

File Sub: CF/EXD/SP/1990-0036

Remarks by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
on the
World Summit for Children
for
"Diplomatic World Bulletin"

18 September 1990



UNICEF Alternate Inventory Label



Item # **CF/RAD/USAA/DB01/1998-02204**

ExR/Code: **CF/EXD/SP/1990-0036**

World Summit for Children - Diplomatic World Bulletin. Re
Date Label Printed 20-Aug-2002

Cover + 3pp + ~~0~~ b



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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How is it, one might ask, that a topic as common as children could generate the extraordinary gathering of the World Summit for Children? And what might be expected from this new type of meeting? What might we hope for?

The word "world" in the title of this summit refers to representation from North, South, East and West at the highest political level. But it also alludes to the source from which this has sprung. Concern for child-related issues from throughout the world has mounted to this global event.

This international source of the World Summit is perhaps nowhere better symbolized than in the forceful leadership of Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar. He endorsed the concept of holding a World Summit for Children before it was ever recorded in print, and he has thrown the weight of the United Nations behind it, finding innovative ways to use the system in collaboration with its member countries.

Similarly, the courage and perseverance of the six initiating countries - Canada, Egypt, Mali, Mexico, Pakistan and Sweden - indicate the kind of importance that is attached to children's issues throughout the world. The two co-chairmen of the World Summit, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney of Canada and President Moussa Traore of Mali, have shown creative and often inspiring leadership since they first became involved in initiating the World Summit. For example, President Traore brought the proposal to Summits of the Francophone countries, the non-aligned countries, and the Organization of African Unity, and received strong endorsements in resolutions from each. Prime Minister Mulroney, it must be said, has been a leader on international efforts for children since long before the proposal for a World Summit. In 1985 he was one of five heads of state or government who participated in official ceremonies to redouble international commitment to the goal of universal child immunization by 1990. Since first collaborating with the other Initiators in calling for the World Summit for Children, he has offered steadfast support, channeling his invaluable experience in hosting Summits through both the Canadian Mission and his offices in Ottawa.

New attention to children's issues has surfaced at the international level through a broad array of vehicles that have become part of the World Summit process. For example, the goals for children and development in the 1990s, which are before the World Summit for adoption as part of its Plan of Action, derive from an unusually extensive consultative process at country, regional and international levels, and from subsequent endorsement in various international fora attended by virtually all Governments, the relevant UN agencies including WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNESCO, UNDP and IBRD, and a large number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

It is worth noting that, at present rates, almost 150 million young children will die in the course of the 1990s. The coupling of technological advances with modern delivery systems including social mobilization have already set improvements on course to save 25 million of those children. If the goals which are before the World Summit for adoption are in fact achieved, however, the lives of some 50 million children will be saved before the turn of the century, through efforts that contribute to the slowing of population growth rates, as target rates are reached and parents become confident that their children will survive. The goals have been deemed feasible by the best experts of the day. Collectively, however, they could perhaps only be realized through the impetus provided by a successful World Summit mobilizing human society to do more for children. We in UNICEF see "doing the do-able" on behalf of children, as outlined in the goals, as one of the primary objectives of the World Summit.

The source of concern for children which is manifesting in the World Summit lies deeper in the roots of continents and countries than at the leadership levels alone. It lies in people. For example, without the longstanding insistence and hard work of NGOs, we would not have a Convention on the Rights of the Child today. This new Magna Carta for children is causing people and governments around the world to reexamine the extent to which they are fulfilling their obligations to children. Helping to breathe life into the provisions of the Convention - so that people become mobilized and children's rights are actually met - is seen as another principle objective of the World Summit.

NGOs have also been responsible for defining the roles of Primary Health Care (PHC) and basic education in the development process. These are crucial contributions to progress for children. The importance of PHC and basic education are now accepted in the mainstream and have received increasingly higher levels of priority in the social sectors. But moving from development efforts that benefit a relative few to programmes that reach a broader base of people has been a shift pioneered by NGOs.

Efforts on behalf of children in the health field have shown us, in the 1980s, what is possible. It is time in this decade to adapt the lessons of those successes to other important health areas which have not yet become the focus of major efforts - areas such as maternal health, AIDS, malaria, and many more. The lessons of those successes must also be adapted beyond the health field, to the arena of education. Sustaining advances for children, and, in fact, sustaining any true development advances, require the broadscale availability of usable and relevant primary education which is responsive to the needs of the populace and to the developmental needs of children. We know now that this is affordable, and that it is do-able. The decision of whether

this possibility will become a reality is a decision which the World Summit could take, if participants choose. It is before them in the proposed Plan of Action, and it will hopefully be before them in the years ahead as they enact that Plan.

There is another objective to the World Summit for Children, an objective whose source and promise lies in people throughout the world. All of the increasing attention to children's issues reflects a new ethos which is beginning...just beginning...to emerge. The Summit should establish beyond doubt that children are entitled to a first call on the concerns and resources of society for the essentials of their survival, protection and development.

A successful World Summit would be looked back upon by history as the turning point in societies' responsiveness to the needs of children...the turning point after which their needs received greater attention in all countries, North, South, East and West. It would make the 1990s the decade in which the shameful large-scale deaths and widespread malnutrition of the world's children are consigned to history, providing a permanent gift from the last decade of the 20th century to the people of the 21st.