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Statement by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
Meeting of the Sub-Committee on Nutrition
of the
Administrative Committee on Coordination

United Nations – New York
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I want to welcome all of you to this important meeting -- partners in our sister agencies as well as distinguished experts from outside the UN system. The work of everyone in this room to reduce malnutrition in the world has never been more important and in many ways never so well positioned for success. With the nutrition goals endorsed by 71 heads of state and senior representatives from 88 other countries at the World Summit for Children in 1990... goals affirmed and endorsed both at Rio's UNCED and at the International Conference on Nutrition (ICN) in Rome over a year ago... there is a great consensus on which to build as we together continue to fight malnutrition at a time when so many enemies of children -- measles, tetanus, polio, illiteracy, etc. -- are on the run. Advances in immunization and ORT alone are now saving 4 million children annually.

What are the principal elements of consensus on the nutrition front? We have come a long way from the World Food Conference of 1974 in which the focus was largely on food and food production as determinants of nutrition outcomes. In the 20 years since that ground-breaking conference, there has been an increasing realization, as the ICN declaration clearly shows, that nutritional security does not depend on food alone.

In addition to food, access to health services and a healthy environment, and care of women and children, are all necessary conditions for good nutrition. No one of these is sufficient in itself. We all know this from our own experiences. All of us can recount stories of countries or communities in which we have worked where food was plentiful and households had access to it, but malnutrition continued to be a problem.

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The importance of all three necessary conditions -- food, health, and care -- relays a clear message to the UN system: No one agency alone can or should take up the full mandate of addressing malnutrition. Rather, knowing what we know about the multidimensional nature of the problem, we all should take up some part of that mandate, complementing each other's work as much as possible. Indeed, some aspect of malnutrition reduction should be part of the work of **every** development-oriented UN agency. This should include using nutritional indicators in the evaluation of the effectiveness of our work in many sectors, since we understand that child nutrition is a telling indicator of development progress of many kinds.

Our complementarity around such a complex problem is the key to the success we have had and will have. As you know, donors are especially concerned about reducing overlap among our agencies, as all of us are as well. For this complementarity and harmonization of activities to take place, we need to ensure frequent and rapid exchange of information on nutritional outcomes and on activities meant to improve them. We need to ensure that the science that informs our consensus on nutrition and our related activities is up to date and sound.

In this respect, I want to congratulate the Secretariat of the Sub-Committee on Nutrition (SCN), on behalf of UNICEF, for fulfilling this critical role. It has done so effectively, with limited staff and resources. The Reports on the World Nutrition Situation have become important documents for understanding our progress in nutrition. The Report in 1992-93 provided the first in-depth analysis of progress toward meeting our common nutrition goals for 1995 and 2000. In regional and country-by-country analyses, this important report illustrated cases of rapid movement towards fulfilling the goals, and estimated the rate of improvement that would be necessary for some countries to meet the goals. Donors frequently use these reports, and it can only be helpful for all of us to be using the same information base.

The six country case studies supervised by the SCN, with support from UNICEF, which were presented at the IUNS meetings in Adelaide last year, have given us insight into success factors that have concretely contributed to reducing malnutrition and the conditions under which they might be replicated. These accounts have highlighted the importance of popular participation in community-based nutrition programmes such as that supported by UNICEF in Tanzania. These cases also underscore the importance of human resource development, notably women's education, to sustainable nutritional security. Perhaps most importantly, these reports help dispel the pessimism about the prospects for development that one confronts all too often these days.

I know that all of us have made use of the wide range of other SCN technical publications, covering topics from micronutrients and protein-energy malnutrition (PEM), to a range of vital policy issues. SCN News, now circulated to some 30,000 readers, has been an important vehicle for communicating new developments in nutrition. I hope we all will give full support to the preparation of the next issue on maternal and child nutrition.

