

File Sub: CF/EXD/SP/1994-0045

Address by Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
to the  
30<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session  
of the Summit of Heads of State and Government  
of the  
Organization of African Unity

Tunis, Tunisia  
13 June 1994

 UNICEF Alternate Inventory Label  
RcE0007250

Item # **CF/RAD/USAA/DB01/2002-01181**  
ExR/Code: **CF/EXD/SP/1994-0045**  
Organization of African Unity [OAU]. Address by Mr. James  
Date Label Printed 24-Sep-2002

cover + 7pp + 8b



United Nations Children's Fund Fonds des Nations Unies pour l'enfance Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia  
Детский Фонд Организации Объединенных Наций 联合国儿童基金会 منظمة الأمم المتحدة للطفولة

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Since I last had the privilege of addressing this continent's leaders, one year ago in Cairo, events in Africa have brought to mind Dickens' classic characterization of the era of the French Revolution as the "best of times...and the worst of times".

The "best of times" because of the "miracle" that people's power, visionary leadership, and international solidarity have so recently worked in South Africa. And the "worst of times" because of Rwanda's frightening descent into anarchy and atrocity.

South Africa's uplifting example of reconciliation and democracy -- happily, part of a process that is transforming many African nations -- and the Rwandan drama of intolerance and terror -- sadly, one of many civil conflicts and emergencies in Africa as well as in Europe and Asia -- symbolize the opposing trends that are competing to shape the future of this great continent.

The challenge before us is how to optimize the favourable and minimize the negative trends in the few remaining years of the 20th century.

South Africa's giant step into freedom is a historic advance for all of Africa, and for the entire world. UNICEF is especially pleased to see that President Mandela has placed children at the heart of South Africa's new, non-racial democracy. Just as children suffered most under the wicked system of Apartheid, children stand to benefit most from the progressive transformation of their country that is now underway. Its leaders' strong public commitment to invest in the nation's future by investing in children's basic health, nutrition and education, means that South Africa can quickly become a model and a catalyst for the entire continent.

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We at UNICEF are cognizant of the fact that South Africa's greatest challenges lie ahead; righting the wrongs of more than three centuries is not something that can be accomplished overnight, nor can it be done by South Africa alone. The international community has an obligation to provide South Africa with the assistance it needs. Together with the rest of the UN system and the international community UNICEF is committed to work closely with the new government to ease and accelerate the transition.

Following this gathering of Africa's leaders, I will be joining President Mandela in celebrating the Day of the African Child, on 16 June -- in Soweto, the site of martyrdom and resistance that inspired the OAU, five years ago, to institute the observance of a special day for Africa's children every year on a worldwide basis.

This year is surely the "worst of times" for children in countries affected by armed conflicts, drought and famine. But I would remind us that much progress is being made in African countries that are not in the global headlines and even in parts of countries whose crises otherwise capture media attention. I sincerely believe that many of the necessary conditions now exist in much of Africa for a burst of human progress, starting with children.

I will go even further and say that most African countries now have many traditional enemies of children - polio, measles, illiteracy, guinea worm, iodine deficiency - on the run and that by the end of 1995 the lives of over a million of the nearly five million who were dying each year in Africa can be saved. In this short span of time, additional millions can be given a fighting chance to reach their physical and intellectual potential. And if there is a strong performance over the next several years, I would say that by the end of the decade, Africa will have made serious headway against many of the worst effects of poverty in the lives of the continent's children -- effects that are also causes of poverty's transmission from generation to generation. Such an unprecedented spurt of human progress would lay solid foundations for Africa's development in the 21st century.

I do not make these statements lightly, and I suspect they will be dismissed as unrealistic by the Afro-pessimists. Some of you in this hall, who know all too well the complexity of Africa's problems, may also have understandable doubts. But the reports I am getting from UNICEF field offices virtually throughout Africa confirm the impression I myself received during recent visits to Nigeria, Ethiopia and Cote d'Ivoire, and the sense of the discussions I have had this week in Tunis with many of Africa's leaders: there is already a significant momentum of progress

underway... there is strong political will to accelerate actions on behalf of children... and there is growing awareness that progress for children and women can jump-start the broader development process.

