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Message from Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
High-Level Conference on Children
of the
League of Arab States

Tunis, Tunisia
17 November 1992



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It is a great honour indeed, and a great pleasure, to be with you for this important gathering. I have been looking forward to it because we are seeing proof, here in the Arab world, that it is possible to improve children's lives even in hard times. I have been looking forward to it because the League of Arab States is showing the world that progress on the national level can be accelerated when a group of nations or a region unites to pursue common goals for making human progress. And here I am referring not only to the Arab League but to other groupings as well: the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab Maghreb Union. For a number of years now, the regional collaboration you have undertaken on behalf of children has served as an example, an inspiration to other groupings and regions.

The population of the Arab world is young - 100 million, or 45 per cent of its 220 million inhabitants are under the age of 16. This high proportion of young people only underscores the importance of children and youth to the present and future of the Arab world. In the Arab Document on Childhood issued here in Tunis in June 1990, you wisely noted that "the kind of physical, intellectual, moral, spiritual, cultural and psychological care we afford (children) today will decide the future of the Arab Nation..." Indeed, the actions you take - or fail to take - now for your children will define the contours of life in your countries well into the 21st century.

The Arab world has made greater progress in child survival over the past 30 years - and especially over the past decade - than any other region. In 1960, 256 out of every 1,000 Arab children died before the age of five. By 1991, this had been reduced to 107. In 1960, 157 per 1,000 infants died before reaching their first birthday. By 1991, this, too, had been significantly reduced to 74. By far the most impressive reductions in child mortality came in the 1980s, as a result of the promises made by the region's Ministers of Health to cut under-five deaths in half by the end of the decade. Then, on the eve of the World Summit for Children, the Arab League pledged to reduce child mortality rates another third

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by the year 2000 - a target embraced soon thereafter on a global level. This is a region that is not afraid to continually challenge itself with ambitious goals and rigorous deadlines.

The pace of social progress is also reflected in your citizens' increasing life expectancy: in 1960, an Arab could expect, at birth, to live until the age of only 46; by 1991, this had risen to 63 years. At this rate of increase - God willing - with each passing year every newborn can expect to live six months longer than the child born the year before. This is truly impressive progress.

The largest global collaboration ever mounted in peacetime - the historic effort to reach Universal Child Immunization (UCI) coverage of 80 per cent of all under-one-year olds worldwide - was resoundingly successful in most Arab countries. You led the world in meeting this challenge, increasing coverage from less than 30 per cent in 1980 to over 80 per cent by 1990. Most of your countries have immunization levels higher than those achieved in industrialized countries such as the United States and United Kingdom. Two important challenges face you now: first, to sustain immunization levels and increase coverage to 90 per cent of all infants by the year 2000, with special attention to immunization against measles and tetanus toxoid for women of child-bearing age. Second, to narrow the gap between provinces in each country and to help countries with low immunization levels to raise and sustain their coverage.

Progress has been notable on other fronts, too. Primary school enrolment for both boys and girls increased significantly during the 1980s, although the gender gap in education - and female illiteracy rates in particular - remains unacceptably high. Also, active policies for promoting health, education and family planning have led to declining fertility and birth rates in much of the Arab world, suggesting that the region is now in the initial stages of demographic transition. Until quite recently, population growth in the Arab world had mirrored the high rates of sub-Saharan Africa.

Moreover, half the members of the Arab League have ratified the historic Convention on the Rights of the Child, that revolutionary tool for turning children's basic needs into rights that governments, communities and families are bound to respect whether times are good or bad, whether there's war or peace. Three others have signed, signaling their interest in early ratification. I remember that it was here in Tunis in 1989 that the Arab League endorsed the historic recommendation passed in Alexandria in November 1988, supporting early ratification of the Convention. Being an optimist, I prefer to look at the regional glass as being half-full rather than half-empty. It is worrisome, however, that seven Arab states have so far neither signed nor ratified the Convention, which is now the law of the land in 126 countries around the globe. The Convention provides a framework for

reviewing and perfecting national legislation concerning the survival, protection, and development of children, and reinforces the ethical teachings of the world's great religions. Ratification of the Convention by every one of your member states would clearly signal unanimity of commitment to elevate children's essential needs to the highest rank of society's priorities. The League of Arab States could be the first regional group with all its members States Parties to the Convention.

