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1985 session

FOR INFORMATION

Statement by Mr. V. Tarzie Vittachi
Deputy Executive Director (External Relations)
at the opening of the 1985 session, New York, 15 April

During the period of review of the current session of the Executive Board some important developments have been initiated in the area of External Relations. I suggest they are important not because they are significant in themselves but because they are interwoven in the warp and woof of UNICEF's programme priorities and have thereby invigorated the acceleration of activities in child survival and development.

The entire strategy of the Child Survival and Development Revolution to which the Executive Director has referred, rests on the principle of empowerment - enabling parents to assume the responsibility of taking more informed care of the health and well being of their own children. To put it simply, it means that information must be communicated to parents in a credible and understandable way so that they realise the meaning and importance of immunisation as a means of protecting their children against some infectious diseases; of preventing debilitation and death from diarrhoeal dehydration; of resisting the siren songs of advertisers of artificial infant formulae and breast-feeding children for as long as possible; of giving the four-month-old baby solid food to supplement mother's milk; of giving adequate food to pregnant and lactating mothers for the sake of the health of both mother and child; of observing and noting signs of deteriorating health; and of simple but often neglected matters such as washing hands before touching food and of keeping the home environment clean. None of these health lessons is complicated and they are inherent in all cultures but, unfortunately, the lack of even rudimentary knowledge of relatively recent technologies, such as vaccines, the pervasive reliance on hospitals and dispensary systems as the exclusive centres of health when they are quite obviously centres of sickness, and the steady abandonment of faith in the efficacy of traditional health care which was available in every rural community in favour of the promise of the magic bullets of antibiotics and injectibles offered by modern medicine, have cumulatively created a damaging dependency on the magician in the white coat and his magic bullet and a pattern of deleterious health practices, attitudes and habits.

This is why community health care structures were tardy in putting down roots and immunisation levels did not exceed an average of 20% across the developing world and until this past year the target of 1990 for universal immunisation was a mirage impossible to reach. The reality is that many parents are unable to understand why they should allow an infectious disease to be put into the body of a healthy child - a perfectly logical question from someone who has not been credibly and intelligibly informed that vaccines play Nature's game of infecting mildly to harden resistance to disease. It was the sort of problem Louis Pasteur faced in his day, a century ago. The mother is loath to take her child in for second and third shots because the child had a fever on the night of the first vaccination and she had no sleep at all but had to do her household chores as well as help out in the field the next day.

These are illustrations of the reasons which have led us to conclude that the willingness of parents to change their attitudes and habitual practices had to be stimulated and heightened by communicating useful, relevant and credible information and that such programme communication is the cutting edge of programmes and not merely a support function as the conventional lexicon had it.

In our collegial meetings and dialogues among UNICEF staff, we now refer to this as the Demand Approach to development as distinct from, but not opposed to, the familiar supply approach to development - the supply of plans, technical assistance, equipment, funds, and so on - a strategy - if indeed it was ever conceived deliberately as such and did not rather seem the only logical way to deal with anything in a top-down world - which pays very small development dividends because it makes the fundamental error of regarding the recipient or beneficiary - the people - as inert though sentient objects waiting passively with hands outstretched for the manna of prosperity and health to fall from above.

The demand approach, on the other hand, seeks to remove obstacles to understanding through communication, to reveal the demand for family services, and health services for children. This demand is often only latent and needs to be made manifest. I know of no mother, however illiterate, however poor who would not wish her child to survive, to be healthy, to become educated, and grow tall in the world. But the ravages of poverty and underdevelopment have so often thwarted this wish - one, two or three children dying before they reached their first birthday in ones own family and also in the neighbouring family - that the wish is hidden, and made latent by self-tranquillizing explanations which attribute family tragedy to Fate. We in UNICEF, have realised that Fate is not Destiny. Fate is what happens to us, destiny is what could and should happen to us. And that our communications strategies must convey this good news to people, that they can empower themselves to alter their Fate by certain changes of health practices, acquiring the knowledge they need to observe their children grow or falter - and take steps accordingly. These steps if taken mount up to active and articulate demand - no longer latent. But we must be watchful that when demand is stimulated for vaccines, for fresh water, for oral rehydration therapy, for more health education, for pesticides to improve environmental sanitation, for cement for a well or a latrine - they must be readily and steadily accessible. Thus demand and supply mesh to make development a reality rather than a chimera for people.

