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Remarks by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
upon receipt of the
Alan Shawn Feinstein Award for the
Prevention and Reduction of World Hunger

Brown University – Providence, Rhode Island
6 April 1989



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Four years ago I helped launch the Alan Shawn Feinstein World Hunger Programme here at Brown University. I am pleased to see the remarkable progress that has been made, and is periodically reported to me by my colleagues as they participate in elements of the programme.

My topic in 1985 was "Famine Today...Hope for Tomorrow". Four years later, as tomorrow has begun to arrive, how much hope can we now find?

Actually, quite a bit, even if we examine only those major developments in UNICEF's baliwick during this short period.

In February 1985, we were but four months into the massive public and governmental response to those first devastating television reports from the camps in Ethiopia. But the world was responding. The government of Ethiopia, the USSR, and the USA sharply revised their policies toward the emergency in response to public opinion. An international coordinating mechanism - the United Nations Office of Emergency Operations for Africa - had been established. Tens of millions of dollars in funds were being committed by governments and raised from the public, by established relief and service organizations as well as by groups like Band Aid with its "Don't They Know It's Christmas?", and U.S.A. for Africa's "We Are the World", which were created just for the relief effort.

We saw scenes in Ethiopia of British and German pilots air-dropping Canadian grain shipped to the country on American vessels and transported to the airport on local and Russian trucks, and Polish officers flown in by helicopter to remote areas preparing the ground for food and supplies dropped from low flying planes.

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Hunger - loud, screaming hunger - was being relieved.

At that time I referred in my address here at Brown University to the emergence of a new ethos regarding loud emergencies - a new ethos in which pressure from world public opinion would compel governmental action to respond once the world media had registered the impending disaster on the public consciousness. This was borne out in Africa in 1984 and 1985.

Today we face another "loud emergency" of mass starvation in Africa that may cause some to question whether there really is a new ethos regarding the loud emergency. A skeptic can note that last year, 250,000 civilians - the equivalent of two Hiroshimas - died in the Sudan without a comparable world response. Why not? The answer is that they died in the obscurity of one of the most remote regions in the world as a consequence of the civil conflict in which there was no interest in allowing the story to be told. Only in the past few months has the scale of the disaster been realized through increasingly vivid media reporting - creating the climate which can compel action to prevent a repetition. The international community has just become well aware that more than 100,000 people, the majority of them children, are bound to die of starvation this year - the equivalent of four or more Armenian disasters - unless adequate food supplies reach the south of the country before the May-October monsoon rains begin, bringing air and road transport to a halt. Now that this awareness has surfaced, mammoth international pressure is being brought to bear.

The problems in delivering this food have not been, of course, those of availability of food nor of willing donors. Rather, armed conflict between the government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in the southern Sudan and a massive disregard by both sides for civilian well-being have effectively prevented relief to either side in the South, where two thirds of the population has been displaced in the past two years. Yet, thanks to a newly aroused world public opinion which has made itself felt both by local authorities and by friendly governments, six days ago "Operation Lifeline Sudan" began - a plan to allow safe passage of more than 100,000 tons of supplies (worth more than US\$100 million) to the South along eight "corridors of tranquility" before the advent of the rainy season. In short, public opinion - informed by an alert media - remains key.

But relieving the loud emergency of immediate hunger in Africa is not the only progress which has been made in these four years toward reducing hunger and malnutrition. Life-saving relief from around the world in such "loud emergencies" has contributed significantly, I believe, to the emergence of a new sense of responsibility to help in the "silent emergencies" of malnutrition and disease, as well, which take the lives of more than 80 per cent of the 40,000 children who still die every day. When I spoke here four years ago I emphasized that much of malnutrition is the interaction of disease and hunger. Thus, when a child weakened by hunger is struck with diarrhoea, the body's precious and limited nutrients are drained; when he or she is struck with fevers accompanying childhood disease, the appetite is destroyed. Both conditions exacerbate an already threatening condition.

Four years ago I spoke about the potential for a virtual "Child Survival and Development Revolution" (CSDR) which could dramatically impact on this equation involving malnutrition and disease - a synergistic combination of recent technological advances and a new capacity to communicate with those who need to be empowered with the knowledge of their potential. Since then, progress has been dramatic in combatting both vaccine-preventable diseases and life-threatening diarrhoea.

Four years ago only some 10 per cent of the world's children were immunized against the six main child-killing diseases. Today, the World Health Organization estimates that more than 60 per cent are covered, with the result that the lives of 1.5 million young children were saved last year alone, and comparable numbers were spared lives of crippling side effects of disease. And does it not offer food for thought that cities such as Addis Ababa, Cairo, Harare and Maputo now have immunization levels for under-ones comparable to or better than New York and Washington?

Four years ago fewer than 2 per cent of mothers used oral rehydration therapy (ORT) when their children were struck with diarrhoea, even though the simple sugar, salt and water solution which can be administered at home for 10 cents is capable of saving a child from the lethal effects of diarrhoeal dehydration - the Number One killer of young children. Today, some 25 per cent of mothers use ORT, and the number is increasing monthly. As a result, the lives of another million children have been saved during the past year.

