000 children still died last year as a consequence of diarrhoea. I understand that diarrhoeal deaths rise to more than 100 daily in the warmer months of the year. The great majority of these deaths can be prevented, if only their families has used ORT. Mr. President, I am told that the present efforts launched by your government should achieve the year-2000 goal of reducing diarrhoeal mortality by 50% by the end of 1994. The potential exists, however, for achieving considerably more by the end of 1994, if ORT becomes a truly national effort under your personal leadership as it is for immunization.

On the basic Education front, I note, Mr. President, that in the last 4 years your government has increased its expenditure for education by more than 70%, and launched innovative programmes with the "National Modernization Agreement for Basic Education" as the foundation. Also, the Programa Nacional de Solidaridad has assisted 500,000 children living in extreme poverty in rural and isolated areas in the poorest states.

I am also heartened by the decision of the Mexican Government to collaborate with the World Bank in a project on "initial education" in which

UNICEF is pleased to participate, along with UNESCO and UNDP. A loan of US\$ 80,000,000 will be used for this purpose in the 10 poorest Mexican states.

As government analysts point out, more effective strategies to prevent primary school drop-outs are needed. More community involvement to encourage and assist education is urgent, as are programmes for almost 4 million illiterate women, in their own right and because they have such a strong influence over their children's futures.

The quality of life for children everywhere is fundamentally influenced by water and sanitation services, as well as by access to health services and to education. Here it is notable, Mr. President, that your government has increased the budget by 5 times the previous level. One result is that between 1990-1992, your government has extended drinking water coverage to 8,000,000 additional people and sanitation services to another 7.1 million more. At the same time, some 13 to 14 million Mexican still lack access to clean water. I am told that approximately one third of these live in isolated rural communities.

For these remote communities especially, simple and low-cost rather than sophisticated technology appears to be part of the solution, along with a continued development of your "Clean Water Programme", the promotion of community participation in building and managing water and sanitation systems, and the strengthening of state and municipal levels of management.

On the question of Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances, Mexico, through DIF (Desarrollo Integral de la Familia) and the National Commission on Human Rights and other agencies, has been making a remarkable effort to assess the nature and extent of its problems in this difficult area.

Mexico's NPA sets goals and objectives for 10 categories of street children so far identified. Programs to achieve these goals have been initiated. We still need to know and do more. I look forward to the result of further studies and to the details of the action programmes based on them. I also look forward to continued dissemination of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, with the perspective of perfecting here in Mexico a society which throughly respects children and their rights.

Based on Mexico's success in using the National Plan of Action as a tool for social policy, I would like to stress two challenges for the coming period.

Today, in the Meeting of Latin American governments on implementation of NPAs, we have heard how a number of countries, such as Colombia, Ecuador and Brazil, are securing the participation of all States or provinces -- and of some municipalities -- in the NPA process. A genuine breakthrough would occur if we could get all municipalities to participate. If every major municipality were to prepare its own programme of action, within the framework provided by the States, it would be another first for Mexico.

The second challenge is to extend the use of ORT to 80% of Mexican families by the end of 1994, up from the current level of 66%, as part of

the . There is only one country in the world that has done anything comparable on ORT, and that is Egypt -- with dramatic results where it now saves the lives of some 100. We badly need another world example. Dehydration still takes the lives of 5 to 6 thousand children daily worldwide. We need another breakthrough in this important area, and I think that Mexico could achieve that breakthrough. To do this, particular attention will have to be paid to 10 critical States you have already identified. ORT costs practically nothing and does so much. What a great gift it would be, if Mexico could extend the use of ORT to 4 out of 5 children. It would be a gift to Latin America, and to the world.

Thank you.