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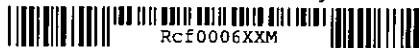
Remarks by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
Caribbean Summit for Children

"Healthy Lifestyles for Youth: It's in Your Hands"

Bridgetown, Barbados
15 November 1991



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"Healthy Lifestyles for Youth: It's in Your Hands"

A little over a year has now passed since the World Summit for Children. It was the largest gathering of presidents, prime ministers and kings in history, the first of the post-cold war era. The Caribbean was ably represented there by five of its leaders, among them the Prime Minister of Barbados, The Rt. Hon. Erskine Sandiford, and they all contributed greatly to its success. All the region's leaders have now signed the Summit Declaration, committing themselves and their governments to implementing its far-reaching Plan of Action.

We at UNICEF believe that the World Summit will come to be seen as marking the beginning of a new order for children, one in which their essential needs get "a first call" on society's resources and concerns, in bad as well as good times, in war or peacetime. But still today, because they are not being dealt with first -- or second...or third -- still today, because their needs are so often dealt with last, 40 thousand children will die, mostly in the poorer countries of the world, of largely preventable malnutrition and disease. The World Summit was a global promise to radically improve the lives of all children by the year 2000, and our efforts should now be directed at helping see to it that the promise is kept. The obscene daily waste of young lives must be halted once and for all so that children everywhere can live to reach their full potential. The future of our overburdened, fragile planet depends on it, as do the living standards and quality of life of our nations.

The leaders and governments of the Caribbean, like their counterparts around the globe, are now busy preparing National Programmes of Action -- due by year's end -- for reaching the year 2000 goals set at the Summit. Each country will shape its own plan in accordance with its own conditions and resources, but those plans are likely to be strongest -- most realistic and doable -- where policy-makers consult with the people, drawing on the experience, energies and resources of non-governmental organizations, the private sector, trade unions, women's groups, religious leaders...and, of course, of children themselves.

The world leaders at the Summit sought partners in responding to the challenge, including in their Declaration: "We turn especially to children themselves, we appeal to them to participate in this effort". That is why you are here. So this Caribbean Children's Summit is very much a part of the World Summit follow-up process. It gives the young people of Barbados and 15 other countries a chance to say what is on your minds, to tell the decision-makers what you think should be included in the National Programmes of Action; it gives you an opportunity to say what you yourselves can contribute to "keeping the promise". The Convention on the Rights of the Child says in Article 12 that ratifying countries "shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child." You are all of an age and maturity for forming your own views; therefore you have a reciprocal obligation to make those views known.

In most of the Caribbean, countries have a real head start on a whole series of vital fronts. Many have already met some of the Summit goals and are well on their way toward reaching others. Infant and under-five mortality rates are nearly comparable to those achieved in many highly industrialized countries, and are generally lower than those of Detroit or Washington, D.C. A promise was made in 1985 to achieve a level of immunization of at least 80% of children by age one against six diseases by December 1990, five years later. That was the biggest specific promise ever made for children worldwide; we now know that promise was achieved. It was the largest collaborative peace-time effort the world has ever undertaken. More people, and more "people days" were spent immunizing children in the third world and the developing countries in 1990 and this year than were required to build the Panama Canal or the Suez Canal and, some have even suggested, the pyramids. You were so successful in this effort that today in the Caribbean there are a higher proportion of children immunized at age one, over 80%, than are immunized in the United Kingdom or the United States at age two! It was a tremendous accomplishment. Today in many developing countries, immunization is a more universal service and the vaccinator reaches more hamlets and villages than even the postman. So we demonstrated we can do it. The Caribbean region has made notable achievements in health, life expectancy and education, achievements of which you can feel proud.

At the same time, teenage pregnancies, AIDS, and unhealthy lifestyles represent some of the major problems requiring urgent attention. Sustaining and deepening your accomplishments amidst economic crisis and fiscal austerity, while overcoming the obvious problems we see around us, are major challenges you will face in the coming years. In order not to lose ground, as so many countries did during the "lost decade" of the 1980s, and to make progress, governments and citizens will be called on to find ways to do more with fewer resources; services will often need to be restructured and made more efficient; low-cost prevention will have to take precedence over costly cure; and communities and families will have to play a greater role in meeting local needs.

