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Address by James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
China National Conference on Education for All

Beijing, China
1 March 1993



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It is a certainly a privilege to address this National Conference on Education for All. It provides China and the countries represented here the opportunity to renew their pledge made at Jomtien, exchange experiences and learn from on another in order to reach the goals that were set there and further endorsed at the World Summit for Children.

I would first like to express my appreciation to Premier Li Peng for his positive and early response to Mr. Mayors's and my suggestion to convene this national conference as part of the global initiative to promote Education for All in the world's most populous country. When I first had the privilege of meeting H.E. Mr. Li Peng, he was Chairman of the State Education Commission. It is no accident that the first conference should take place in China because the Chinese government under H.E. Mr. Li Peng's leadership has given education high priority in China's development strategy. I would also like to congratulate H.E. Mr. Li Tieying and the State Education Commission for their leadership and the careful planning that went into organizing this conference. Finally the high level of representation from all the countries attending this conference indicates clearly the world-wide commitment to the present initiative.

You are already familiar with the broad outlines of this initiative involving the nine most populous developing countries: Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan. Together, these countries account for 75 per cent of the world's nearly one billion illiterates and the largest absolute number of children unable to benefit from primary education opportunities. Action taken now in these countries will provide the critical mass to make EFA achievable.

Having this conference in China not only will provide an opportunity to further solidify our commitment to this initiative and learn from one another, but it will also provide an opportunity to observe the impressive achievements made by China. Indeed, never before have we seen such significant improvement in the living conditions of people and such rapid development of a national economy on such a gigantic scale, as we have witnessed in

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China in recent years. China today is posed to become the largest national economy in the world in the first quarter of the 21st century, a prospect that would have been difficult to imagine only a few years ago. The phenomenal economic progress of the last decade has been possible because of the investment China has made in its people -- in improving their health, education and nutrition.

China's achievements in education are remarkable:

China now has reached a literacy rate of 78 per cent among the population aged 15 and over and has demonstrated that low income is no bar to high levels of literacy.

China has the largest primary education system in the world with an enrolment of 122 million students, 5.5 million teachers, and 729 thousand primary schools. The net enrolment ratio is over 97 per cent.

The momentum of progress can be maintained on the future only by continuing to invest in people. It is significant that historically all the newly industrializing countries, such as Singapore and the Republic of Korea have -- as did Japan -- all made heavy initial investments in basic education decades ago. There is abundant evidence that education is indispensable for development. Farmers with primary education are significantly more productive because they are more receptive to new methods and new technologies. A literate workforce is essential to a modern economy. Educated workers are more productive and more easily trained in new job skills. Girls who have completed primary school become mothers who provide better nutrition to their families, who take greater advantage of health services and who themselves will practice better family planning and have fewer children. Basic education is the foundation on which development rests. If we are to achieve the World Summit Goals in health and nutrition and sanitation, basic education must underpin our efforts. Education is undoubtedly the key to sustained progress.

Jomtien Follow-up

Momentum for pursuing the Education for All goals focusing on primary education has been building since Jomtien. The Executive Boards of UNICEF and UNESCO have created the Joint Committee on Education from their two governing bodies to follow up on the Jomtien Conference and to promote greater cooperation at regional, sub-regional and country levels. UNICEF is strengthening its institutional capacity to assist countries in this enormous task by building its staff strength especially at national level and

increasing its resources for education programmes and projects. The UNICEF Board has agreed in principle to devote up to 25 per cent of its resources to creative projects in basic education by the year 2000. The World Bank, another Jomtien partner, has already tripled its lending for primary education projects.

It is important that the broad goals of Jomtien are made more specific within each country's context and that explicit, quantifiable goals are spelled out. It is also important from the management point of view to set mid-decade intermediate goals as milestones to work toward. In this connection, I am pleased to note that China has set basic education goals for 1995 including:

- (a) Universalization of compulsory primary education covering over 90 per cent of the total population.
- (b) Reduction of the total number of illiterates between 15-40 years of age by about 20 million.

Basic education for All has been defined by Jomtien not only in terms of universal access but also in terms of achievement of a minimum level of basic learning as defined appropriately by each country. This attention to learning achievements is, I believe, one of the most creative legacies of the Jomtien Conference which will have an enduring impact. The focus on actual learning achievement will have revolutionary implications for the way countries plan, manage and organize basic education programmes. Simply attending school is not enough. Education through whatever means --- formal or non-formal -- must ensure that children and adults acquire the basic skills in literacy and numeracy and the essential knowledge for living to ensure that they have the power to control and improve their lives. Development depends not on rote learning but on problem-solving and critical thinking skills. I note that curriculum reform in China is promoting this type of learning. A person's schooling may end after completing the primary or secondary levels, but learning never stops. A good basic education concentrates on learning achievement and lays the foundation for learning the many new skills required over a lifetime.

