

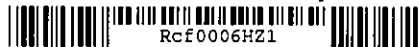
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Message from Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
to the  
Conference of Mayors of Capitals of West Africa States

Freetown, Sierra Leone  
30 November 1993



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Freetown, Sierra Leone, 30 November 1993

Let me begin by congratulating the Honourable Alfred Akibo-Betts, Chairman of the City Council of Freetown, for convening this important gathering of Mayors representing capital cities of West Africa, in collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Development Programme, and the United Nations Development Fund for Women. I wish to express UNICEF's appreciation to all the participants who have travelled far to take part in this meeting which will address how mayors can work to improve the conditions of urban children. On behalf of UNICEF, allow me to invite all of you to take up the challenge by becoming Defenders of Children in each of your cities.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Mayor Mamadou Diop of Dakar for his dedication to the cause of children. We owe special thanks to Mayor Diop who, through his tireless efforts, has contributed to making the Mayors, Defenders of Children initiative a most promising global movement. It was in Dakar that the First International Colloquium of Mayors, Defenders of Children was held in January 1992, hosted by Mayor Diop. Since then, he has travelled to many cities in the world encouraging others to join the Mayors Initiative.

He, as well as Chairman Akibo-Betts, also participated in the Second International Colloquium of Mayors' Defenders of Children, held in Mexico City last July. In the spirit of the Mexico Declaration and Plan of Action adopted by the 80 mayors and municipal leaders who participated in the event, numerous activities are now taking place worldwide. National gatherings of mayors are being held in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Italy and Spain, among other nations. A regional gathering of Latin American mayors was held in Ecuador on 8-9 November, hosted by the Mayor of Quito, in which detailed municipal workplans were developed. In Asia, a regional meeting of mayors for children is being planned in Bangkok, Thailand, and in many cities municipal plans of action for children are being formulated. These initiatives prove that the strong commitments undertaken by the mayors -- first in Rome in 1991, then in Dakar in 1992, and most recently this year in Mexico City -- were more than mere promises on paper. These commitments are beginning to produce concrete results, results which translate into better living conditions for urban children and which can provide the basis for a brighter future.

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As you may know, Africa and its children are UNICEF's first priority. Our Executive Board has mandated this policy year after year, in recognition of the magnitude of the problems you are confronting on the road to sustainable development, and in order to constantly remind the international community of its responsibility toward Africa and its people. UNICEF devotes more of its human and financial resources to Africa than to programmes in any other region of the world.

It is not surprising to those of us working for child survival, protection and development, that African mayors and municipal leaders have so willingly embraced the cause of children. The leaders of Africa have repeatedly demonstrated that they possess the critical ingredient of political will to accelerate human development, and a particularly strong commitment to improving the lot of children. In recent years, we have seen Africa seize many opportunities for progress. Let me name a few:

African leaders were the first to enthusiastically support the idea of a World Summit for Children, at a time when many considered a summit-level meeting on the topic of children unlikely to happen. There were 71 heads of state or government, including 18 from Africa, at the World Summit held in New York on 29-30 September 1990. Africa's strong participation helped make the Summit a genuine breakthrough for the world's children and the entire development process.

Africa's follow-up to the commitments made at the Summit has been outstanding. Today, this continent leads the world in the number of countries that have issued National Programmes of Action to reach the year 2000 goals for Child Survival, Protection and Development agreed upon by the heads of state and/or government. We are certain that the National Programmes of Action will be successful once they have been adapted at the regional, state and municipal levels within each country. This is why your role is so critical. Achievement of the goals set forth in the National Programmes of Action will depend ultimately upon local initiative and community participation. By translating your countries' National Programmes of Action into concrete programmes at the municipal level, you will be helping to accelerate social progress. I urge all of you to follow Dakar's and Mexico City's examples and develop action plans for your municipalities.

It is significant that this meeting of mayors is being held in Sierra Leone, which was the second country in Africa and among the first in the world to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In fact, African countries supported the adoption and ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child earlier than countries of any other region. To date, the Convention has been ratified by 153 countries, out of which 45 are African. In addition, Africa adopted the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the child which complements the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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The Organization of African Unity (OAU) has dedicated the decade of the 1990s to Africa's children, and has been working in partnership with UNICEF to support efforts to reach the goals set by the world leaders at the Summit. The Consensus of Dakar resulting from the International Conference on Assistance to African Children, held in Dakar one year ago, and sponsored by the OAU and UNICEF, set a series of targets for 1995, which if reached will save the lives of 3,000 children a day, a million a year. What a great thing it is, to have in your hands the capacity and mandate to save a million lives next year!