The overall social progress you have achieved (and the common perception of the Arab world as uniformly wealthy) must not be allowed to mask the sharp disparities which persist between and within your nations - vast disparities in income, between men and women, between urban and rural areas, and in terms of access to basic health services, education, safe water and sanitation. Significant levels and pockets of poverty cry out to be addressed. The contrasts are perhaps best illustrated by the fact that while childhood obesity has become a significant public health concern in parts of the Arab world, hundreds - and currently, thousands - of other Arab children are starving to death every day. Last year, nearly 900,000 Arab children under the age of five died of largely preventable diseases - some 2,500 a day. Rapid urbanization has resulted in large increases in street children, child labour, child abuse and child neglect. The great challenge of the 1990s for the Arab world is to maintain the momentum of social progress achieved in the 1980s, while narrowing painful and potentially explosive gaps between and within nations - and here there is ample scope for stepped-up assistance from wealthier Arab states to their less fortunate brothers.

Wars and natural calamities have taken a tragic toll in lives, causing widespread deprivation, swelling the numbers of refugees and placing enormous strains on already overtaxed public services. Children and other innocents are most often hit the hardest. In conflict situations, children have been callously targeted, held hostage, used as soldiers. They have been hurt by international sanctions. In defense of children and other vulnerable groups, UNICEF will spare no effort to see to it that such sanctions do not punish those they are not intended to punish.

We at UNICEF have seen what your countries have been able to accomplish even under the most difficult of circumstances and are convinced that you are fully up to the challenge that lies ahead. The Arab world provided one of the six countries which initiated the World Summit for Children and played a critical role in its success. In July, United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali presented his first report to the General Assembly on measures taken to implement the promises made at that first-ever global summit meeting. I commend this report to your attention and have brought along copies for distribution to each delegation. In the report, the Secretary-General states that follow-up to the summit has been "substantial and widespread", while stressing that

"a great deal remains to be done". In the context of regional follow-up efforts, he makes specific reference to this High-Level Arab Conference on Children.

For the first time since the dawn of history, humankind is engaged in medium- and long-term planning for the well-being of its young - and you are at the forefront of this revolutionary development! We are very encouraged by the fact that most of the Arab states have either finalized or are preparing National Programmes of Action (NPAs) to implement the strategies and reach the goals set by the World Summit for Children. In the process of preparing and activating solid NPAs, you are giving a major boost to your ongoing efforts on behalf of children and women. Accelerating human development will, in turn, galvanize economic progress, slow population growth, and ease stress on natural systems and resources.

The implementation of these NPAs is indeed a challenge - but a challenge that can be popular politically, because these documents speak to the needs of every family for a better future for their children. Implementation will, of course, require mobilization and sustained commitment from political leadership at the highest level and from all parts of government.

I would like to offer a few suggestions regarding the NPA implementation process. First, the costs of realizing these programmes must be estimated more accurately in each NPA, must be used for developing strategies of greater cost-effectiveness and be continuously updated. In a number of NPAs produced so far, the discussion of costs and of how the proposed programmes are to be funded is not developed in sufficient detail. I would argue that the more specific and detailed the costing is in your NPAs, the better position you will be in to advocate for adequate funding of the social sector; for budget restructuring to cover priority areas of human development, and for a restructuring of foreign assistance to support key programmes that cannot be funded in their entirety by your governments.

Second, NPAs need to be brought down to the local level. That is where implementation must take place; efforts are only sustainable when the benefits make sense, or are tangible, at the community level. Each state, each region, each municipality should have its own programme of action, one which states what resources it will bring to the process. Other parts of civil society should be encouraged to do the same: NGOs, religious organizations, professional societies, labour unions, private enterprise, all have an important part to play and resources to contribute. Such participation will reinforce the democratization trend emerging in the region.