In the past year, UNICEF has worked to sharpen the tools and forge the relationships needed to communicate the demand-generating knowledge referred to above. We have recognised the reality that UNICEF staff alone cannot carry out the communications strategy for a child survival and development revolution. We are using the means available within UNICEF - the skills of our information staff and the programme communications in the field, the outreach of our partners in the National Committees to spread the word - but in the field we ourselves alone cannot take the transforming message into the village. We have learnt that it is essential to join hands with people's associations such as Sarvodaya Shramadhana in Sri Lanka, and NAAM in Burkina-Faso, with the parish priests in Colombia, with trade unions and professional associations, with national and provincial legislations, school systems and many other avenues whose intimate understanding of the nuances of life make them infinitely more credible and convincing than any foreign expert. There are the effective media through which to communicate the information necessary to generate demand for CSDR interventions.

It is working. In Burkina-Faso, for instance, nearly 20% of the people immunized were reached by NAAM - the village people's movement - and they will also serve as the permanent community infrastructure to provide on-going services for new children born. A very new link which promises to provide a large and hitherto untapped resource for UNICEF was made by our National Committee in Italy this year with the trade unions of Milan who have pledged an hour's wages of the membership to provide about a million dollars for a water and sanitation programme in Mali. This opens the door for others in the confraternity of trade unions in Europe, America and elsewhere to join in UNICEF's work.

One of the most important strategic alliances we are developing is, of course, with the news media. More effective journalists in the electronic as well as the print media responded to UNICEF's advocacy for children than at any time in UNICEF's history. There were two reasons for this: The continuing and cumulative professional appeal of the State of the World's Children Report and the intensive contact our staff as well as the staff of the National Committees have developed with concerned journalists. The old idea that the media is uninterested in any news except the sensational remains largely true but the support our work is receiving from conscientious journalists, whose interest in reporting the processes of the silent emergency, is heartening proof that a persistent honest efforts to win them over to our cause rather than merely to seek publicity for UNICEF is worthwhile. When the substance of our work becomes evident the image holds up. A great deal more needs to be done in this area. The media as a whole still tends to report banner headline-making human tragedies only when they build up into a sensational event such as the famine in Ethiopia. Our warnings went unheeded for two years and the media took up the case only when the abcess had burst. But we would be less than fair if we did not praise the media for an unprecedentedly consistent and empathetic spell of reporting one of history's great tragedies. The crisis continues to effect children and mothers in its various forms and UNICEF is providing information support to the Office of Emergency Operation on Africa.

Another urgent need is to train and educate communicators in the substance of the accelerated child survival and development programme and we have initiated this process. Two kinds of "training" are needed: One, the substantive education of the local news media people and also official information staff about the condition of children and of the programmes designed to improve it. Thus motivated, the news media is more and more able to create a national climate of awareness, a sense of realistic hopes for reducing child suffering and child deaths, which improves the auspices for necessary social change. Such substantive training is also needed by the communicators in religious and non-governmental associations who have long played the role of conveying messages. This training will be a two way street on which demand and supply messages will travel. It is these messages which, we hope, will increasingly find their way into the information and development education programmes of our National Committees in the next years. Apropos, we are now engaged in a process of consultation with our partners to refurbish our publications so that they will support the needs of National Committees and our other strategic allies better and we hope, less expensively rather than be a substitute for the information and educational publications designed for country-specific purposes by National Committees as well as by the country representatives. In the developing world, the promise of publishing our literature in more and more local languages is moving apace. The State of the World's Children Report 1985 appeared in whole or substantial part in 31 languages.

Last year, for the first time in UNICEF history, our National Committees held a global reunion in distinction from the customary reunions of Europeans at which our partners from North America, Japan, New Zealand and Australia were present as mute observers. This is an important step forward to which we must be grateful to the chairman of the standing Group of the National Committees, Mr. Gilbert Jaeger, and for the sensitive diplomacy of some of the veterans in the family of committees.

Last year we took our first steps to establishing new committees in Hong Kong and Singapore. In the exploratory work, we sought and received the assistance of Sir Bernard Ledwige, the distinguished head of our United Kingdom National Committee. We had also begun to place committee staff in UNICEF offices to gain direct experience of programmes and also lend a hand when needed.