You, the leaders of this continent of unspeakable suffering, considerable accomplishment and infinite potential, have demonstrated your strong commitment to improving children's lives in recent years:

- \* You have promulgated the African Charter on the Rights of the Child and overwhelmingly ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Of your membership, only five countries, several of them still embroiled or just emerging from conflict, have yet to ratify the Convention -- I trust that you will urge them to do so by 1995. Implementation of this extraordinary "Bill of Rights" for children and youth is, of course, the crucial next step, along with candid reporting to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

- \* At your 1989 summit, the OAU became the first body to support the concept of a World Summit for Children -- an action that helped set off a chain reaction of endorsements leading to the historic World Summit for Children in 1990 and a global agenda for radically improving all children's lives by the end of the decade.

- \* At your 1991 summit, you requested each country to prepare its own National Programme of Action (NPA) to implement the World Summit for Children goals, and today, 43 of your 52 member States have issued or drafted NPAs. These innovative documents spell out policies, inter-sectoral plans, programmes and, in many cases, budgets for achieving the goals for children and women over the 1990s. At the 1991 OAU summit you also called for a meeting in late 1992 where African countries could speak of their NPAs and discuss support with donors. This led to the International Conference on Assistance to the African Child (ICAAC) held in Dakar in November 1992, which opened the door to new forms of North-South collaboration for achieving not only the year 2000 goals, but also a new set of mid-decade - end 1995 targets now being pursued as a major priority on a global scale.

- \* But you have done much more than make statements, hold meetings and issue plans. We are seeing Africa's commitment to children where it counts most -- on the ground. Despite some recent slippage, you have largely achieved the ambitious immunization goal you set at the OAU summit in 1987, by means of which you are saving the lives of over half a million children a year. Today, vaccines are reaching some 13 million African children on four or five occasions before their first birthday, up from a few million in 1987. A polio-free zone is

now spreading northward from southern Africa. This is a logistical, organizational and yes, political achievement that points the way for accelerating progress in other areas as well. Take use of oral rehydration therapy against diarrhoea -- the leading cause of child death in most of Africa; use of this nearly-cost free remedy is now close to 50 per cent in your countries, well above the developing world average of 38 per cent, and now saving the lives of more than 200,000 children a year. And you have recently made great progress towards eliminating the guinea worm, the "fiery serpent", from the world, and the number of cases dropped from approximately one million in 1990 to less than 200,000 today. The Bamako Initiative of community financing and management is beginning to revitalize and extend the reach of health systems in over half the countries of sub-Saharan Africa.

At last year's OAU summit, I recommended that you strongly support the Consensus of Dakar that emerged from the ICAAC meeting, and urged you to personally focus on achieving three critical but doable goals by the end of 1995:

- \* first, to reverse recent declines and sustain immunization coverage at 80 per cent -- 90 per cent in the case of measles;
- \* second, to bring usage of oral rehydration therapy against lethal diarrhoea up to 80 per cent; and
- \* third, to iodize all salt for human and animal consumption at an annual cost of 2 to 3 cents per consumer.

Permit me to reiterate the importance of these goals. By achieving them, Excellencies, you will save the lives of another 3,000 children a day -- a million a year, and remove the iodine deficiency that now reduces the intelligence of more than 20 million African children. As a result African children will be stronger, healthier and better equipped to learn and contribute to the brighter future each of you is trying to build. You will also pave the way for achieving the more complex year 2000 goals in primary health care, nutrition, basic education, safe water and sanitation and family planning.

In this context, I enthusiastically endorse the draft resolutions before you on follow-up to the International Conference on Assistance to African Children, including universal salt iodization, on monitoring at local as well as national levels progress toward achieving mid decade and year 2000 World Summit goals, and on the important subject of AIDS and Children, that have been proposed by your Council of Ministers.

When you return to your countries with renewed determination to achieve the mid-decade and year 2000 goals, I urge you to take into account the following:

\* At ICAAC, African governments expressed their commitment to human development through efforts to allocate at least 20 per cent of public expenditure to meeting priority human needs for basic education, primary health care, family planning, nutrition and water and sanitation in rural, low income urban areas, and donors committed themselves to increasing and sustaining the share of official development assistance for social priority sectors, bearing in mind the proposed level of 20 per cent of total ODA for these sectors. We at UNICEF are well aware of the efforts you are making to increase allocations for priority areas of human need to 20 per cent of overall public spending. To the extent that you approach this level of funding, which has already been achieved by some countries, you -- UNICEF, too -- will be able to advocate more forcefully for donors to devote 20 per cent of ODA to the same strategic areas. You and your finance and foreign ministers must tell the donor community in no uncertain terms that ODA needs to be restructured to support the implementation of your NPAs. Moreover, we must ensure that macroeconomic structural adjustment programmes are also supportive of the scale of human investments required to implement your NPAs.