Third, I highly commend the Arab League for its commitment to stronger monitoring mechanisms and information systems, which are

also vital to the credibility of NPAs and the success of the programmes they propose. The assignment of responsibilities for monitoring and the identification of appropriate indicators are only the beginning. Functioning systems must begin producing data on goals for which there is now no data or the data is suspect. And ways must be developed to communicate this information to decision-makers, opinion leaders and the general public.

Finally, even where NPAs have been issued, I hope that you will not consider them as documents carved in stone, but rather as living, changing plans that are to be improved and updated on a regular basis.

But where will the money come from? In a period of world recession, structural adjustment, austerity programmes, external debt, and multiple crises of one sort or another, it is certainly one of the most important questions - but a question to which there are many positive answers, once the priority of children's needs is accepted. Clearly, external aid can only be counted on to provide a very small proportion of the total amount needed. Social sector budgets will have to be increased, as already announced by Egypt, Tunisia and other countries. Permit me to suggest three possible sources of additional domestic funding for human development: first, this region, which has the highest ratio of military to health and education expenditures anywhere, can and must carve a "peace dividend" out of post-Cold War efforts to build a stable and lasting peace in the area. In the medium- and long-term, investing in people provides far more national security than investing in weapons. Second, market-oriented economic reforms are releasing revenues and producing savings that can provide high returns if re-invested in priority social sectors. Third, by strengthening the ethos of "building from below" - that is, involving communities in the management and financing of local services - new and important additional resources can be mobilized for human development.

But even where additional funds are not available, there is usually ample scope for restructuring of existing budgets to ensure that priority programmes are adequately funded. Within each social sector, hard questions need to be asked: how much of the education budget goes for basic education? How much of the health budget goes to primary health care? How much of the budget for water supply goes to low cost systems for the rural and peri-urban poor? All too often, the answer is that the share is far too low. Worldwide, the countries with the highest levels of human development expenditures devote only 5 or 6 per cent of their budgets to priority sectors. Certainly there is room for - at the very least - a quadrupling of these percentages. It is from the restructuring of national and social sector budgets that most of the resources to achieve the goals of the NPAs will have to be found.

I should stress that external assistance must be restructured as well. World-wide, less than 10 per cent of international aid currently goes for human priority needs. That proportion needs to be doubled, at the very least, if the goals outlined at the World Summit for Children, and later ratified at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, are to be met. What the industrial world spends on the military every day would be sufficient to cover the annual external requirement for helping Arab countries meet key sectoral goals.

Clear priority must be given to low cost and cost-effective solutions. Many of the most powerful solutions cost very little. Consider oral rehydration therapy, pioneered in the Arab world by Egypt and now being promoted energetically by Morocco. It is shocking that still today, diarrhoea will kill more than 200,000 children a year - more than 500 a day - in the Arab States, and yet most of these deaths can be avoided at the cost of just a few cents per episode through the use of ORT. Nor is money the real issue in the prevention of the physical and mental disabilities - including poor educational performance - associated with vitamin A or iodine deficiencies. For a few cents per person, commercial salt can be iodized and vitamin A capsules can be administered to children when they come in for immunizations. And breastfeeding - it's free, life-saving, and strongly backed by the Koran and the Hadith. The Arab world could save tens of millions of dollars in foreign exchange and give its babies the best start in life by decisively reversing the trend toward the use of breastmilk substitutes. Even immunization, which is somewhat more expensive, now involves only modest costs thanks to the substantial investment in equipment and manpower training you have already made. Here, it is more a question of political will and social mobilization than money. Even more costly services such as basic education, drinking water and sanitation can be extended and improved at affordable cost with the full participation of communities and the use of innovative and creative approaches, including cost-sharing.

Although major progress in the well-being of children ultimately requires progress on many fronts, and a comprehensive set of national actions to reach a range of concrete goals, the fact is that many of these goals are inter-related and mutually-reinforcing. They inter-act synergistically and you can make the cost-effectiveness of what you do increase exponentially. Basic education illustrates this best. We know that basic education, especially of girls and young women, is everywhere accompanied by improvements in child and maternal health, and helps reduce family size. Having healthier and fewer children makes it easier for parents to educate and care for the children they do have, and so on, with tangible benefits for each succeeding generation. The World Bank says that educating girls yields "a higher rate of return than any other investment in the developing world", not to mention the benefits which learning provides to girls and women themselves.

