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4 February 1989

TO: Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director

FROM: Michael Shower 
Counsellor

RE: Thoughts related to a World Summit for Children

The following collects the various thoughts which we have discussed regarding the purpose, participation, format, agenda, process, timing and context of a possible World Summit for Children, and related activities aimed at marshalling greater leadership attention to the needs and opportunities for children at the global, national, and community level.

Purpose of a Summit

The idea of a Summit for Children arises from the several experiences of recent years in which serious consideration of the needs/opportunities of children at the highest levels of regional international relations have been an important part of processes of increasing and accelerating actions for children within countries. The SAARC, OAU and Central American summits provided not only opportunities for great public spotlights on child survival initiatives, but they also: (1) required each government to "get its own house in order" on programmes for children, so that it would not be seen as lacking among its peers; (2) generated the momentum for further accelerated interventions for children in each participating country; and (3) provide a continuing mechanism for "monitoring" delivery on the commitment which each government has made.

The USA:USSR Summit, which promised attention to the needs of children external to the two countries involved, provides leverage for strengthening the involvement of the two governments, whether individually or in possible partnership, in supporting child survival programmes worldwide. That leverage has been successfully followed-up with the USSR's increased pledge to UNICEF's General Resources for 1989 and responsiveness to consideration of other suggestions which UNICEF has offered.

Thus, a World Summit for Children would be an opportunity to take a giant step further at the highest level of leadership commitment to and identification with the needs of children. The very fact of a "summit for children" is so out-of-the-norm and unusual that the leadership gathering alone would be of enormous consciousness-raising value. In addition to having the several

impacts identified above with respect to the regional and bilateral summits, whether or not a World Summit produced a detailed plan of actions for children, it would create a far greater awareness of needs and opportunities than currently exists, and would thus, in much the same fashion as the International Year of the Child in 1979, create a positive, stimulative environment not only among governments, but also among non-governmental organizations, the business sector, media, etc., and the public at-large - an environment which could be exploited into widescale additional interventions for children.

Participation

Several concepts of the participation and format of a World Summit for Children have been suggested. It is not assumed that a Summit would be all-inclusive (ie, 158+ Heads of State/Government participating), although this would be the case if the Summit took the form of a special session of the United Nations General Assembly, either at the Head of State/Government level, or as a normal special session. Most thinking, however, has assumed a more manageably representative group, of approximately 40 participating countries.

If a Summit is called explicitly on the subject of children, several formula are possible means for determining participation. One is to include every country with annual child births exceeding 1.5 million. In addition, to achieve representative universality, representatives of various groupings of countries would also be included (eg, the European Economic Community; the Organization of African Unity; the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation; the Association of Southeast Asian Nations; the Arab League; etc.), as well as the Secretary-General of the United Nations. Another formula is to accept the UNICEF Executive Board as a somewhat randomly representative collection of countries (41), which is well-balanced among developing and industrialized countries, and geographically diverse. A third formula would be to draw on either of the above two approaches, but to flexibly include any additional countries which particularly take initiative to convene the Summit or whose participation is considered particularly necessary or appropriate due to the country's leadership role with respect to children. [Country lists based on these formula are attached for illustrative purposes.]

Format

If a Summit is called explicitly on the subject of children, it is probable that a one and one-half to two-day schedule would be appropriate. This would allow presentations on the general situation of children worldwide; representative experiences illustrating opportunities and means for improving the situation of children; informal discussions; acceptance of a prepared plan for actions for children (either general or specific); and a public conclusion to the meeting. If the subject of children is simply incorporated into the agenda of a broader Summit (eg, a Cancun II-type meeting), at least one half day should be devoted to children, allowing a very abbreviated agenda but including each of the above elements.

It would seem preferable for a Summit of this size, whether explicitly for children or a larger agenda, to be convened in a relatively isolated and

relaxed location, so as to minimize the logistical requirements, security arrangements, local disruption, and, of course, expense.

