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Interview with Dr. Charles Egger

Conducted by Dan Jacobs at UNICEF Headquarters

on 11 October 1983

Jacobs: In 1967 to 1970, during the Nigerian/Biafran conflict, you had just become the UNICEF Deputy Executive Director for Programmes. Dr. Egger, do you recall your earliest experience with the Nigerian/Biafra situation?

Egger: Well, I think I really became involved in this emergency operation when I was sent by the Executive Director, Mr. Labouisse, to Geneva to maintain contact, and liaise with the ICRC and be available also for visits to Nigeria from Geneva, and I think it's about six or seven weeks that I stayed in Geneva in that capacity, which was at that time crucial in working out an arrangement through which UNICEF could utilize the ICRC channel to provide relief and supplies to the population, particularly to children and mothers in Biafra, who were largely in Iboland. Neither UNICEF nor ICRC had any experience in this type of emergency operation, of that magnitude, in a country which could only be reached, really, through the air, and this created extraordinary difficulties for both agencies. First, the one is a UN agency and the other one is far freer as an International Red Cross organization which is more

at liberty to take its decisions, in terms of the work, and is largely guided by the interpretation of their own mandate under the Geneva conventions, which of course had never foreseen assistance to the civilian population in an internal conflict of that magnitude. So it needed a lot of adjustments, exchanges, discussions, etc., which I was a party - sometimes feeling between the hammer and anvil, between Headquarters and the ICRC. We should not forget that really those who were responsible for starting this operation was the International Red Cross Organization, and I think rather soon followed by a number of voluntary agencies, primarily based in Europe but not necessarily having all their support from European sources, in particular, the Church organizations. They also have played a very important role, and I think we have to see UNICEF in perspective as being one of the three groups that was involved in this conflict - as one of the actors.

Jacobs: Should we go back a moment and present this chronologically, and discuss the events prior to the time you went to Geneva to liaise with the ICRC. UNICEF first began becoming involved in the effort to reach people in Biafra as well as on the Nigerian side, in November 1967, and you were receiving reports from your Regional Director in Lagos and others, that was Vedast Kyarusi, and also Hugh Clarke were writing letters during that period. It seemed as though the International Committee of the Red Cross had obtained some kind of arrangement by the end of December '67, through which UNICEF and ICRC could gain access to the children and other victims of starvation in Biafra. In January '68, you had a meeting with Mr. B. Akporode Clarke of the Nigerian Mission to the United

Nations, is that something that you attribute importance to? Do you want to correct anything I just said?

Egger: No, we felt at that time when I had taken over the functions of the Deputy Executive Director, at Headquarters, that it was important in an operation of this nature, to establish a proper contact with the official representative of that Government which was the representative of the Federal Government, who had probably not been sufficiently sought out by UNICEF in terms of contacts, exchanges, etc., and so with the head of the Africa Section, repeatedly we went to see Mr. Clark in order to place him in the overall situation, to inform him of what UNICEF had in mind and also to consult with him, so that we did establish regular exchange and discussions with the official representative of the Federal Government of Nigeria. At that time, I think the Federal Government was in rather a difficult position, the public opinion in both Europe and America was far more on the side of what they considered to be the rebels in Biafra, and he was therefore quite amenable and grateful for this opportunity that we took the trouble to seek his views - his advice - and to inform him of what UNICEF had in mind. This led then to the famous letter which he wrote where for the first time the Federal Government gave implicit agreement to UNICEF to operate on both sides within the framework of our mandate, and concentrating on children. This exchange later on revealed to be an extremely important statement that he had made which arose out of a series of contacts that we had had with him, I think this was probably something that should have been done in any circumstances, but it proved to be a rather vital as events showed subsequently.

Jacobs: Did you have the understanding from your meetings with Mr. Clark and the letter he subsequently wrote that UNICEF and ICRC had some sort of arrangement with the Federal Military Government of Nigeria to gain access to the people in what they called the Eastern Region, which was Biafra?

Egger: Frankly, I think so, though even after having read through all this material, it is very difficult to recollect details of this, but I felt that there was this kind of understanding.

Jacobs: Then we do come on to the time when you and Mr. Labouisse were in Geneva. I presume you were there for EcoSoc in the beginning of July. I think you and he had serious meetings with agencies discussing what might be done in the Nigerian/Biafra situation. Did you happen to be present with him when the Secretary General met with representatives of the UN agencies, around July 8, '68? Can you recall that or was that too long ago?

Egger: I think so, but I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to remember details of this.

