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Statement by James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
before the
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Foreign Agriculture and Hunger

"How U.S. Leadership Can Help Jumpstart Development –
Children and Women as Cutting Edges of Social Progress"

Washington, D.C.
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"How U.S. Leadership Can Help Jumpstart Development -- Children and Women as Cutting Edges of Social Progress"

I am honored, and delighted, to have the opportunity to testify on behalf of the United Nations Children's Fund before the House Subcommittee on Foreign Agriculture and Hunger. Today I would like to share with you UNICEF's strong conviction -- born of almost half a century of development work for the world's young and underprivileged -- that there is now a way of "jumpstarting" solutions to many of the seemingly intractable problems facing humankind on the threshold of the 21st century.

Our proposition is this: children should be the cutting edge of new efforts to overcome the worst manifestations of poverty and underdevelopment. Such efforts would not only radically improve the lives of the world's poor, but also significantly slow population growth and environmental degradation, strengthen democracy and help prevent conflict, spur economic growth and improve the status of women. In short, it would significantly advance achievement of all the major goals for foreign aid set forth in the encouraging report issued last week by the State Department Task Force headed by Deputy Secretary Wharton, and in the recent testimony of USAID Administrator Brian Atwood. Further, we believe this is doable at an affordable cost and can produce major, measurable results by the middle of the decade. And finally, I will argue that U.S. leadership is the key missing link needed to accomplish this historic "unfinished business" of the 20th century. When President Clinton said that "People must feel responsible not only for improving their own lives, but also for helping those in need...There is no them; there is only us," he was articulating precisely the kind of global vision that will be needed if the U.S. is to assume such a leadership role.

Hidden behind the dark headlines that greet us when we open our newspapers is the evidence that the world is now able to make vastly greater progress on many problems that have long resisted solution. Rather than merely reacting to situations after they have become critical, as in Somalia, the world has an opportunity

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in the 1990s to make a number of effective -- and efficient -- social investments which will substantially contribute to preventing future crises and building healthy societies.

The situation today may be analogous to that of Asia in the mid 1960s, when population growth seemed set to outrun the food supply. Many predicted widespread famine, chaos, and instability for the last third of this century. But then, quite suddenly, within four or five years, the Green Revolution took hold in Asia, extending from the Philippines through South Asia to Turkey. In country after country, wheat and rice production increased at annual rates unprecedented in the West. The immediate cause was not so much a scientific breakthrough -- strains of the miracle wheats had been around for as many as 15 years -- as a political and organizational one. Only by the mid 1960s had fertilizer, pesticides, and controlled irrigation become widely used, thanks in large part to earlier aid programs. At the same time, the combination of South Asian drought and increasing awareness of the population explosion created the political will to drastically restructure price levels for grains and agroinputs, and to mobilize the multiple sectors of society--rural credit, marketing, transport, foreign exchange allocations, media--required for success.

While most accounts of the period appropriately highlight the critical role of U.S. agricultural institutions and foundations, they do not, in my opinion, give sufficient credit to President Lyndon Johnson, who was deeply, personally involved, or to his colleagues Walt Rostow in the White House; Orville Freeman and Lester Brown at the Department of Agriculture; and David Bell and Bill Gaud at USAID, all of whom fervently pushed the Green Revolution like a cause, a mission.

We may be in a similar position today -- poised for advances, but on a much broader front, including primary health care, basic education, water supply and sanitation, family planning, and gender equity, as well as food production--and covering a much wider geographical area, including Africa and Latin America as well as Asia. With an earnest effort from the major powers -- first and foremost, the United States -- the 1990s could witness a second Green Revolution, extending, this time, far beyond agriculture to the reaches of human development.

Frequent illness, malnutrition, poor growth, illiteracy, high birth rates, and gender bias are among poverty's worst symptoms. They are also some of poverty's most fundamental causes. We could anticipate, therefore, that overcoming some of the worst symptoms and causes of poverty would have far-reaching repercussions on the national and global level. The recent experiences of such diverse societies as China, Costa Rica, the Indian state of Kerala, Sri Lanka, and the Asian newly industrializing countries (NICs) suggest that high population growth rates, which wrap the cycle of poverty

ever tighter, can be reduced dramatically. Reducing poverty would give a major boost to the fragile new efforts at democratization that will survive only if they tangibly improve the lives of the bottom half of society. As we know from the experience of Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and the other Asian NICs, such progress would in turn accelerate economic growth. By breaking the "inner cycle" of poverty, we would increase the capacity of the development process to assault poverty's many external causes, rooted in such diverse factors as geography, climate, land tenure, debt, business cycles, governance, and unjust economic relations.

We are uniquely positioned to succeed in the 1990s. Recent scientific and technological advances--and the revolutionary new capacity to communicate with and mobilize large numbers of people--have provided us with a host of new tools. The world's leaders can now use them together to produce dramatic, even unprecedented, results.