Agenda

There are at least three levels of scale of an agenda which a World Summit for Children might attempt. A major contribution to the wellbeing of children could be secured by a Summit which is explicitly focussed on achieving the established United Nations goals of universal child immunization and expanded access to oral rehydration therapy (and possibly other, similar, quantifiable goals, such as the eradication of guinea worm, etc.), and ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The functional objective of such a Summit would be to generate the necessary action momentum to achieve those goals as close to their target dates as possible. Such a narrow-focussed Summit should also lay the groundwork of consciousness for "children-sensitive" development - ie, national policies which ensure that essential services for children are not regarded as "expendable" during difficult times, and ensure that the interests of children are a fundamental consideration of all development planning and economic and fiscal planning in general.

But, depending upon the "confidence level" of the organizers (ie, their confidence that a constructive consensus might be achievable), a Summit might be more broadly action-focussed, beginning to put consciousness of "children-sensitive development" into action by addressing a larger, longer-term agenda including such issues as basic education, water and sanitation, maternal and child nutrition, etc.

A third level of scale would involve addressing the still broader issues of children in the context of "development with a human face", entering such areas as the impact of the debt crisis and adjustment on children, "real development" approaches, etc.

Process

The obvious question is, if there is to be a Summit, who should call it? The most practical approach seems to be similar to that used for the Cancun Summit and other ad hoc international gatherings: that one or more Heads of State/Government take a personal initiative in calling a summit-level meeting. The initiator(s) might first approach a small additional group of leaders (3 or 4, to secure geographic representation), asking them to join as a steering group, which would then collectively issue invitations to the larger group of 40 or so targetted participants. Alternatively, the initiator(s) might propose that the UNICEF Executive Board convene at summit-level, or they might ask the Secretary-General of the United Nations, with their endorsement, to issue invitations for a summit-level meeting. The initiator(s) of such a call ought to be national leaders whose country(ies) and administration(s) are recognized for demonstrated sustained commitment to the interests of children, both in addressing the needs of their own children and in assisting, according to their means, with attention to children by other countries and the international system.

(It should be noted that, for countries with a strong interest in participation in a Summit for Children, but which may not fall within the formulas for participation noted above ["Participation"], the simplest way to ensure inclusion would be to participate in the initiative of calling the Summit.)

Timing

Under general circumstances, one would assume that any serious summit meeting, especially one involving 40 or so countries, would require extensive preparatory work, and probably a minimum of 9 months' advance planning, including multiple preparatory meetings to produce the working documents for the summit and a draft conclusion. However, much of that preparatory work is already in progress or accomplished, for reasons not directly related to a Summit proposal. If, for example, a Summit is narrowly focussed on achieving the established United Nations goals of universal child immunization and expanded access to oral rehydration therapy (and possibly other, similar, quantifiable goals), the objective of the Summit would be merely to generate the necessary action momentum to achieve those goals as close to their target dates as possible; UNICEF, WHO, the Child Survival Task Force, and other participating agencies and institutions could readily identify those areas of activity and resources still required to achieve the goals. If a Summit is more broadly focussed on "children-sensitive development", the meeting could appropriate as a working document the "Strategies for Children for the 1990s" plan which the UNICEF Executive Board in 1988 requested for consideration at its April 1989 session. In addition, the World Roundtable on Children, to be convened in Paris in late March under the patronage of President Mitterrand and organized by UNICEF, will be addressing these same issues, but from a slightly more political/strategic perspective; the product of this meeting could also be drawn upon by a World Summit. If a Summit chose to address the even broader issues of children in the context of "development with a human face", its working papers, in addition to the above, could include The State of the World's Children, 1989 as a stimulative concept paper, and could draw upon the preparatory work of the International Development Strategy for the 4th Development Decade. It is only in this latter case that a somewhat more elaborate, specific-to-the-Summit preparatory process would seem necessary, probably involving an advance meeting of senior officials 1-2 months prior to the Summit itself.

Hence, it would seem entirely plausible that a World Summit for Children could effectively be convened as early as autumn (late September) 1989. Because a primary objective of a Summit would surely be to help secure the immediate UCI and ORT goals as close to the end-1990 target dates as possible, a Summit would need to occur by the first half of 1990, at the latest, in order to contribute significantly to those efforts.

