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"Children in the 1990s:
Ending Some of Poverty's Worst Symptoms and Causes
at an Affordable Cost"

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**Children in the 1990s:
Ending Some of Poverty's Worst Symptoms and Causes
at an Affordable Cost**

By James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund

Article for DIRECTIONS magazine

UNICEF estimates that it would cost approximately \$25 billion a year to control the major childhood diseases, halve the rate of child malnutrition, bring clean water and safe sanitation to all communities, make family planning universally available, and provide almost every child with at least a basic education.

Over the last three years, the majority of the world's Presidents and Prime Ministers have committed themselves to achieving these goals by the end of the decade. Detailed plans have been drawn up in some 75 countries, and are nearing completion in 30 more.

The achievement of 80% immunization in the developing world - saving 3 million lives each year - has shown that these goals can be achieved by mobilizing today's technologies and today's communications capacities. Other scientific advances are waiting to be put into practice on the same scale.

More than money is required. But UNICEF has estimated the cost in dollars in order to dislodge the idea that abolishing the worst aspects of poverty is a task too vast to be attempted or too expensive to be afforded. \$25 billion a year is less than 5% of the world's annual military spending. It is less than Europeans spend each year on wine, or Americans on beer.

Even within present resources, much more could be achieved if more priority were given to meeting the needs of the poorest. Only about 10% of government spending in the developing world is allocated to basic nutrition, health care, water supply, sanitation, primary education, and family planning. Furthermore, less than 10% of development aid is earmarked for these obvious human priorities.

What is required now is a doubling of current expenditures and efforts - so that at least 20% of government spending and at least 20% of foreign aid goes directly to meeting basic, obvious needs.

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Given this modest increase in resources, and a sustained political commitment in all countries to see the job through, it is possible to achieve, within a decade, one of the greatest goals that humanity could ever set for itself -- ensuring a basic standard of nutrition, adequate health care, and education for every man, woman, and child on earth.

There are two reasons for maintaining the commitment to these long-term goals even in the face of many particular crises - from Somalia to the former Yugoslavia - which regularly erupt into the news and claim the lives of so many millions of children.

First of all, it is important to recognize the sheer scale of the tragedy of ordinary, everyday malnutrition and disease. No famine, no flood, no earthquake, no war has ever claimed the lives of 250,000 children in a single week. Yet malnutrition and disease claim that number of child victims every week. The yearly total is 13 million young lives.

When little or nothing could be done about this larger scale tragedy, then neglect was perhaps understandable. But slowly, quietly, and without the world taking very much notice, we have arrived at the point where this tragedy is no longer necessary. It is, therefore, no longer acceptable. And the time has come to bring it to an end.

Second, a commitment to ending this long-running tragedy is important to the long-term future for world development. Attacking malnutrition, disease, and illiteracy strikes not just at some of poverty's worst symptoms, but also at some of poverty's most fundamental causes.

Economic development is undermined when millions of children suffer from poor mental and physical growth. Equality of opportunity is denied when the children of the very poor drop out of school. Productivity is sapped by the time, energy, and health that is lost to diseases. Employment prospects and incomes are destroyed by disabilities such as polio or nutritional blindness or iodine deficiency. And the contribution of women to economic development cannot be liberated if women remain chained to long years of child-bearing, long days of attendance on sickness, and long hours devoted to the fetching and carrying of water and fuel.

In these and many other ways, poverty's symptoms help to crush the potential of the poor and to perpetuate poverty from one generation to the next.

There is now a clear and demonstrable potential for overcoming these tragic symptoms and causes of poverty and underdevelopment - a clear potential for meeting the needs of all for basic nutrition, health care, water and sanitation, primary education and family planning. That potential has been formulated into a set of

specific goals for the year 2000 - goals which have been accepted by the great majority of the world's political leaders. The technologies and strategies are tried and tested, available and affordable. And a start has been made in many nations.

We therefore stand on the edge of a new era of concern for meeting basic human needs. Whether the world will enter decisively into that new age depends on the pressure that is brought to bear by politicians, press, and public in all nations. The role of non-governmental organizations and private voluntary organizations in mobilizing community participation in self-help for development is particularly critical. With the end of the cold war and the ascendancy of democracy and market reform in so much of the world, the 1990s constitute a rare "window of opportunity" for accelerating human progress. We cannot -- our children cannot -- afford to let that window slam shut on the better future that is now within reach.