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Chronicling UNICEF's Recent Past

Editor's note: Kul Gautam has kindly allowed Staff News to publish these excerpts from his longer review of *Children First: The Story of UNICEF, Past and Present*, by Maggie Black.

Children First is a well written, fascinating account of the work of UNICEF that could serve as antidote to sceptics questioning the relevance and effectiveness of the UN system. Maggie Black has done a fine job of chronicling the history of UNICEF in the years 1980-1995.

The author's excellent first hand knowledge of UNICEF and access to many key actors who are part of the story facilitated the writing of *Children First*. But paradoxically, these also seem to have created some difficulty. The difficulty arises from three factors: a) the author's personal involvement in certain aspects of UNICEF's work, which makes it harder for her to be completely objective; b) her firsthand interaction with some of the key players of the period, and the difficult work of balancing their views and perspectives; and c) the tricky task of writing an objective history of an organization without over-glorifying or underestimating the contribution of an extraordinarily dynamic and visionary leader, Jim Grant, who shaped and dominated that history.

In the Preface, the author assures us that "a considerable effort has been made to avoid the trap of projecting UNICEF as springing newly formed into existence at the advent of Grant." In that effort she has been successful. However, in her effort to avoid falling into that trap, she has gone overboard and misjudged Grant's commitment and contribution to certain broader aspects of development and concerns beyond child survival.

Ms. Black has identified sections of the book that Grant would have wanted to discuss with her -- over which he might have pleaded an alternative case. Based on her experience in dealing with Grant, she states that "he would have put his point of view to me, but never forced it." What might have been those points of view that Jim Grant would have wished to put forward? The following is an attempt to present what might have been his side of the story.

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Children First portrays Grant's initial lack of excitement about the Convention on the Rights of the Child, water and sanitation, urban basic services, women in development and other issues as a failure to appreciate their importance. Even worse, there is a not-so-subtle insinuation that Grant was interested in these subjects only to the extent that they served his single-minded pursuit of the child survival agenda, or as a sop to the Executive Board. The book portrays it as a dramatic conversion on Grant's part, when he later becomes apparently more committed to these issues. But the reality, as experienced by Grant's closest collaborators, was often quite different from what Black reports.

For example, although he is portrayed as being single-minded about child survival or immunization, and narrowly focused on 'selective', rather than comprehensive, primary health care, Jim Grant's development interests were in fact broad, multi-faceted and holistic. There was hardly any aspect of development that he was not interested in or knowledgeable about. However, Grant had a very keen sense of strategy and strategic priorities. He knew that the best was often the enemy of the good, that the most desirable was not always the most doable. He was convinced that the example of doing something worthwhile on as large a scale as possible, was far more powerful for advocacy purposes than doing many miscellaneous good things on a small scale. Grant's initial lack of support for many of these issues was therefore not a sign of his lack of interest in them, but a deliberate strategic choice, based on his analysis of the prospects of 'going to scale' at that particular time. Black, in fact, acknowledges this when she states that child survival was "selected not as an abandonment of the wider issues, but as a symptom of them all and because it was more doable, comprehensible and politically appealing," and that "it was Grant's intention that this would provide a springboard for wider action across the whole human development agenda."

In spite of this, a reader without first hand knowledge, reading the chapters on nutrition, water and sanitation, basic education, child rights and the gender dimension, is likely to get the impression that UNICEF and Grant were rather lukewarm supporters of initiatives in these areas. This seems partly a result of the author's rather journalistic (as opposed to historical) writing style, which makes the book more readable and colourful, but sometimes sacrifices more sober, balanced and factual analysis. Part of the baggage that the author brought to writing this book was the various assignments she had personally undertaken in recent years for UNICEF. Besides her earlier book, *The Children and the Nations*, Black's other major writings for UNICEF have dealt with street and working children, children of urban slums, CEDC, hand-pumps, health and sanitation - precisely the areas in which she found UNICEF under Grant lacking in commitment.

Grant did not push immunization or GOBI-FFF because he believed these were necessarily the most important actions. He believed these interventions were especially suited for large scale replication using the communications, mobilization and organizational capacity increasingly found in all parts of developing countries. He believed that if there was demonstrable success in these areas, similar techniques could be used to promote other aspects of development. These actions were thus seen as important in their own right, and potentially as a kind of Trojan Horse for

promoting primary health care, which was in turn another Trojan Horse for broader human development.