Jacobs: Let's go on, then, to your liaison with the International Committee of the Red Cross, because that period of July '68 was a very important time. In general terms, what would you say was happening with you, with UNICEF and the Red Cross during that time when you were trying to find some way to get the beginning of relief organized?

Egger: My first recollection is that the ICRC was not sufficiently geared to handle an operation of that nature. They had their usual range of very good Delegates trained in the normal International Red Cross work, negotiations, etc., and they had got a staff. They did not have people - nor had we, by the way - that had had operational experience, in terms of transport, logistics, the manpower requirement for such a very huge operation. And to get the ICRC to agree, I think they needed to brace themselves for such a large-scale operation, took quite a bit of doing. They were very sensitive, and they are very proud of their independence, and they didn't like at all the interference of the UN.

The second thing was that UNICEF was trying, by all means, to find a way of access to the country, by trying to discuss the "land bridge", reinforcing an air-lift, using helicopters and things like that. There was a great pressure from Headquarters, reflecting the increasing concern of public opinion, voluntary agencies, and all, that the UN agencies and the ICRC should be far more active and take initiative, explore ways in order to increase the amount of aid that should have been provided to Biafra. This, inevitably, involved very delicate negotiations, both with the Federal Government and with the Biafra authorities, which went on for months and months, as you know from the history, and really only led to stepping up of the airlift, first by day and then by night, to try to utilize this with the tacit understanding of the Federal Government. But this tacit understanding was not always observed by the field commanders, and I think, as you know there have been a number of interventions, interruptions and losses. What struck me

also, is the negotiating style of ICRC both in terms of the speed and the appraisal of the reality of the situation, operational leads, etc. It was very different from the one that UNICEF really did develop. Therefore it was not always easy to bring these onto to a common denominator; fortunately this led to certain changes within ICRC and to the ICRC widening the source of recruitment by getting some people with experience of army military operations, transport, fleet operations, and things like that. But it had to go through a period of realization and ripening, which meant that of course very valuable time was lost. UNICEF at the beginning, agreed to be a loyal partner of ICRC, although impatient often, and with considerable discussions between the two organizations, one took the moment that if the other organizations that were able to develop an air lift - mainly the Church organizations that grouped together - UNICEF decided also to support them, which the ICRC didn't like, but which I think, retroactively, was the right decision because I think it allowed us to move greater quantities with two organizations that inevitably were vying for some influence and place, and were quite anxious to make use of this readiness of UNICEF to provide far larger resources and supplies than they could have mobilized themselves. This was an important element, so these are some of the experiences that I remember during that summer, where the whole operation had to be planned, worked out, agreed among two organizations that were very different by their nature, personalities, outlook, the general terms that were guiding them.

Jacobs: During that time you were in Geneva liaising with the ICRC, were you directly involved in beginning to help organize the UNICEF logistic operation through UNIPAC in Copenhagen or was that outside your responsibilities.

Egger: I probably had something to do with it, but I don't remember to what extent.

Jacobs: You don't recall that? There was no way to get things in at that time so it's probably not important. Do you recall meeting with Ambassador Lindt or were you principally dealing with Roger Gallopin of the Red Cross and other top personnel of the ICRC?

Egger: Yes, I met with all of them, we met regularly at different levels with Gallopin and with the President Gonard, the retired Corp and Commander, and then Ambassador Lindt who has been a friend of mine ever since we worked together in the war. He was in the internal army information service, which was a very important psychological effort that was made in Switzerland to provide correct and objective information on the war situation and the attitudes of the various powers. I'd been in touch with him ever since through his diplomatic career and then his career there as High Commissioner of the ICRC.

Jacobs: While you were there in Geneva, Mr. Labouisse went to Lagos and spent about three and a half weeks, and I think during that time you and Mr. Heyward talked probably every day, perhaps a number of times a day, but you had some difficulties communicating with

Executive Director in Lagos, through open telephone lines or anything like that. Do you recall that as being any kind of particular problem for UNICEF in proceeding at that time in making decisions?

Egger: Labouisse was a man who wanted to be sure about his facts and about his appraisal of the situation, and he took some time to establish his contacts with them, because the federal government looked with some suspicion as to his mission. He also did something which I felt was extraordinary important, which we had very much neglected. He undertook a visit into the battle areas of the emergency, areas on the Federal Government's side, because we had an unbalanced approach. We were talking always about the ??, that there were quite considerable problems relating to children also with the Federal Governments' side, and this helped to re-establish a certain equilibrium. Labouisse, only later in his mission, as far as I recollect, reported back, and with the impatience shown by headquarters, inevitably this tiller, an organization with three poles of influence, New York, Geneva, and particularly Lagos, had come to an understanding and sorted out their different views, it took some time. But I would have expected this as a normal thing, and when it was possible to meet with Mr. Labouisse in Geneva fairly rapidly, there was agreement as to what line to take, and in these matters it was quite clear what Labouisse wanted to do.