We have learned that economic growth -- as important as it is for progress -- will not automatically "trickle down" to enable the poor to pull themselves out of poverty. It is critically important -- here in the Caribbean and wherever economies are undergoing major transitions -- that societies develop broad consensus regarding the need to make or continue making long-term investments in people, in their health, education and productivity. How to maintain those investments through hard times, how to protect the most vulnerable in particular, is one of the central challenges we must face in the 1990s.

What has made the last two years historic is the simultaneous end of the cold war and the explosion of democracy around the world, a feature you have enjoyed in the Caribbean but most people have not enjoyed till the last 25 years. This is why the Secretary General of the United Nations and we at UNICEF view this event as of great importance. It is the beginning of a process among youth which could benefit the whole world. You may ask, "Why you?" Why are you so significant? Why is that what you can do is going to have the potential of helping children in Nigeria, in Ghana, in India? There are several reasons. First, thanks to the presence of democracy in the Caribbean and a responsiveness of governments, the children in the Caribbean, today, have a level of health and a level of basic education that is very, very close to that of the industrial countries -- even though the latter may have 3, 4, 5, or 6 times as much per capita income. The Caribbean, the governments of the Caribbean collectively, have made a tremendous contribution and very heavy expenditures. There are very heavy costs for school systems, health systems and the results are what I indicated earlier. Today, for example, there is a lower level of child mortality in the Caribbean than in Washington, DC. You may ask, why is Washington, DC doing so poorly? Because Washington, DC is the one place in the United States that does not have a democracy. It is the one place where they can vote for the president but have no congressman, no senator, no representative. They can't control their own budgets. The better child survival in the Caribbean, even though incomes are low, demonstrates the strength of democracy in ensuring protective policies and services.

What is clear is that the major frontier for progress even in difficult times lies with educating and motivating individuals to do more to help themselves. People can and ought to be enabled to take far greater care of themselves. There is a new respect for the capacity of the individual and the obligation of governments to enhance and encourage use of that capacity.

Many of the new challenges you are facing at this stage in the Caribbean are precisely the kinds of problems that can only be solved through changes in lifestyle and behaviour by people who are sufficiently educated, empowered and supported to help themselves, their children and their communities. The leading causes of death and disability in the Caribbean are, increasingly, the so-called diseases of lifestyle -- among them heart attacks, stroke, hypertension, cancer, pulmonary diseases, diabetes, etc., which not only wreak havoc on individuals and families, but place intolerable stress on already overburdened economies.

I remember that Dr. William Foege, when he was head of the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, in the early 1980s, used to point out that medical interventions to add a single year to the life expectancy of the average American male would cost more than \$10 billion annually. But, he said, you could add eleven years -- today it would be somewhat less -- if the American male would only do four cost-free things: stop smoking, moderate alcohol intake, watch the quality and quantity of food intake, and do a moderate amount of exercise.

It sounds so simple, but the adults in this room, especially, know how difficult it is to break unhealthy habits once they are ingrained. The progress that has been made in recent years in these four areas is largely due to massive public education campaigns, usually initiated and sustained by private individuals and organizations, leading -- especially in the richer nations -- to a heightened sense of individual responsibility for and control over one's own health and even to a new culture of personal fitness. Policy makers are coming to see that prevention through health education is the practical, affordable, long-term solution. And they are realizing that the earlier in life healthy behaviours are inculcated, the better.

Last week we were all saddened to learn that a famous American basketball star had been diagnosed as having the virus said to cause AIDS. I think you all have heard the story of Magic Johnson. On the morning after his press conference, young people were asked their reactions on radio and television, and I was struck by their sense of disbelief. One teenager said he never thought "somebody so rich and famous, somebody so nice", could get AIDS. He was shocked, but it is equally shocking that, a decade into the pandemic, it is still not understood that wealth, fame or being a "nice guy" do not confer immunity from the AIDS virus.