China's Role in EFA

The global initiative in the nine most populous countries will provide world leadership in EFA as well as many inspiring examples of strategies and policies. In this connection China has made commendable -- outstanding -- progress during the past four decades in providing education to its people. China has pioneered and nurtured many imaginative experiments in reaching its disadvantaged groups and in making learning relevant to the learners' lives and circumstances. The use of Mingban (community) teachers is an

outstanding example of people's collaboration and also an innovative way of educational financing and providing basic education by the people before the State can assume full responsibility. The Mingban teachers have functioned as a sort of temporary bridge -- a Bailey bridge -- to provide at least the main element of basic education in short period of time while a more elaborate education system was being developed.

Though substantial progress has been achieved, development of basic education in China remains a continuing challenge. There are disparities in participation between boys and girls, between different nationality groups, and between economically advanced and underdeveloped regions.

The primary education system in poor areas remains a principal challenge with a number of continuing deficiencies. While an impressively large proportion of children do enrol in primary schools throughout the country, in poor counties the problems of non-attendance, high grade repetition, high drop-out rates and the rather low level of learning achievements among many who remain in school continue to hinder progress towards EFA goal achievement.

Girls form the majority of children who are not enrolled in schools and constitute about 70 per cent of those who drop out before completing primary education. They will continue to demand special attention. The majority of adult illiterates are women, requiring a special focus.

China's National Programme of Action (NPA) prepared in response to the World Summit Plan of Action, I am happy to note, has attached great importance to this issue of disparity reduction among regions and between genders. The NPA indicates that the efforts to universalize nine-year compulsory education and eradicate illiteracy would focus on the poor areas and the areas inhabited predominately by minority nationality groups. The NPA also envisages special attention to the education of girls.

The UNICEF-assisted basic education programmes in China are directed primarily towards the economically underdeveloped, remote and minority nationality areas. They include a focus on improving the quality and relevance of primary schooling, preparing the pre-school age children for schools and assisting education for children with special needs. The main thrusts of the programme have been on upgrading and improving the efficiency, effectiveness and relevance of education leading to the improvement of local schools, and out-of-school activities focusing on child and community health and protection of the environment.

Future Challenges

The achievement of universal basic education in a country the size and complexity of China is a challenging task. While both primary education and adult literacy programmes must be strengthened, there is a need to make a special effort in universal primary education so that the problem of literacy can be contained at the source. Success in primary education would serve as the cutting edge for success in a broader effort in basic education for All.

While China's long commitment to the universalization of basic education is most commendable, there are at least four major challenges which may require urgent attention. I am sure other countries also face similar challenges in their efforts to universalize basic education.

First, China's success in its educational efforts has depended on its overall national policy of decentralization to local authority and responsibility. But this extremely useful strategy has also led to disparity in opportunities between different regions and nationality groups. The Challenge now is to combine the beneficial effects of decentralization with a social safety net for the underprivileged. This is a policy issue which needs to be resolved by the combined efforts of national and provincial governments.

Second, the primary education curriculum is at present too focused on preparation for secondary and higher education rather than on providing learning for life. These two requirements need not be mutually exclusive. The most valuable assets for life that children can learn at the basic education level are the three Rs, essential knowledge and understanding about their physical and social environment and the skills to use this knowledge in solving everyday problems. In fact, students acquiring this knowledge and skills will be better prepared for further studies. In pursuing this challenge, I would like to draw the attention of the countries represented here to the great potential opened up by the communication revolution -- radio and television -- which now reaches even the remote villages and hamlets.

Third, significantly reducing and eventually eliminating the gap between boys and girls in primary school enrolment and completion is a challenge that China and most of the nine countries will have to address. China is seriously addressing this issue and I am sure that Chinese girls will have reached educational parity with Chinese boys even before the year 2000.

Fourth, one of the most important challenges for all countries is to make the education system more efficient. Reducing dropout and repetition and having all first grade children complete the primary cycle with learning gains will enable countries to make the

best use of their limited resources. Restricted budgets for education demand not only a major emphasis on resource mobilization but also improved efficiency of operations. Specific strategies to mobilize community resources and increase the involvement of all segments of society will be essential for many countries.

I have deliberately focused on four major challenges: eliminating gender disparity, removing regional inequities, ensuring learning for life, and improving the efficiency of education. I am sure that there are many more challenges and many more issues. However, we must all set priorities. Resources are limited, not just financial resources but resources of time and energy and leadership. Ultimately, all societies have to choose their own priorities.

As we rapidly approach the 21st century, the moral imperative facing this generation is to commit ourselves fully to the process that not only will guarantee the survival and good health of every child but will also provide them with the intellectual tools to enjoy life fully and contribute significantly to economical and social progress. The international EFA initiative represents your determined march towards providing education to all your people, male and female, young and old, in economically developed as well as in economically less developed regions. However, it is the political will and the commitment of each country that will finally decide the outcome of their initiative. We are certain that this conference will move us one major step closer to full educational opportunities for all.