Jacobs: I take it, from what you just said, that you were back in Geneva, (I think you may have taken a bit of vacation at that time as you'd intended to do) you were back in Geneva when Mr. Labouisse arrived

from Nigeria and Mr. Heyward flew in from New York. Is it correct that the three of you participated in the meetings with the Red Cross Societies and the churches, and finally the decision that the ICRC had to make as to whether it was going to begin an air-lift, even though it was not receiving the authorization that was needed? Do you recall anything about those meetings?

Egger: Yes, I remember when Ambassador Lindt, at a press conference, did announce that ICRC was going to support an air lift, and that UNICEF had indicated the willingness to provide both the supplies and possibly the aircraft. In the final analysis, I think what we did was to man the helicopter service that helped to provide the supplies from Lagos airport to the areas under the responsibility of the Federal Government that were emergency areas, and our helicopters were never utilized to cross a frontline. The effect of it was more psychological than others, because I think the quantities that they actually moved and the difficulties that one had with the private operators of the helicopter service, and the difficulties with management that they had - staff, spare parts, maintenance, normal contacts with the Nigerian authority, was such that I don't think that in terms of quantities they added a great deal, but I think that they acted as a spur to explore other channels, and I think the effect was primarily psychological.

Jacobs: Right after the helicopters began operating, you were in Nigeria, I believe? You might not recall the exact meeting, but I think you were there in early October '68, and perhaps you and Poul Larson of

the Lagos office and other had meetings with people like Ed Marks, who'd gone there from the United States Agency for International Development,;the US Assistant Secretary of State, for African Affairs, Joe Palmer was there. Do you remember anything of that period just after the air lifts had begun?

Egger: I remember that I met them, and one of the problems-that we had is that the UNICEF staff who were in Lagos, could not possibly conceive what the situation looked like on the other side, and we had constantly to try to advise them to react to what was inevitably somewhat a one-sided position that our Lagos office took. This was inevitable, because I think they'd only seen that particular aspect during the long periods, and had never come out during the critical period, out of Lagos, and were exposed to the tremendous interest that was taken in Europe and America for the conflict, as such, and in particular for the Biafra side. Not to mention, them realising what was going on on the other side. This was a really difficult psychological situation that I think had to be overcome with understanding and firmness, and I remember both Kyarnzi - who, of course, was a Tanzanian, was most unsuitably placed - and it's not his fault - but as Tanzania was one of the governments which recognized Biafra he was practically, almost declared persona non grata, and he had to be. Clark was a good Number Two.

Jacobs: That was Hugh Clark, and he was from Sierra Leone.

Egger: Yes, I think he was far more balanced, and they accepted him far more easily, but Larson, when he came, really took, from the very

beginning, the Federal Government's side, and he was actually a part of the problem which we had to deal with.

Jacobs: In what way, since obviously that would have made him more acceptable than the Nigerian government?

Egger: Well, it may have been more acceptable to the Nigerian government, but as UNICEF was pursuing a much more broader mandate, trying to work on both sides, he was always the first one the Nigerians got hold of when there was a press release, or some information about what UNICEF was doing on the other side, or when he was asked to communicate certain matters to the Federal Government. So Larson simply did not have enough of a perspective of the overall situation, and proved to be rather difficult to deal with, quite frankly, internally. We, in fact, had to change him at a later stage. He couldn't understand the type of policy UNICEF was pursuing and responding to pressures, interests of National Committees, Governments, public media etc. That was one of the problems, I think what we were able to do during these meetings was to develop an operation on the Federal Government side. As I mentioned, Labouisse was really the first one who went out to see what was happening in the area where the civil war had stagnated for some time but where ?? had been taken on by the Federal Government, or were affected by the implications of the war that led them to an equally important effort being developed on that side. I think this was an absolutely fundamental position to allow UNICEF to have a more balanced approach to this whole problem.

Jacobs: Do you feel that throughout this entire period - '68, '69 and the post war period that UNICEF had good offices with the Nigerian Government? Is there any time when it suffered any problems with the Federal Military Government of Nigeria, not even comparable to the International Committee of the Red Cross? I'm trying to draw you out on this because I don't recall too much.