(An indication by April 1989 that a Summit for Children is likely to materialize would allow the UNICEF Executive Board, the World Health Assembly, and the Economic and Social Council to take that prospect into account in the conduct of their business in April, May, and June-July, respectively.)

Summits at all levels

In addressing the Martin Luther King Day Community Convocation at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York, you underscored UNICEF's contention that effectively addressing the needs of children requires the mobilization of leadership attention at all levels - to "reach the unreached by reaching the leaders of the unreached". Noting that the community surrounding the Cathedral suffers an infant mortality rate twice that of the U.S. national average, you encouraged a New York City Summit for Children, and summits in each Borough and community district of the city. This idea - that governmental, private and civic leaders ought to be enlisted in every country and every community - should be a fundamental part of the process leading to and following a World Summit. Such a mobilization of involvement - organized by heads of national governments, governors and mayors - could generate another quantum leap of vastly expanded and strengthened action for children similar to that generated by the International Year of the Child.

Children in a global context

The initial suggestion of a World Summit for Children has enjoyed a positive response from several Heads of State/Government, including Prime Minister Carlsson of Sweden, who issued a public statement declaring: "I share the opinion that the issue of the child must be given priority in the context of international cooperation. Children's issues must be dealt with in the economic, social and cultural reality in which we all live and strive. I therefore agree...that the time is ripe to consider a summit to discuss the situation of the child." President Ershad of Bangladesh, President Mubarak of Egypt, President Soeharto of Indonesia, President Mwinyi of Tanzania and President Mugabe of Zimbabwe (current chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement), and Foreign Minister Andreotti of Italy, were also quick to endorse the idea of a Summit for Children. Canada's national Globe and Mail editorialized: "UNICEF suggests that the time may have come for a summit of world leaders to apply more urgent remedies. Would anyone argue that it was overstating the case?", and Le Monde (Paris) asked: "Who would not support it?".

The idea of a World Summit for Children obviously seems compelling in its own right. But, as Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar observed in a public statement endorsing the State of the World's Children Report: "Children do not live and grow in a world unto themselves. They live in our world, and their survival and growth is dependent upon the health of our societies. ...the state of the world's children is linked to growth and development, just as the well-being of children is essential for sustained economic and social progress." While the situation of children cannot be separated from the situation of the world at-large, three other precepts also relate to any consideration of the value of a Summit for Children. First, countries have demonstrated in the past several years that important progress can be made for children despite adverse economic and political circumstances - even despite war and the consumption of resources that total war demands. Therefore, protection of the lives and livelihood of children should not be dependent upon better times in general. Second, we have also demonstrated in the past several years that countries and communities are prepared to agree on actions for children even if they disagree on virtually everything else. Thus, even conflicting forces in El Salvador, Lebanon, Uganda, Afghanistan and elsewhere

have agreed to cooperate - or, at least, not interfere - for the benefit of the urgent needs of children. This gives rise to a third precept: the possibility that creating opportunities to agree and cooperate on children can contribute importantly to creating environments of agreement and cooperation on a broader range of difficult issues - whether the ideological/strategic issues that separate great powers; economic issues which separate North and South; or political issues that separate conflicting forces.

The question might be asked: "Why a Summit for Children instead of a Summit on the Debt Crisis, or on the Environment, or on Trade?" The answer is not "instead of", but why not a beginning of summit-level commitment to issues upon which world collaboration can make a difference? And if we are to begin, why not begin in a sector which is ripe for collaboration because it is ripe for success? And why not begin with those whose future is the fundamental concern of every government, because they are the future? Why not begin with children? Because children cannot wait.

1988 brought a new sense of possibilities to the world: possibilities of the lessening of global tensions; possibilities of resolution of regional conflicts; possibilities of reductions in armaments and the consequent savings of resources; possibilities of increased reliance on multilateral institutions; possibilities of serious global attention to the environment, to sustainable development, and to amelioration of the debt crisis. 1988 also brought a new sense of creativity and boldness in international leadership.

The whole decade of the 1980s brought new possibilities for improving the condition of children. Might not 1989 and the decade of the 1990s see the possibilities for children opening the door toward realizing the even greater possibilities for the world at-large?