For example, the universal child immunization effort--the largest peacetime international collaboration in world history--has since the mid 1980s established systems that now reach virtually every hamlet in the developing world and are saving the lives of more than 8,000 children a day--some 3 million a year. Here, too, the technology was not new; vaccines had been available for some 20-30 years. Success has been the result of applying new communication and mobilization techniques to the immunization effort, often led personally by heads of state, making use of television and radio advertisements, and supported by a wide range of local leaders. School teachers, priests, imams, local government officials, nongovernmental organization (NGO) workers, and health personnel all joined the effort. By 1990, more than 80 per cent of the developing world's children were being brought in four or five times for vaccinations even before their first birthdays. As a result, Calcutta, Lagos, and Mexico City today have far higher levels of immunization of children at ages one and two than do New York City, Washington, D.C., or even the United States as a whole.

A similar effort is now being made to spread the use of oral rehydration therapy (ORT) to combat the single greatest historical killer of children, diarrhea, which takes the lives of some 8,000 children every day, down from 11,000 daily a decade ago. ORT was invented in the late 1960s, but only recently have leaders mobilized to use this lifesaver on a national scale. Every year it now saves the lives of more than 1 million children, a figure that could easily more than double by 1995 with increased national and international leadership.

Our workshops are now well stocked with other new tools, technologies and rediscovered practices that can bring tremendous benefits with inspired leadership and only modest funding. Thus, the simple iodization of salt--at a cost of five cents annually per

consumer--would prevent the world's single largest cause of mental retardation and of goiter, which affect more than 200 million people today as a result of iodine deficiency. Universal access to vitamin A through low-cost capsules or vegetables would remove the greatest single cause--about 700 cases per day--of blindness while reducing child deaths by up to a third in many parts of the developing world. For the very young, the best source of vitamin A is breastmilk. The scientific rediscovery of the miracles of mother's milk means that more than a million children would not have died last year if only they had been effectively breast-fed for the first months of their lives, instead of being fed on more-costly infant formula. In such diverse countries as Bangladesh, Colombia, Senegal, and Zimbabwe, it has proven possible to get poor children, including girls, through primary education at very little cost. Recent advances have shown how to halve the costs of bringing sanitation and safe water to poor communities, to less than $30 per capita. New varieties of high-yield crops--from cassava to corn--are now ready to be promoted on a national scale in sub-Saharan Africa. Their potential has already been demonstrated in such diverse countries as Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe and Tanzania.

Meanwhile, with such tools in hand, the new capacity to communicate--to inform and motivate empowers families, communities, and governments to give all children a better chance to lead productive lives. In short, we are now learning to "outsmart" poverty at the outset of each new life by providing a "bubble of protection" around a child's first vulnerable months and years. Strong international leadership and cooperation--facilitated enormously by the end of the Cold War and the expansion of democracy--could leverage that new capacity into wide-ranging social progress.

Notwithstanding the media image of the Third World as a lost cause, there is real momentum there for change. In fact, for all the difficulties and setbacks, more progress has been made in developing countries in the last 40 years than was made in the previous 2,000, progress achieved while much of the world freed itself from colonialism and while respect for human and political rights expanded dramatically. Over the past forty years life expectancy has improved more than during the entire previous span of human history, as the World Bank highlights in its latest World Development Report, focusing on health. Life expectancy has lengthened from 40 in 1950 to 65 today, and continues to increase at a rate of 9.5 hours per day. Forty years ago, approximately three out of four children born in the developing countries survived to their fifth birthdays; today, some nine out of ten survive.

At the same time, the birth rates in countries as disparate as Brazil, China, Colombia, Cuba, Korea, Mexico, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Tunisia have been more than halved, dramatically slowing

population growth and the inherent strains it places on limited natural resources and social programs. Among the factors that have helped contain population growth, improving children's health is undoubtedly the least well-known and appreciated. Vice-President Al Gore underscored the connection between population and infant mortality in his address to the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, quoting Julius Nyerere to the effect that "the most powerful contraceptive is the confidence by parents that their children will survive." While they are important priorities themselves, reductions in child mortality, basic education of women, and the availability of family planning make a strong synergistic contribution to solving what Yale historian Paul Kennedy calls, in Preparing for the Twenty-First Century (1992), the "impending demographic disaster."

In fact, a children's revolution is already under way in the developing world, often led by those in power. Developing country leaders took a major lead in seeking history's first truly global summit--the 1990 World Summit for Children--with an unprecedented 71 heads of state and government participating. They also pressed for early action on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted by the General Assembly in November 1989 and which has since been signed or ratified in record time by more than 160 countries--with the United States now being the only major exception.

