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Address by Mr. James P. Grant  
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
to the  
International Colloquium of Mayors as Defenders of Children

Dakar, Senegal  
8 January 1992



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Address by Mr. James P. Grant

Executive Director, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

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International Colloquium of Mayors  
as Defenders of Children

Dakar - 8 January 1992

It gives me great pleasure, and I consider it a high honour, to be here today with the mayors of many of the outstanding cities of the world, along with the leaders of some of the most important municipal organizations. I would like to take this opportunity to thank His Excellency, President Abdou Diouf, and the Mayor of Dakar, the Honourable Mamadou Diop, for hosting this historic meeting for the world.

President Diouf and the government of Senegal have played a major role since the mid 1980s in placing children higher and higher on the global agenda. In 1987, it was President Diouf who made children a major topic for OAU summit meetings and helped establish a summit pattern for children which culminated in the 1990 World Summit for Children in which he was so active a participant. Most recently, it was President Diouf's energy, initiative and persistence that led to the adoption of strong resolutions at the November Francophone Summit in Paris, and at last month's Sixth Islamic Summit (which took place in this very conference centre), calling for implementation of the visionary commitments and year 2000 goals adopted at the World Summit for Children.

And we owe special thanks to Mayor Diop -- who is also the President of the World Conference of Mayors and of the Conference of Mayors of Capital Cities of the World -- for working tirelessly to make the "Mayors as Defenders of Children" global initiative a reality. Mayor Diop has long been an active participant in the child survival revolution. In his capacity as Minister of Health, he took part in the March 1984 meeting in Bellagio, Italy, which launched the global immunization effort that was later to achieve its 1990 world goal, now saving the lives of more than 3 million children a year.

Moving forward from that achievement, we have an opportunity at this historic gathering to set in motion actions on behalf of children that will not only elevate the quality of life in your own cities, but set an example for municipalities throughout the world.

By coming to Dakar to join in this colloquium, those of you in urban leadership positions bring to our deliberations rich experience in urban realities. Many of the burning problems of our times arise within the context of the metropolitan agglomerations of developed and developing countries alike, and it is within your own and other cities that we must solve them.

We should, during our two days here, soberly assess the complex nature and depth of those problems and come up with recommendations on how we, our nations and, indeed, the world can grapple with them so that children and their families stand a chance — so that they enter the 21st century ready to play a productive role in their societies and enjoy fulfilling lives.

I need not set forth for this group the full dimension or gravity of those problems. A third of the developing world's children now live in urban areas; by the end of the decade, due to the unrelenting growth of cities, fully half of the children of developing countries will be city children. Increasingly, poverty is concentrated in the towns and cities of both North and South. In industrialized countries, new urban problems challenge us -- drugs, AIDS, violence, pollution, homelessness -- even as economic downturn cuts back urgently needed funds. Reduced resources cause a rise in joblessness, illness, malnutrition, shortages of schoolrooms and child care centres, even shelter.

Faced with desperate need, people take to the streets. One way to look at this is chaos and anarchy. Another is democratization and the potential for participation by people in solving their own urban problems. Which is it to be? One tends to trigger violence and repression; the other, mobilizing the people as constructive forces for their own betterment. It is in the pressure-cooker of cities that people are seeking their rights and abilities to participate in managing their own affairs.

This challenge must call forth political will, political leadership, and a response that looks affirmatively to the potential of people to become part of the solution, rather than be seen as the problem. Creating conditions in which urban parents and neighbours can meet their own and their families' needs for adequate nutrition, health care and education is essential to meeting this challenge. Investment in people will help liberate their productivity and stimulate economic growth.

Mayors are on the frontline of the democratization and decentralization that characterize the final decade of the 20th century. You can seize the opportunity to work with the people and with the international community that offers assistance. You can be the Defenders of Children and join your local urban efforts to national and international programmes that will help turn around global and national downward trends. The solution of urban problems requires actions at the global and national level, but political leaders of cities can in turn stimulate governments to act boldly on actions for children.

Over the past decades, major successes have been gained in what we call the Child Survival and Development Revolution, with the biggest advances taking place in rural areas. Let me give one example, out of UNICEF's experience, of the importance of working together with political leaders if we are to accomplish what needs to be done for children.

At the beginning of the 1980s, when only ten per cent of the world's children were being immunized against the six major child-killing diseases, the goal was set to reach 80 per cent of all infants with vaccines by the end of the decade. That was the biggest specific promise ever made for children worldwide and it sparked the largest collaborative peace-time effort the world has ever undertaken. As you know, since many of you were directly involved, this goal has been attained, and today in many developing countries, not only does the vaccinator reach more hamlets and villages than even the postman but also a majority of families now want to have their children vaccinated early. In most countries in the developing world, including cities like Calcutta, Lagos and Mexico City there are a higher proportion of children immunized at age one than are immunized in the United Kingdom or the United States or in London or New York City at age two! The world's success in that ambitious undertaking is owed to a considerable degree to the commitment and active involvement of political leaders at every level who mobilized radio, television, newspapers, school teachers, imams and priests, and business leaders. Presidents and prime ministers became personally involved and provincial and regional governors served as front-line commanders of UCI campaigns. It was this kind of far-sighted political leadership that made Senegal, our host country, a pioneer of the immunization effort. Without the social mobilization in each country that followed out of such leadership, reaching the UCI 1990 goal would have been impossible in such a brief time.