Egger: Well, the main discussion partner that the Federal Government sought out was really ICRC, but I think we were not immune to this, and there were periods of tension lack a comprehension of intentional or other mistakes, of accidents de parrage which attracted their ire. The presence of Harry Labouisse with his conciliatory nature and his sincerity and goodwill and firmness, I think helped a lot to overcome that, I think they really liked him, because he was not trying to domineer, he was trying to be open-minded and be diplomatic, and they knew that he had also taken a great interest in the children on their side. That helped UNICEF a lot. I think this was the result of his prolonged stay down there.

Jacobs: I'm not sure how much you were directly involved in 1969. We might just touch on the period of time when providing relief became extremely difficult after the International Committee of the Red Cross had one of its planes shot down, and it was told in effect by the Nigerian government to give up its role as coordinator of relief. Does this revive any recollections in your mind as to what problems UNICEF was encountering during that last half of '69, or what you felt should have been done? You may not have been directly involved.

Egger: Well, I'm not sure I can add a lot to it, but probably I was involved to a certain extent, but Mr. Heyward and Mr. Labouisse took an extraordinary interest in this problem. I think I felt it would perhaps be a better divisional responsibility if I were to turn attention to looking after the other long-term interests in UNICEF, outside of the Nigerian conflict, and help to represent Headquarters in what was at that time a continuous effort of devolution of decentralization of new approaches, etc. But I think it may very well be that I was only indirectly or occasionally involved in the Nigerian conflict, in order to give attention to the ordinary running of the programme work of UNICEF the world over.

Jacobs: Would you say that brings us then to the post-war period of reconstruction, when you once again did oversee - I believe you sent Sasha Bacic out there to head the reconstruction of Nigeria, and you yourself travelled there to observe the reconstruction, for about six months of the post-war period. Do you want to talk about that?

Egger: I think this was a rather important period, in a sense that to everybody's surprise the federal government proved to be, after an initial reaction of some of the troop commanders, I think far more understanding and magnanimous towards the Ibo population, and entirely agreed with our efforts then to support a rather ambitious rehabilitation and reconstruction effort and the fact that then on both sides of the conflict. I think that's where UNICEF, thanks to the fact that it had by and large been able to maintain its image of humanitarian agency, working with both sides of the conflict and

trying to establish a proper relationship with the respective government, was far more in a favourable position to take part in such a rehabilitation effort. We utilized, if I'm not mistaken, some of the funds that had been provided during the emergency period; we asked for more funds and under Sasha Basic's direction, a rather imaginative reconstruction effort started, not only in a more immediate aspect such as school feeding, etc., but we helped to reconstruct schools; we went into physical rehabilitation that affected both schools and health centres; we helped in the retraining of staff, printing of school books, providing school education material. There was a great thirst to get back to a normal way of life, and education is one of the most important things, because there was not enough - or hardly any - education during the years of the war, the Ibos being by far the most lively and the most intelligent component, there was a real craving to get back into education. I think we can say that while we're naturally also interested in continuing to assist with the improvement of the nutritional situation of children, which did improve very rapidly, thanks to a new method which had been devised, of a protein calorie mixture, K-Mix 2 - thanks to a determined effort to involve the mothers in educational approach. I think that UNICEF put most of its emphasis onto the reconstruction of services, health and education, to - I'm not sure to what extent but - a little bit on water supply and social welfare services. That really spear headed a wide movement that was taken on by other agencies and UNICEF has been really on the forefront, working very closely with the rehabilitation and became a major partner in this effort, where UNICEF showed its efficiency. I think it's largely due, to a great

deal, to Sasha Bacic, who saw to it to it that they utilized our funds locally to the purchase of woods, making contractual arrangements with artisans, with other contractors to build schools, and I remember having been visiting schools that went up and were rebuilt with a speed and efficiency as only the Ibo are capable of doing if they are really interested in doing so.

I think this was a very fine effort of UNICEF and I think it was the last major effort we did make in Nigeria. It proved afterwards to be far more difficult to get into more long-term programmes. But both in terms of developing the structures of school buildings, health centres, etc. as well as arranging of short-term training of staff with the people that were still there, we were most useful, really, in helping to make the material aid available and in having some short-term consultants that could assist in the review of the curricula and things like that. But the major effort was undertaken by the Nigerians themselves.

Jacobs: Did UNICEF learn from this experience in emergency relief and reconstruction things later applied in other emergencies, or now in retrospect, do you have any comments to say what might have been learned that we didn't learn?