The transition of the Geneva Office from a general purpose regional office or branch, into an external relations headquarters office primarily responsible for working with National Committees, continued last year. The decision to consolidate supply functions in Copenhagen and rationalise other functions, retirements and transfers of familiar staff members carried out according to managerial exigencies, gave rise last year to some apprehension among some national committees that Geneva was being short-changed. We ask for patience and trust that despite the constraints imposed by budget considerations and the principle of no growth of staff at headquarters that we have been enjoined to observe, Geneva will be well staffed to serve the needs of committees and the private organisations who work with us in Europe. By the end of the summer all vacancies will be filled and, by taking recourse to the considerate offer of some committees to outpost their staffers temporarily in Geneva, the staffing situation will be improved.

During the year a plan for increasing our resources from the private sector was designed between the Programme Funding Office, the Greeting Card Operation and Geneva Headquarters. These ideas, only recently formulated, will be discussed in consultations with National Committees.

The report of progress in plans and actions to restructure and improve the marketing of greeting cards, while retaining and reinforcing the volunteer system which has been the heart and soul of the Operation will be offered by the Director of GCO later in this session.

Finally, Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Executive Board, allow me to sketch in broad outline the plans we are making for the commemoration of UNICEF's 40th Anniversary, 1986.

An information paper on the History Project has been made available by Mr. Jack Charnow, the Project Director, himself an embodiment of UNICEF's history, from 11 December 1946 when UNICEF was founded. The products of the past 30 months' work on the history will soon begin to appear. One important dimension of the history is already in place in house. This is the orderly arrangement of archival documents and their chronological and thematic indexing to provide answers to the basic question: How did UNICEF come to be what it is? It has been a massive undertaking for a small staff but an essential one. It will be the basis of the continuing history which should be undertaken when this Project winds down in 1986.

A series of monographs on geographical themes such as UNICEF in Africa, UNICEF in Asia, UNICEF in Latin America, The Beginnings in Europe, institutional subjects such as Greeting Cards, on programme themes covering UNICEF policies and programmes, and a series of interviews with veteran Board members and ex-staffers who made UNICEF what it is, are being edited for publication, beginning this summer and going into our 40th anniversary.

These are by and large for readers interested in a detailed look at the evolution of UNICEF from a charitable institutions providing emergency supplies to children of war-shattered Europe to its current phase as the world's development agency for children.

Three major publications are due for publication to a general audience in 1986. These are by three of our staff members - all women. The narrative history of UNICEF by Maggie Black. We hope to make the text available for translation so that language editions too appear in 1986. The pictorial history of UNICEF from milk agency to child survival and development agency being compiled and written by Judith Spiegelman. The UNICEF Almanac - a mammoth undertaking by Joan bel Geddes which will provide a prolific source of reference on every aspect of UNICEF - policies, programmes, people. Negotiations with publishers are now going on.

These will be the principal contributions of the History Project to the commemoration of the 40th anniversary. They promise to be worthy makers of the occasion. Another paper with an open ended list of commemorative ideas for 1986 proposed by UNICEF is being made available to members of the Executive Board whose comments and suggestions will be warmly welcomed. It has pleased us very much to find that some members have already shown enthusiastic interest in the anniversary and are considering ideas about celebrating the occasion in their countries.

We suggest that 1986 should be observed as a year-long process rather than as a single date or event. The proposals we offer are based on two principles:

One, the global programme should reflect the special characteristics of UNICEF - UNICEF's people-to-people orientation, its widely dispersed programme deployment, its partnership with governments, and above all, its human face as an institution.

Two, following Mr. Grant's penchant for not letting any occasion pass by without advancing the Child Survival and Development Revolution, the commemoration of the 40th anniversary should wherever possible further heighten people's awareness that far too many little children are dying and suffering from avoidable causes, and that our common struggle against the neglect and disease which debilitate and disable and kill children needlessly can be won if we all put our hearts and minds and determination into it - not in the year 2000, but even earlier, within a time when all of us can be held accountable. Our 40th anniversary and the way we mark it may be seen as a world-wide Children's Festival - the celebration of not only what has been done for and about children since the war and what is now being done, but also what needs to be done. The objective is to make a difference and suggest that this difference should be a universal recognition of the principle of Children's First in our political economic, social and moral undertakings.