The experience of the past decade showed it possible- even during the darkest days of the Cold War and amid the Third World economic crisis of the 1980s--to mobilize societies and the international community around a package of low-cost interventions and services, building a sustainable momentum of human progress. Called by many the Child Survival and Development Revolution, this effort has saved the lives of more than 20 million children; tens of millions are healthier, stronger, and less of a burden upon their mothers and families; and birth rates are falling. Much credit for these remarkable gains is due the U.S. Congress, which has provided consistent and meaningful support to the global effort since 1983.

Leaders are learning that productive things can be done for families and children at relatively low cost, and that it can be good politics for them to do so and bad politics to resist. More than 135 countries have issued or are actively working on National Programs of Action to implement the goals set by the World Summit for Children, all of which were incorporated into Agenda 21 at the June 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Those ambitious goals--to be met by the year 2000 --include controlling the major childhood diseases; cutting child malnutrition in half; reducing death rates for children under five by one-third; cutting in half maternal mortality rates; providing safe water and sanitation for all communities; and making family planning services and basic education universally available. In 1992, most regions of the

developing world took the process a step further by selecting a core of targets for 1995, when the first World Social Summit will review children's progress within the broader development process. Just reaching the 1995 targets will mean that 2 million fewer children will die in 1996 than died last year and will die this year. For the first time since the dawn of history, humankind has both committed itself to achieving measurable goals for improving the lives of the young, and has at its disposal the financial and technical wherewithal to achieve them.

In part, that new concern has its roots in the communications revolution that brings daily pictures of large-scale famine or violence into our homes. At the same time, the new communications capacity has permitted deprived populations everywhere to see how much better people can live, further fueling grassroots movements for reform and democracy. But most of the Third World's suffering remains invisible. Of the 35,000 children under age five who die every day in the developing countries, more than 32,000 succumb to largely preventable hunger and illness. No earthquake, no flood, no war has taken the lives of a quarter million children in a single week; but that is the weekly death toll of the invisible emergencies resulting from poverty and underdevelopment. In 1992, 500,000 children under the age of five died in the kind of dramatic emergencies that attract media attention, but that is a small porion of the nearly 13 million children under five who are killed every year by grinding poverty and gross underdevelopment. The tragic deaths of 1,000 children per day in Somalia last year captured far more public attention than those of the 8,000 children around the world who die every day from the dehydration caused by ordinary diarrhea, which is so easily treated and prevented.

As the international community assumes greater responsibility for responding to proliferating civil strife and other emergencies, it must come to terms with the realities of limited resources. How many operations to rescue failed states like Somalia can the international community afford? It is estimated that the U.S. component of the Somalia operation alone will cost more than $750 million for just four months' involvement, nearly comparable to UNICEF's average annual global budget of recent years, much of which is used to prevent future crises. There are now 48 civil and ethnic conflicts in progress around the globe. The United Nations is involved in 14 peacekeeping operations on five continents. Last year, those operations cost more than $3 billion, about four times higher than the previous record. This year, the price-tag is projected to rise to $4.5 billion. Those operations are a most expensive way to relieve suffering, and it is clearly time to invest far more in preventing emergencies and conflicts, and in buttressing the new democracies, even as we put out the world's fires. As U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali argues in his Agenda for Peace, prevention can prove far less costly--and produce far greater results--than relying on expensive and sometimes ineffective rescue operations.

As the international community shifts toward prevention--as it must--it makes the most sense to focus on eradicating poverty's worst manifestations early in the lives of children, breaking the cycle of poverty from generation to generation. At the World Summit for Children, the international community identified the basic package of high-impact, low-cost interventions that can make a difference in the short and medium term, while helping to build a stronger foundation for sustainable development. Now it has only to make them work, albeit on a massive scale.

The overall cost of reaching all the year 2000 goals for children and women, which would overcome most of the worst aspects of poverty, would be an extra $25 billion per year. The developing countries themselves might be expected to come up with two-thirds of that amount by reordering their domestic priorities and budgets. The remaining third--slightly more than $8 billion per year--should come from the industrialized world in the form of increased or reallocated official development assistance (ODA) and debt relief. That is a small price for meeting the basic needs of virtually every man, woman, and child in the developing world in nutrition, basic health, basic education, water and sanitation, and family planning within this decade.

In Russia and the other former Soviet republics, such aid could produce rapid grassroots results at an affordable cost, easing pain and helping to buy time until democratic and macro economic reforms show concrete progress. Plans for restoring democracy to Cambodia, Haiti, and Mozambique will need to alleviate suffering among the poor quickly; and targeting the essential needs of children and women can produce the biggest impact at the lowest cost. International relief programs for Somalia must rapidly give way to assistance that constitutes an investment in human development, and no such investment has been found to be more cost effective than primary health care, nutrition, and basic education for children and women. The road to power for many of the world's extremist movements--whether based in religion or political ideology--is paved with the unmet needs of the poor.