Let me suggest, finally, that we learn from the success of UCI and identify for urgent, priority action a few low cost, feasible goals which we know how to monitor, and which all heads of state in the region can endorse and actively promote. And furthermore I would suggest that setting intermediate goals as a region - or as sub-regions - could reinforce efforts being made in each of your countries. Why not agree on four or five targets where the elements of regional collaboration could most clearly make a difference? And why not meet them by 1995, in time for the mid-decade United Nations progress review scheduled by the World Summit for Children? 1995 is also the year in which the World Summit on Social Development is slated to be held, and the 50th anniversary of the United Nations will be celebrated. If the Arab world were to come to these events with the solid achievement of a cluster of strategic, intermediate goals, you would be providing powerful impetus to the global process of implementing the goals for children and the broader human development agenda reflected in the Earth Summit's Agenda 21.

What could some of those "doable" year 1995 goals be?

- * Eradication of polio and a parallel 95 per cent reduction in the tens of thousands of measles deaths in the region.
- * Elimination of neo-natal tetanus, which causes more than ten thousand infant deaths each year in the Arab world.
- * Increase ORT use to 80 per cent. This would mean saving the lives of more than 100,000 Arab children a year.
- * Universal salt iodization to prevent the mental retardation and lowering of intellectual and physical capacities among millions caused by low intake of this vital micronutrient.
- * A halt to the free distribution of breastmilk substitutes in the region by the end of this year, and the designation of all major hospitals as Baby Friendly by 1995.
- * Finally, an accelerated effort to make educational systems girl-friendly, by attracting - and keeping - girls in school with the all-important support of their families, as well as increased literacy programmes for women.

Success in meeting such intermediate targets - or others you may see fit to identify - would surely lay the basis for broadening the scope of priority action to cover all or most of the year 2000 goals. You already have a number of Arab League working groups that could meet every six months or so to follow-up on joint actions to reach the targets and exchange national experiences. Each regional and sub-regional summit meeting could review progress along the way. Needless to say, UNICEF and, I am sure, WHO, UNESCO UNDP and the entire UN system, stand ready to assist you in such a process and help mobilize support from a donor community that - I am confident - will find this concerted approach to meeting interim targets highly attractive.

Achievement of these goals would result in saving nearly one thousand Arab child lives a day by the end of 1995 and lead to a far greater reduction in deaths by the year 2000. May I share a dream with you - a dream that leaders in the Arab world consider the well-being of their children of such importance that they personally convene monthly or quarterly meetings to monitor progress being made in their country towards each of these goals. Many world leaders made this a practice that proved instrumental in achieving the goal of Universal Child Immunization. To do this would not only help your countries achieve their own goals but would also set an example for other countries worldwide.

This meeting in Tunis - which was preceded by regional gatherings of ministers and officials of the SAARC and Latin American countries - is a key part of the global process of World Summit and Agenda 21 follow-up. The success of your meeting in Tunis will help lay the basis for the International Conference on Assistance to African Children that will take place in Dakar starting 25 November. Some of your governments will be going as part of the African community and others as traditional donors to Africa. I cannot overemphasize the importance of the Arab world's solidarity with Africa and its children in these hard times.

Having visited Somalia and the former Yugoslavia recently and having witnessed there the utter devastation visited upon children by the combined cruelties of man-made and natural calamities, I would like to conclude my remarks with an appeal for peace - peace, which is every bit as vital to the survival and healthy development of children as air, food, water and love. From our particular vantage-point as the UN's agency for children, we at UNICEF will do everything we can to encourage peace efforts in the Middle East and in Africa, and to work with all parties to open or broaden days and spaces of tranquillity for children and other innocents caught in conflict situations.

The Arab world, where civilization first flourished, has an opportunity to give modern civilization - with all its opportunities and all its horrors - a decisive uplift on the

threshold of the 21st century. You are wise to focus your energies and your resources on your precious children and we wish you the best of luck with this historic gathering.