\* Second, NPAs need to be translated into effective State, provincial and municipal programmes of action -- in line with the process of decentralization underway in so many of your countries. In order to achieve any of the mid-decade and year 2000 goals, inter-sectoral action, involving many government agencies and departments, will be necessary. Partnerships with NGOs are also particularly important, given their close ties with local communities. Applied flexibly, the goals for children respond to the great heterogeneity of Africa. Their strength is clearly in their focus on action and on doable results, highly visible and desirable social ends providing an ability to mobilize political support from an entire cross-section of society for shared concerns for children. By putting the child at the centre of development, the entire society feels a new birth of enthusiasm and optimism as they reach toward the future with a sense of accomplishment.

\* Third, in order to ensure accountability all along the chain of authority and keep the momentum going, I urge you to personally hold regular monitoring and evaluation meetings to review progress toward achieving the goals, as called for in the resolutions before you. Particularly if they are public events, these meetings will build a sense that the effort to help children and women is a national movement rather than simply one of many government programmes.

\* Finally, I call on your Excellencies to deliberate on ways to better protect children caught in armed conflict, refugee and displaced children, child soldiers, war-traumatized children and children affected by natural disasters. I know

you share our indignation and shock over the many atrocities perpetrated against children in recent conflicts. Together, we must strengthen the concept of children as a "zone of peace", and the rights of children to special protection and international assistance in the midst of situations of strife. The OAU is already a pioneer in such efforts, in 1990 being the first Inter-Governmental Organization to endorse such concepts as zones and corridors of peace to reach civilians trapped in civil conflict and I believe you can help push the international community toward better protections and more humane treatment of children.

If you do these things, Excellencies, we can put more effective pressure on the developed world to do its part -- on ODA, on arms sales, on the design of structural adjustment programmes, on debt relief, on commodity prices, on tariff barriers, among other measures to redress the wrongs of past and present. UNICEF will continue to work closely with, and in fullest support of, the OAU secretariat, under the strong leadership of Secretary General Salim Ahmed Salim.

Through improvements in health and nutrition, and family planning programmes, the expansion of basic education and literacy, and the enhancement of the role of women in development, rapid reductions in child deaths in Africa can be expected. This, in turn, will help to stem population growth, reduce environmental degradation and alleviate poverty. This will help prevent much of the unrest and violence that have set back development and caused widespread suffering in Africa in recent decades.

Increasingly, the "loud emergencies" of war and famine are competing for scarce international resources with the "silent emergencies" of malnutrition, disease and ignorance that underlie many conflicts and whose victims far outnumber the casualties of man-made and natural disasters. A rough estimate is that of the 12,000 African children who die each day, some 1,000 - 2,000 fall victim to war and other emergencies, while more than ten thousand succumb to the preventable effects of underdevelopment and poverty. UNICEF devotes 39 per cent of its global resources to Africa -- more than to any other region -- but a third of our expenditures in Africa is now going to emergencies that rightfully demand a resolute humanitarian response -- and the proportion is likely to continue to rise. The dilemma we face is how to respond to the cries of children and women trapped in war and famine without compromising our necessary emphasis on the "silent emergencies". I look forward to your guidance and recommendations on this critical issue in the coming months.

Let me assure you that UNICEF's global priority -- reaffirmed at our most recent Executive Board meeting -- continues to be Africa. We will stand by you in the "worst of times" and do everything in our power to extend and multiply the "best of times".

In closing, allow me to quote from President Mandela's acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo last December:

"[The new South Africa] will and must be measured by the happiness and welfare of the children, at once the most vulnerable citizens in any society and the greatest of our treasures. The children must, at last, play in the open veld, no longer tortured by the pangs of hunger or ravaged by disease or threatened with the scourge of ignorance, molestation and abuse, and no longer required to engage in deeds whose gravity exceeds the demands of their tender years... In front of this distinguished audience, we commit the new South Africa to the relentless pursuit of the purposes defined in the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children."

I know, Excellencies, that you will second these eloquent words and noble thoughts in your concrete actions for children over the next critical 18 months and in the years leading to the 21st century.