We in UNICEF are convinced that the personal attention of the mayor of the city, the first citizen responsible for the daily needs of the community, would make an enormous difference in striving to meet these targets. I draw your attention to the following six critical goals which are achievable by municipalities at very low cost:

1. Immunization - Africa committed itself in 1986 to raising immunization levels from about 20 percent of all under-one-year-olds, to 75 percent by 1990. Fully half of the continent achieved or surpassed that goal, and thanks to this extraordinary accomplishment, more than 500,000 child lives are being saved each year in Africa. But coverage needs to be sustained and there is evidence that it is declining in some countries. With your leadership, you can ensure that immunization remains a top priority.

2. Oral rehydration therapy (ORT) - The benefits of this simple, easy to use, sugar-salt solution or home brew has been called a life-saving miracle to prevent lethal dehydration from diarrhoeal diseases. The challenge is to greatly increase its usage by promoting community based ORT units and a wide distribution through commercial and public channels. There is no reason for a child to die of diarrhoea today, and yet it remains the number one child killer in Africa.

3. Iodization of salt - Iodine deficiency is the single largest cause of preventable brain damage and mental retardation in children. You could virtually eliminate such disorders and boost IQs, school performances, as well as future productivity, by ensuring that only iodized salt is distributed and consumed in your communities.

4. Vitamin A - The lack of this vital micronutrient found in green and yellow vegetables is the leading cause of blindness among children and it greatly increases the risk and severity of diarrhoea, measles and pneumonia. You can see to it that a single capsule is provided to every child twice a year -- delivered through already existing immunization networks and local health centres, and to ensure that parents are educated about the children's need foods rich in Vitamin A. Like the iodization of salt, Vitamin A supplements cost literally a few pennies per dose.

5. Breastfeeding - Mother's milk is the perfect food for young children, it saves babies' lives, helps ward off illness, and substantially enhances physical and intellectual development. It contributes greatly to the mother's health, as well. You can help reverse the harmful trend toward bottle-feeding by publicly identifying yourselves with campaigns to empower mothers to breastfeed their babies. You can immediately require all city hospitals to support mothers in breastfeeding their newborns, and you can take action to ensure that manufacturers of breastmilk substitutes do not distribute free samples of formula through hospitals and maternity centres.

6. Guinea-Worm Disease - the "fiery serpent", has virtually been wiped out elsewhere in the world, but it persists in pockets in 17 African countries. Your efforts to ensure safe water supplies and educating vulnerable populations between now and 1995 could contribute to the elimination of this disease.

We consider the above goals as doable - not easy, exactly, but quite feasible - in the short run and at very low cost. Achieving these goals by 1995 - year of the 50th Anniversary of the United Nations and year of the World Summit on Social Development - will greatly facilitate and accelerate efforts toward reaching the full range of year 2000 goals.

The Mexico Declaration and Plan of Action provides a good framework to follow, and one major challenge you might wish to set for yourselves would be to develop, by the middle of next year - if you have not already done so - detailed and comprehensive Municipal Plans of Action that translate your National Plan of Action into realistic and doable propositions at the urban level.

- a. A first step in preparing a Municipal Programme of Action for Children is to make a thorough analysis of the situation of urban children. Local districts, even schools, can participate in this process.
- b. A second step is to identify the remedial measures required over time, and the reallocation of time and resources required to achieve the desired results.
- c. The third step, I suggest, is to identify those major improvements for children that are doable immediately, without major additional financial resources, and which primarily depend on strong municipal leadership for their implementation.
- d. Finally, putting programmes into place to achieve your goals will require communities that are highly motivated to help themselves. Central governments as well as international partners are more likely to provide resources and expert guidance, if they see action for development underway at the grassroots.

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We have the opportunity in the 1990s to change history as never before, starting with children. Political leaders all over the world are coming to understand that it is not only morally right to make children a high priority, but that it is smart politics and good for the future development of the city as well.

In closing, allow me to appeal to you once more to take up the challenge of joining the movement of Mayors as Defenders of Children. Your full attention to the needs and rights of children will be a major force in reaching the development goals for the new millennium. Africa has never been what the Afro-pessimist say it is; you can disprove their dismal projections by accelerating your efforts for the new generation.

It is a privilege to work with you to give all young people a brighter, healthier future.