A recent SCN initiative in response to concerns for the appalling nutrition conditions of refugees and displaced people, has led to the establishment of a system to regularly monitor the situation of refugees in Africa. It is already providing useful data to inform preventive measures. The strong collaboration with NGOs that developed in this effort is most commendable, and we hope that it will be expanded to cover other regions.

In short, the SCN Secretariat has kept us all aware of the latest findings in nutrition science and what works in the field, taking vast amounts of information, digesting and making it available in a useable form.

In spite of the budgetary austerity with which we all must increasingly contend, I hope our respective agencies can give some thought to increasing the resources available to the SCN Secretariat. We must recognize that the Secretariat is terribly understaffed and provide enough funds to remedy this critical situation.

The coordination of nutritional information related to our efforts to realize our common nutrition goals will also help us to assess progress on other related goals. In this respect, the goal to reduce protein-energy malnutrition by 20 per cent from 1990 levels by end 1995 and by 50 per cent by the year 2000 is especially important. We know that the achievement of this goal will be affected not only by success in reaching other nutritional goals in such areas as breastfeeding and micronutrient deficiencies, but also by the progress made on reducing and preventing infectious diseases, improving access to clean water, and in the long run, ensuring universal education of boys and girls.

The information we are getting from the SCN Secretariat will be absolutely critical for our collective global efforts to achieve the mid-decade goals for children, which include by the end of 1995 the virtual elimination of vitamin A and iodine deficiencies and by the end of 1995 making virtually all hospitals with maternal facilities "baby friendly" by supporting breastfeeding and ending free and low-cost supply of infant formulas to the health care system. Reaching these and other mid-decade targets will not only prevent the major causes of child blindness and mental retardation, but it will mean saving an additional two million young lives per year by 1996. We all know how much is at stake in this undertaking.

In January Dr. Nakajima commented to ---- of WHO/UNICEF Executive Board members on Health Policy the work of SCN and the work we are all doing are central to a larger mandate, of which reducing the grave problem of malnutrition is only a part. The SCN Secretariat has helped and should be strengthened to continue to help all of us mobilize the information we need to keep nutrition and related issues of child well-being upper-most in the minds of policy makers and donors. The SCN's role is rightly seen as a key part of an information strategy that makes it impossible for politicians to hide behind the excuse of a lack of information in defending inaction or indifference. SCN also helps us all to maintain our common focus on nutrition, whatever the organizational context from which our concerns about nutrition arise.

I trust that this common focus on nutrition will be strengthened in this meeting and that we will all come away with a sense of better ways in which to complement each other's efforts, with renewed energy to overcome the multiple challenges we face.

As I said earlier, never before have we had so much going for children. In addition to the mini-summit commemorating the third anniversary of the World Summit for Children and its 27 year 2000 goals -- many dealing with nutrition -- there is the almost unbelievably rapid progress on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, now ratified by an historically-unprecedented 155 countries. For the first time ever for a human rights convention, universal ratification is in sight by 1995. National programmes of action to achieve the World Summit goals now cover more than 90 per cent of children in the developing world, and in several major countries -- China, India and Mexico among them -- every state and province has a plan of its own, also with the many nutrition goals. The heads of state and government of most developing countries have explicitly endorsed the mid-decade targets, and UNDP Administrator Gus Speth has written all Resident Representatives calling on them to exercise active leadership of the achievement of both the 1995 and year 2000 set of goals. The task ahead remains formidable -- but we are off to a good start toward another "miracle in the making" in the next two years if only each and every one of us will vigorously put their shoulder in support over the next 22 months.

As Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali said at the mini-summit commemorating the third anniversary of the World Summit for Children last September: "Of all the subjects of development, none has the acceptance, or the power to mobilize, as does the cause of children. Our children are our future." And I would add that the fight against hunger and malnutrition has a similar power to mobilize. Putting the two together -- children and nutrition -- we have a very powerful lever of human development as a whole. To do so at this time is both an opportunity and an obligation. Let us use it to move the world into a 21st century worthy of our children and ourselves.