Building on that experience, heads of state and government -- President Diouf prominent among them -- assembled at the United Nations a year ago to attend the World Summit for Children, the largest gathering ever of world leaders. This represented a marshalling of political will at the highest level on behalf of children, a commitment to ensure a better future for children, their mothers, families and communities everywhere.

They agreed on important principles -- including that children should be given a first call on resources to meet their most essential needs, in good times and bad. But very importantly, they identified 27 goals for children which are so readily achievable in the 1990s that it would be unconscionable not to do so, and they set forth a global Plan of Action for meeting those goals. These are practical and measurable goals, doable in this decade. The political leaders returned to their countries, and more than one hundred governments are now preparing National Programmes of Action to implement the Summit agenda. I am delighted to note that the Government of Senegal has very recently finalized its National Programme of Action.

Closely allied to the forward motion begun by the World Summit for Children is the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is the most comprehensive human rights document ever agreed to by nations and, within a year of its coming into force, the Convention has become law in more than a hundred countries -- including Senegal, which ratified the Convention on 31 July 1990, becoming the 17th country to do so. The Convention provides a legal basis for action on behalf of children in nearly every realm. Most countries -- now 107 -- have ratified the Convention, and in a shorter time than ever before for any human rights treaty.

The underlying concept linking the Convention and the World Summit is, in the words of the Summit Plan of Action, the "...principle that the essential needs of children should be given high priority in the allocation of resources, in bad times as well as in good times, at national and international as well as at family levels".

For many nations, for many cities, these are "bad times", and children are not yet getting the "first call" on resources they need. Charged with the responsibility of meeting the growing needs of ever-larger numbers of people living under increasingly difficult circumstances, at a time of fiscal austerity and cut-backs in government services, you mayors and city leaders know that solutions are not to be found in doing "business as usual". You know that some degree of restructuring of government spending will be required, shifting resources in favour of low-cost services for the many rather than high-cost services for the few. Experience has shown that even when public expenditure has to be cut, a reordering of priorities can still permit the continued protection of the vulnerable.

Where urban basic services are working effectively they derive their strength from the participation of the people. In a time when people are asserting their democratic right to participate in their government, here is a place to begin, by including urban neighbours in organized ways of working to provide the essentials of life for themselves and their families. Participation is the key to making urban basic services work, and the anomie and lack of social solidarity affecting most crowded cities must be overcome through the common pursuit of widely shared goals. Political leadership can make the crucial difference in igniting and sustaining a sense of shared purpose among a city population. Cities are increasingly the new frontier for social progress on the threshold of the third millenium, and the likes of you gathered in this hall are at the cutting edge of the new world order now struggling to be born.

Today and tomorrow, in the give-and-take of our workshop discussions, you will be seeking specific points of action that you can carry back to your own cities to achieve locally the goals the World Summit for Children has set for nations. One major challenge you might wish to set for yourselves would be to develop, by the middle of this year, detailed and comprehensive Municipal Programmes of Action that translate National Programmes of Action into realistic and doable propositions at the urban level. Some cities have already drafted such plans, and are gearing up for a decade of intensified activity for children.

A first step in preparing a Municipal Programme of Action for Children is to make a thorough analysis of the situation of your children. Local districts, even schools, can participate in this process. 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. A 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 for their implementation on strong municipal leadership. Let me cite examples:

1. Italian cities that qualify as defenders of children have agreed as a minimum to devote one municipal council meeting a year solely to the issues of children, and prior to that meeting to invite proposals from schools and community groups. This imposes no major additional financial cost to the city.

2. Determine to achieve the year 2000 goals for immunization within a much shorter time, say two years. Again, no major additional financial cost to the city. Vaccines and syringes are provided by the state.

3. Implement an information programme so that within, say, three years, every family will know how to use and be motivated to use oral rehydration therapy at home against diarrhoea, the single biggest killer of children, especially in Africa. Again, at virtually no major cost to the city.

4. Launch a campaign to promote breastfeeding, including assuring that all hospitals in your city by the end of 1992 can qualify as "baby friendly" and are fully supportive of effective breastfeeding. This would require little initial financial support and actually would save money for hospitals, communities and families within the first six months.

5. Set up a system so that the growth of each child is monitored from birth. This too could be done at very little cost.

Effective implementation of these five measures alone would reduce child deaths and child malnutrition by one third, possibly by even half, within five years. Cost is not the principal problem; the principal need is for strong municipal leadership and effective mobilization of existing community resources.

A similar list of actions could be drawn up on the education front for early, dramatic improvements at modest cost if only strong local leadership were to be provided.

Meanwhile, serious action should start and increase on such terribly difficult problems as street children and AIDS prevention; rapid progress and successes in doing the readily doable described above can provide the confidence and staying power required to deal with these more difficult problems.

This meeting in Dakar can be a beginning of a joint effort, by Mayors, by municipal organizations, by national governments and international agencies in what we call the Grand Alliance for Children. Mayors as Defenders of Children must be major players in pulling this coalition together. We at UNICEF are committed to work closely with you, both programatically and at the level of helping to mobilize external resources. If we can succeed, the children of tomorrow will start the new millenium with a brighter future.