Egger: One of the most important political lessons which we've learned is simply a rededication of a UNICEF firm line of approach is that in a conflict - and this has always been UNICEF's objective - to work on both sides of a conflict, and to get this principle accepted and endorsed by the parties concerned, which was not always very easy,

but to have this principle confirmed and re-underlined by its governing body. I think that in the long run has won us far greater respect and support and sympathy than anything else. We were, perhaps, at the beginning of the Nigerian conflict, tending to emphasise one side more than the other but this was sort of re-established, and I think that certainly this was one of the lessons we have learned. The second, which we have not sufficiently learned about is that any participation in such a logistic does require trained people that can think in terms of translating needs in the operational terms, and the operational terms to break it down not only in how many goods have to be transported by whatever means, but in making sure that if you have a limited tonnage, to determine quite clearly what has priority in a given situation and can make the best possible contribution. We learnt that in a dire and more difficult way, and I don't think we have sufficiently applied this at a later stage, if I compare it with what we were doing ten years later in a similar conflict, namely in Kampuchea.

One lesson we certainly have learned is that in a relief situation in a country that has large-scale natural resources, that has people, is far easier to spend and it makes a lot more sense to spend your money locally, local procurement making local contractual arrangements, and only supplementing through imported goods, what is needed. This is a lesson that has certainly been learned, and is being applied, and it has made UNICEF far more suited than other agencies because we learned to make use of the possibilities that existed in the countries themselves; that was

certainly a big lesson. The third lesson is that the type of people that are required for a long-term operation, to negotiate plans, to make studies, take your time to work out the details and to take care of all the susceptibilities to get the thing together, are not necessarily the people that can manage an emergency operation. You have to realise that and without being discriminate or harsh you have to make decisions of changing people and getting those on board that have that capability and background, and they may not necessarily be always in the organization, you have to look outside. You have to mobilize people to that effect. This is something that certainly UNICEF gradually did develop, had to do, and it is a lesson that, I think, by and large has been maintained and is being applied elsewhere.

The fourth one is that you can do far more with making use of the local people. I think what has not sufficiently come out is the effort that the Biafrans themselves did in organizing the preventive health services, they were the pioneers in really dealing with kwashiorkor cases, in defining ways in utilizing both locally - palm oil and things like that - together with imported goods to make these kwashiorkor clinics go through the various stages, depending on the degree of the malnutrition and involving volunteers, auxiliaries, the mothers. I think there, there's a tremendous amount that we have learned or could have learned, and one must give credit to the Biafrans for what they have done, both on the public health side and in dealing in both curative and preventive ways with the nutrition problem that they were facing among the vulnerable groups. You remember discussions with the

famous Biafran or Ibo nutritionist who came out. Aaron Ifekwunigwe, I'll remember always the first time we saw him and we realized what they had done, that if there was any success it was not just in relief, it was in the imaginations and resourcefulness and the ability of these local people to organize - and I hope that this will be brought out in the history in the proper way.

Jacobs: Any other lessons that you may have learned out of the Nigerian/Biafran experience?

Egger: I would list that it is certainly during that period that we came to realise how important it was, not only to governments, of course, in the conflict itself, with those that we were hoping to contact and to provide resources, but also with non-governmental organizations, with the media, with people in the public eye. There was such an interest, such initiatives and good will, and sometimes also, a lot of personal things that went with it, but UNICEF had to learn, and I think did adjust to it, to see that there was another dimension of people that we had to work with these were the NGO's, church groups, Red Cross Societies, children's welfare organizations, etc., I think this is a lesson UNICEF has learned and has continued to apply. This is a supporting group that has a tremendous influence on public opinion and on governments; we would never have had those resources if we had not entered into some kind of arrangement where we were seen as a partner by them, as a constructive partner that has helped them and therefore they were willing to say so publicly, and I think have increasingly said so after having been critical at one stage. We've made similar experiences ten years later in Indo-China. And

thirdly, another element that I think we've learned, is when you raise funds you have to raise funds for a specific purpose, you have to clearly state what you have in mind with the resources that you want in terms of general objectives, quantifications, and that there is a clear understanding how these funds are to be utilized, and that you can account for it. That also needed continuous information to governments, and it's there where UNICEF started more repeated Board sessions, or round letters, or special meetings, to enter into far closer relationships with donors than we would normally have done. That proved to be a tremendous advantage of UNICEF, and I think it's a lesson that we applied later in other situations like Kampuchea. But I think the Nigeria period, through which we went through, which led us - which almost forced us to that - has been a pacemaker, and has been most valuable, I think, in the long run in order to mould an image of UNICEF as an active concern and responsive organization in spite of all the fumbling, the difficulties, the sometimes disagreements, etc. but UNICEF came out as an organization, showed concern, was willing to learn and apply lessons, or learn from mistakes and apply them in improving and changing its approaches to people in order to meet the role that we have come to accept.

Jacobs: Thank you very much.

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