For every life saved through these simple interventions, the nutritional status of several more children has been substantially improved.

Sufficient progress has been made that in looking forward to plans for the 1990s we not only see serious attention being given to goals which many had earlier thought rhetorical - such as that of halving 1980 child mortality rates by the year 2000. Also, serious attention is being given to a whole cluster of new goals, which, if achieved, would have a major impact on the nutritional status of children - to the point that we now speak of the possibility for the virtual elimination of serious malnutrition among under-5s by the year 2000. This year the Joint Committee on Health Policy, comprised of members of the Executive Boards of the WHO and UNICEF, and which has been designing international health policy for four decades, set goals for the 1990s which include, in addition to the child mortality target I have just named, such achievements as:

- eradication of polio;
- virtual elimination of iodine deficiency diseases and of blindness from lack of vitamin A;
- eradication of guinea worm by 1995;
- universal access to safe drinking water and sanitation;
- 90 per cent reduction in measles by 1995, with eventual eradication; and

- universal primary education and 80 per cent female literacy among age groups to be determined at country-level; all of which contribute to the possibility of...
- virtual elimination of severe malnutrition among under-5s.

The same momentum from progress in the CSDR which has brought such goals into the realm of the feasible has had another unprecedented impact. The status of children has been powerfully elevated in the political arena. Specifics regarding the health and well-being of children have been, within the last two and a half years, the focus of debate, declarations, resolutions and joint support from such fora as the Summit of the seven South Asian countries (three times now), the Summit of African countries (twice), and the Summit of seven Central American countries. The single social issue mentioned in the joint statement of the May-June 1988 Moscow Summit between the US and USSR was the survival and protection of children. And less than a month ago, 500 parliamentarians from 98 countries, meeting in Budapest for the Inter-Parliamentary Union conference, passed a strong resolution vigorously supporting a wide range of children's issues. It was the only resolution passed unanimously at the week-long conference, and its adoption was greeted by prolonged applause.

There is even serious discussion now of holding a World Summit on Children before this year is over.

And I must admit that ten years ago, when Poland first proposed a "Convention on the Rights of the Child", I was skeptical about the possibility for international consensus. Today, chances are extremely good that the draft Convention will be adopted by the U.N. General Assembly this fall, and will be ratified shortly afterward by the 20 countries necessary to render the charter into law for the signatories.

These developments are among current conditions which combine to offer new hope for a quantum leap in the health and well-being of children and in alleviating the worst effects of poverty - including hunger.

The future depends very much, however, on the continued success of programmes already launched. For example, universal child immunization must be achieved by its target at the end of 1990 not only for the sake of the millions of children whose lives will be saved, but also to give heart for the tasks of achieving more complex health and nutrition goals. And the groundwork laid by groups and institutions, such as the Feinstein World Hunger Programme, must continue vigorously.

Four years into the World Hunger Programme, we clearly have in hand the capacity to prevent the vast majority of child deaths which still persist and to prevent the worst manifestations of malnutrition and hunger. This era is the first in history in which such a statement can be made.

Morality must march with capacity. The same ethic which stirred the world conscience to respond to the Ethiopian "famine" four years ago and the Sudan "famine" of today is beginning to be extended to encompass the silent emergencies of malnutrition and preventable child deaths. It is beginning to

happen. The new summit-level attention to children's issues and action on the draft Convention on the Rights of the Child are indicative of a sea-change in our collective responsiveness in this arena. A broad-based movement is at work in all parts of the world to ensure that what is do-able on behalf of children gets done. What we sometimes refer to as a "Grand Alliance for Children" is growing, comprised of non-governmental organizations, governmental agencies, academic, religious and professional groups and more.

A new morality and new ethic are emerging which assert that we have a responsibility toward all children, and toward the future. As an integral part of our moving toward a more just and humane world, this new emerging ethos says it is unconscionable not to act to save children's lives and prevent hunger and malnutrition when we clearly have the capacity to do so much, for so many, and for so little a cost. Surely it is time for preventable child deaths and massive malnutrition to be put on the shelf alongside racism, colonialism, and discrimination against women - i.e., among those conditions which are simply no longer acceptable to humankind.

There is no longer a question of whether mass hunger and malnutrition can be avoided, as there was a half century ago. Today the question is whether we have the will, vision, and leadership to transform available solutions into reality.

Each of you has a role in responding to both the loud emergencies, such as the situation in the Sudan, and to silent emergencies such as continuing severe malnutrition and hunger.

In accepting the Alan Shawn Feinstein Award for the Prevention and Reduction of World Hunger, I do so on behalf of all the Grand Alliance of people, including many in this hall, who are making such historic advances on behalf of children - and especially poor and hungry children - throughout the world. The work for which you are honouring me with this Award has been made possible and carried out by massive numbers of people - including notably my own colleagues in UNICEF...but also countless others outside the organization who have acted as allies in this peaceful revolution, and who have given me the inspiration, knowledge and support to make my own contribution to these accomplishments. On behalf of all of them, I extend heartfelt gratitude for both the work of the Hunger Programme in this common cause, and for the very great honour of the Feinstein Award.