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Statement by James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
before the
Commission on Sustainable Development

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**"Our planet must be preserved in order to nurture our children;
equally, our children must be better nurtured
to preserve our planet."**

UNICEF Executive Board, June 1992

I am delighted to have the opportunity to address the new Commission on Sustainable Development and share UNICEF's views regarding some of the key challenges facing us in the 1990s. This Commission, we believe, must seize certain opportunities before it in order to make rapid progress on a number of global fronts -- progress which will begin to have a significant impact on major environmental problems during the 1990s.

Follow-up to UNCED has been an important topic at the two meetings of the UNICEF Executive Board that have taken place since the Rio Conference. I am attaching the corresponding resolutions to the distribution copy of my remarks. The Board called upon our Secretariat to prepare a major paper for this year's session -- which ended last month -- on how UNICEF can best support implementation of Agenda 21.

After discussing that paper, the Board asked us to transmit to this Commission the goals and strategies for children in the 1990s for your deliberations on the "multi-year thematic programme of work". Also the Board called upon us to incorporate the primary environmental care (PEC) perspective into our country programmes in order to meet basic needs while protecting natural resources in and around communities being assisted -- including "empowerment of families, especially children and women."

Last June, immediately after UNCED, UNICEF's Board clearly stated the centrality of environmental issues to the world's children and the interrelationship between the condition of the

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world's children and the future prospects for our planet: "our planet must be preserved in order to nurture our children; equally, our children must be better nurtured to preserve our planet."

With respect to the former, as the Rio Conference recognized in Chapter 25 of Agenda 21, children's stakes in the environment could not be greater:

"Children not only will inherit the responsibility of looking after the Earth, but in many developing countries they comprise nearly half the population. Furthermore, children in both developing and industrialized countries are highly vulnerable to the effects of environmental degradation. They are also highly aware supporters of environmental thinking. The specific interests of children need to be taken fully into account in the participatory process on environment and development in order to safeguard the future sustainability of any actions taken to improve the environment."

Children, in short, are already the ones who are most affected by existing environmental degradation, as evidenced by the millions who die each year for lack of clean water and sanitation, from preventable diseases in the environment such as measles and polio, and from malnutrition often stemming from depleted or ruined agricultural lands. And children, of course, will be the ones most affected by what happens in the future. They are the ones who will suffer as a result of eventual global warming, rising sea levels, widening holes in the ozone layer.

With respect to the latter -- the future of our planet -- improvements in child health and basic education, of girls in particular, can have a vast impact on environmental conditions in the future. There is a critical linkage between child survival and development, on the one hand, and population and the environment, on the other, that is often not fully understood: As U.S. Vice President Al Gore stressed here this past Monday, when parents are confident their children will survive, when women have a basic education, and couples have access to family planning, we know that their attitudes and actions regarding family size and family planning are greatly affected.

This was brought out very dramatically by one of India's most distinguished economists, K.N. Raj, who wrote this past May that the experience of his home state, Kerala -- one of India's poorer states in terms of income but its best in terms of child survival and basic education -- showed that declines in birth rates were determined to a very significant degree by improvements in health and education. He noted that the fertility rate in Kerala -- hard as it may be to believe -- is now estimated to already be at or below the replacement level. If all of India had the child death

and birth rates of Kerala last year, some 3 million fewer children would have died, and some 10 million fewer children would have been born!

On every continent, where health and education conditions exist, together with ready access to family planning information and services -- even in the absence of large-scale economic development -- birth rates have been more than halved over the past few decades, making for smaller families living in better conditions, and easing stress on the environment. Many profess to know that child mortality and female education are at the heart of dealing with population and the environment -- but I sometimes wonder whether we really believe it. The attention these critical issues normally get in discussions of the environment is far from adequate.

In short, not only do children clearly have the greatest stake both in present environmental conditions and in the future environment of our planet, but the future environmental situation of our planet depends very much on how we treat our children today.

For these reasons, Agenda 21 recognized the importance of the Declaration and Plan of Action of the 1990 World Summit for Children, which set over 20 goals for radically improving the lives of the world's children by the year 2000. The attainment of these goals would have a tremendous impact both on the environmental conditions in which children will be living by decade's end, and also greatly affect the environmental future of our planet. Achievement of the specific goals for children, such as reducing infant and child mortality by a third, halving malnutrition, providing universal access to safe drinking water and sanitation, would, for example, have vast implications for dramatically slowing population growth.

The World Summit for Children was the first truly global summit and would appear to have profound implications for following up on the UNCED Plan of Action -- which incorporated the Summit's goals for children and women. The question, of course, has been: would the promises be kept? We have encouraging progress to report on this score.