Sadly, the U.S. has stagnated or regressed over the past decade with respect to children, even while much of the developing world has been making impressive progress. The United States has provided little leadership for that progress, except for that provided by the bipartisanship of Congress, which for ten years has actively encouraged U.S. support to child survival and development programs abroad, including the steadily increasing support provided UNICEF. But by increasing investment in American children and strengthening American families, and by reordering foreign assistance to reflect that new priority, the United States, the world's sole superpower, could once more set the global standard and give a major boost to human development and economic growth.

First, few actions would have more immediate impact than the signature and ratification this year of the historic Convention on the Rights of the Child. President Bill Clinton's signature of the convention and its submission to the U.S. Senate for early ratification, as has been urged by bipartisan congressional leadership, would send an important message to the world, bringing the rights of children close to becoming humanity's first universal law.

Second, the United States needs to demonstrate a new culture of caring for its own children. The much-needed reordering of priorities for American children, women, and families is already under way, with initiatives on Head Start, universal immunization, parental leave, family planning, and health services for all. The Clinton administration is taking important -- historic -- steps in this regard and should be supported in its efforts. A "Culture of Caring," the American plan in response to the World Summit for Children that was issued at the end of the Bush administration--in January 1993-- reminds us that this is a cause for bipartisan action.

Third, the United States needs "20/20 vision." It should support the May 1991 proposal of the United Nations Development Program, which had two components: It called on developing countries to devote at least 20 per cent of their budgets to directly meeting the basic human needs of their people, roughly double current average levels. It also argued that 20 per cent of all international development aid should go to meet those same basic needs: primary health care, nutrition, basic education, family planning, and safe water and sanitation -- the very programs that are most popular with the American people. Today, on average, less than 10 per cent of already inadequate levels of ODA are devoted to that purpose. Different ways of defining and reporting social sector allocations within national and ODA budgets make precise quantification of those proportions somewhat difficult, and efforts are therefore underway to achieve a common form of reporting. But even if subsequent research changes the target percentages, the "20/20 vision" concept underscores the importance of restructuring both sets of budgets in line with the priorities established at the World Summit for Children, which may require--on average--a doubling of existing allocations.

On the ODA side, the United States today devotes only some $1 billion of its bilateral development resources to meeting priority human needs. Of the projected $25 billion extra annually that will be required globally by mid decade to meet the World Summit year 2000 goals, the U.S. share would be $2 billion. The roughly $3 billion total would then still be less than 20 per cent of all U.S. foreign and military assistance. It is a small price to pay for jumpstarting solutions to so many of the overwhelming problems of population, democracy, and the worst aspects of poverty, to say nothing about saving tens of millions of young lives this decade.

The additional funds can be obtained from reductions in the military and security component of the U.S. international affairs budget.

Fourth, the new spirit of democratic change and economic reform in Africa will not survive if its creditors do not give it some debt relief: Together, the sub-Saharan African countries pay $1 billion in debt service to foreign creditors every month, and its debt is now proportionally three or four times heavier than Organization of African Unity-sponsored International Conference on Assistance to African Children, donor countries and lending agencies alike pledged to promote more debt relief while expanding or restructuring ODA in order to help Africa protect and nurture its children. Here again the United States could help lead the way, preventing Africa from deteriorating into a continent of Somalias. The industrialized world should make a definitive commitment to debt relief, with much of the local currency proceeds going to accelerate programs for children, women, and the environment through a variety of debt-swapping mechanisms. With the right mixture of domestic and international support, and with apartheid ending in South Africa, we could see dramatic progress in most of Africa by the year 2000. That could include a food revolution every bit as green as Asia's--but African countries will need help. The alternative could be a return to authoritarian rule, corruption, and conflict throughout large parts of the continent.

Fifth, the United States must actively support multilateral cooperation. With human development and poverty alleviation increasingly accepted as the focus for development cooperation in the 1990s, the United States has an opportunity to transform rhetoric into reality. Active U.S. support and leadership along those lines in the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the regional banks, and throughout the U.N. system will go a long way toward overcoming, in our time, the worst aspects of poverty in the South, where it is most acute. Landmark U.N. conferences have been held on human rights (1993), and scheduled, on population (1994), and women (1995); U.S. leadership at those conferences and at the U.N. Summit for Social Development in 1995 will strengthen their impact. The U.S. role will also be critical in reducing poverty in the North and in the transitional societies of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Sixth, the time has come to "revitalize" USAID -- as envisioned in the encouraging report issued just last week by the State Department Task Force headed by Deputy Secretary Wharton. Refocusing AID in line with the "investment in people" approach to development cooperation called for by President Clinton and the holistic vision articulated by Vice-President Gore in his book Earth in the Balance, could turn US bilateral cooperation into a dynamic and powerful engine for global progress even during these times of fiscal constraint. To the extent that bilateral and multilateral cooperation programs pursue common goals through