How do we achieve these changes in lifestyles? This is where we have to start looking to your suggestions, to your participation. How to stop smoking? If it is not already, death due to smoking will soon be the biggest killer in the Caribbean as it is in the United States. How to reduce early pregnancies, which in New York City, Washington, DC and here are a cause of so much poverty to young mothers and the principle cause of low-birth weight babies and babies that start out life on the wrong foot? How can we increase breastfeeding today? There is a movement away from breastfeeding in many places. We now find in the United States a principal reason for the increase in breast cancer and of ovarian cancer: mothers did not breastfeed early. This leads to an increase in the prospect of breast cancer later. One out of nine American women today will get breast cancer. This is a lifestyle problem, to a very significant degree. How do we increase immunization? How to reduce the use of alcohol and other drugs? How to introduce safe sex? How to reduce the number and closeness of births?

What the teenager's reaction to Magic Johnson's news points up -- more than the innocence or ignorance of one individual -- is that major changes in lifestyles and common assumptions require massive, sustained and convincing public discussion and education, in a format and language the people most at

risk can understand. There obviously needs to be a great deal more educating of the public, motivating and empowering of the public with knowledge about exactly how to prevent the spread of this deadly disease. There may not yet be a cure for AIDS, but prevention is in your hands.

Knowledge about healthy lifestyles needs to be transmitted in the home, in schools, through the media and every available channel. Each country in the Caribbean has at least one television station, two radio stations and four weeklies: powerful resources for communication regarding health. You have outstanding artists -- Ziggy Marley in Jamaica, The Mighty Gabby and Spice in Barbados, teen rap groups in Trinidad -- who have included songs about AIDS and healthy lifestyles in their repertoires. But even when we are armed with the most persuasive, up-to-date information about the dangers of a given behaviour, change doesn't automatically follow. People have to want to change and it often takes support -- or even pressure -- from family, friends and colleagues to nudge us in healthier directions.

Wasn't it moving to see how Magic Johnson's friends and fans everywhere rallied around him as soon as they heard he'd been infected with HIV? Wasn't it inspiring to see him flash his signature smile and announce he was going to become a spokesperson for the movement to prevent AIDS? Couldn't each and every one of you -- each and every one of us -- become friends and spokespersons of the movement...not only to prevent AIDS, but to prevent other sexually-transmitted diseases...to prevent teen pregnancy with its many risks to mother and child...to prevent smoking, drug and alcohol abuse...to prevent use of infant formula instead of breastmilk...to prevent delinquency and other problems affecting young people today?

I don't mean public spokespersons, necessarily (although we do need people to speak out loudly and publicly). I mean that each one of you, in your own lives, in your own families and circles of friends, in your own relationships, can do the right thing. You can support your friends in hard times and turn to them to help you make the right decisions. I'm sure that you know that how long you will live and the quality of your life is, to a great extent, in your own hands. But did it ever occur to you that your friends' lives -- and the lives of your family and the people with whom you are closest -- are also in your hands? You may not be able to make as much impact as we hope Magic Johnson will make, but by influencing the people in your immediate circle of relationships -- by being a true friend to them -- you can send out ripples of healthy influence into the bigger world.

You can help shape the lifestyle and values of society, too. You have a right to participate, to be heard. You are too young to remember the role young people played in ending the Vietnam war, but you certainly know that young people recently helped transform the societies of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and what a force they are in the movements against apartheid and to save the environment. Through your organizations and as individuals, you can make a difference. At home, you can ask your parents why they smoke; at school, you and your classmates can write to the cigarette companies about the advertisements that imply that smoking makes a young person "cool". With the

support of your friends -- not just young friends but older friends, parents and teachers -- you can speak out against child abuse. You can be role models to younger children, agents of change in your communities.

As I mentioned earlier, there's now a "Bill of Rights" for children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child has become the law of the land in 100 countries by now, including most of the Caribbean countries. Young people can help see to it that the rights it proclaims are respected and you can be allies of governments working to fulfill their obligations under the Convention. You have to let the adult world know what it is you need and expect -- challenge us to assist you!

In closing, I would like to address the adults. We know what we adults must do. You national leaders must provide young people with the wherewithal -- the services, training, information, access to media, sound curricula they need -- so they can participate and contribute their ideas, energies and enthusiasm to the urgent tasks facing your societies. Parents, teachers, professionals, legislators, businesspeople -- all must become close allies of children and youth. On the threshold of the 21st century, of the third millennium, a "window of opportunity" has opened in history to permit quantum leaps of human progress. Such opportunities seem to come along only two or three times in a century, so we must not let the window slam shut. Putting children first, we can make the leap to a better, healthier world.