The world's leaders who participated in the World Summit for Children called upon all governments to prepare National Programmes of Action (NPAs) on how to attain the goals for the 1990s. Thus far, 85 nations (industrialized as well as developing countries) have completed their NPAs and another 60 are in the process of doing so. The NPAs generally pursue the same human-centered, poverty-reduction, community participation approaches embodied in Agenda 21.

In a noteworthy development, as the world community reviewed progress toward the year 2000 goals over this past year -- led by

the developing countries -- it set mid-decade targets whose attainment by 1995 would be a most convincing demonstration of the will and capacity of governments to keep their promises. Achievement of these targets would so improve the existing environment, so increase the participation and empowerment of the poor in self-help efforts, that it would mean that **some 2 million children now dying each year would not be dying in 1996!** We'd even see an increase in the IQ of the generation born in 1996, inasmuch as iodine deficiency (the single largest cause of mental retardation and mental underdevelopment in the world today) should be virtually eliminated by then through universal iodization of salt.

The commitment of the developing countries toward keeping the Summit for Children goals is being demonstrated to be very substantial. Increasingly, a critical question is the degree of responsiveness of the industrial countries to the relatively modest additional contributions that they have committed themselves to making. There is need for greater external support, which could be met either through increasing ODA or by restructuring assistance so that at least 20 per cent -- instead of an average 10 per cent today -- is earmarked for meeting priority human needs. The public in industrial countries already thinks that this is the prime purpose of development cooperation, but most current donor country aid patterns have only modest direct impact on poverty alleviation and provide little support to investments in people. There is increasing awareness that it does not have to be this way, but **far too little action on actual restructuring of aid budgets has been forthcoming to date.** This is a critical issue for the next 12 months. If the industrialized countries cannot respond in this relatively simple area, it will have profound implications for what we are all trying to accomplish.

For sub-Saharan Africa there is extraordinary need for urgent action to address its intolerable external debt. It more than tripled over the past decade -- from \$56 billion in 1980 to over \$180 billion today, proportionately by far the highest for any region in the world and clearly a major obstacle to both environmental preservation and human development. Two-thirds of this is official debt held by governments or international financial institutions. That is why I am encouraged by reports that Africa's debt burden is likely to be a serious topic of discussion at the forthcoming G-7 Summit. I hope for a breakthrough on this issue.

We have been asked if achieving the goals called for by the World Summit for Children will further burden the carrying capacity of the globe, and our reply is simple and direct: it will not. What makes these goals for the year 2000 -- as well as the set of 1995 targets -- so eminently doable (if only the will is there!) is that essentially they depend for their success on **participation of people and existing institutions**, including, especially, that of

NGOs. It is people's participation in local schools that will make schools run more efficiently. It's their participation in local health systems that make them financially sustainable. It's participation and empowerment of people to overcome poverty that gives them a lasting stake in preserving the environment. NGOs have won themselves a prominent place in the deliberations of this Commission and in all of our efforts for people and the environment.

The positive initial report on World Summit for Children follow-up that the Secretary-General made a year ago to the General Assembly through ECOSOC (A/47/264) will, I am confident, be followed soon by an even more encouraging report on actions taken since then. So, yes, I believe it is possible that the promises made at global gatherings like the World Summit for Children and the Earth Summit can be kept. The incorporation of the goals for children in Agenda 21 gives UNCED follow-up greater traction. Other major conferences that have taken place -- the Jomtien Conference on Education for All and the International Conference on Nutrition -- plus the current World Conference on Human Rights and the upcoming series of global conferences on population and women, all will create holistic awareness of the key problems confronting us and generate political momentum for solving them, as we approach the World Summit for Social Development in 1995, year of the United Nations' 50th anniversary.

In his encouraging speech, the U.S. Vice-President reminded us of Archimedes' lever. He urged this Commission to exert leverage on other institutions to jointly work for sustainable development. I agree. UNICEF's Executive Board has already pledged its energetic support. The work of UN development agencies should become more focused and effective, and better coordinated, as we help governments to implement the plans of action emanating from both the World Summit for Children and the Earth Summit. But if I may borrow the classical reference, it seems to me that accelerated actions for children -- embodied in the World Summit for Children goals -- to "jumpstart" the social development process and slow population growth can be an extraordinarily powerful lever for many of the major transformations we seek. And we now have a benchmark -- December 1995 -- for measuring the pace of progress.

It is my deepest hope that, at the World Summit for Social Development in 1995, we will be able to celebrate, together, significant improvements in the well-being of our children, including the saving of an additional two million child lives per year by 1996, thanks to the world's concerted efforts to reach the goals and targets for its young, as part of our urgent common effort to preserve the planet and nurture all the precious life inhabiting it.