Among the areas Black cites as having received Grant's inadequate or delayed attention is basic education. It is worthwhile noting that Jim Grant often confided to close colleagues that education was far more important than health for long term development. He was always on the lookout for good examples of education programmes that could be taken to scale. He often agonized about the fact that there were not many replicable examples of low cost, high impact actions in this area. But when he saw the moment as ripe for action, he took the leadership in convening the Jomtien Conference on Education for All and passionately pursued its follow-up.

Although UNICEF staff were proud to be part of an organization recognized to be dynamic and effective -- and every staff member found a personal role in the child survival and development revolution -- there was an undercurrent of disaffection among some staff who felt that issues of their primary concern were perhaps secondary to Grant. The fact that this was due to a deliberate strategic choice not wanting to invest huge capital on issues that, though important, were not quite ripe for large scale dissemination -- provided little consolation to them. The multi-donor evaluation of UNICEF in 1992 detected some of this, the 1994 Booz-Allen study uncovered a lot of it, and not surprisingly, several chapters of *Children First* give vent to it.

Notwithstanding this, Jim Grant was always on the lookout for low cost/high impact actions in all of the areas in which Black finds his commitment deficient. He came back from many a field visit with accounts of 'doable' actions in precisely these areas that were being pioneered in various countries. Often panels in the annual *The State of the World's Children* report chronicled such success stories. Whenever Grant addressed staff working in these areas he showed his genuine interest, usually combined with a challenge that they needed to come up with more doable approaches that could be taken to scale.

Some would argue that Grant's obsession about going to scale was not always justified. An extension of this argument questions the wisdom of pursuing ambitious targets such as universal child immunization in the 1980s and the goals adopted by the World Summit for Children in 1990. Maggie Black provides a good analysis of this when she contrasts the fundamental philosophical differences between 'basic services' and 'child survival' approaches.

Had UNICEF continued along the path of basic services in the 1980s, it certainly would have made some valuable contributions to development and the well-being of children. UNICEF could have also chosen to give equal attention to issues such as CEDC, gender related (Chronicling, continued) issues, community development, the environment, human rights, and so forth. This approach could have responded to the concerns of a larger number of constituencies clamouring for UNICEF's attention. But it is doubtful that the tremendous gains made in child survival and development in the 1980s and early 1990s would have been made, had UNICEF's energies and resources been dissipated in too broad a theatre of action.

Of the various critiques of his regime in the book, nothing would have disappointed Grant more than the portrayal of his position on family planning and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. On family planning, Black says that Grant "ducked the issue entirely," and that over the decade of the 1980s, "family planning was barely mentioned in Jim Grant's annual *State of the World's Children*." Both these statements are utterly untrue; every single edition of *The State of the World's Children* since 1983 has contained a discussion of family planning and child spacing. UNICEF's discussions of demographic transition and of the relationship between child survival and population growth are treated in the book with a negative and dismissive tone that does disservice to a very profound issue of policy and strategy.

Many activists in the family planning movement have indeed been disappointed with UNICEF because it has not used its communication and mobilization capacity for the distribution of contraceptives. To those who equate family planning with contraceptives, this is tantamount to UNICEF's opposition to family planning. But for those who objectively examine the many other determinants of fertility and a holistic approach to population policy, as recognized by the Cairo Population Conference, UNICEF's contribution to family planning is not something to sneer about. Personally, Jim Grant and virtually all of his closest collaborators were very supportive of a broad range of family planning methods, including contraceptives. However, it was his considered judgement that the need to maintain a 'grand alliance' for children would be better served by UNICEF not being involved in supplying contraceptives. UNICEF did, however, collaborate with and complement the work of UNFPA and others that did provide contraceptives.

Was this some kind of duplicity or timidity on Grant's and UNICEF's part? Not really. This was the only position that enjoyed a tenuous consensus in the Executive Board. It was also a position that was supported by Grant's predecessor, and is now being followed by his successor. It is quite conceivable, for example, that if Nafis Sadik or Maggie Catley-Carlson had been the Executive Director of UNICEF, they would have followed exactly the approach taken by Grant (and now Bellamy). Had Grant been the head of UNFPA or the Population Council, he would have happily followed policies that guide the work of those organizations. There are certain institutional imperatives that all sensible leaders follow, sometimes against their own private convictions. Some of these involve a close judgement call that may not be popular with important constituencies. This was the case with Grant's and UNICEF's approach to family planning.

On the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the book presents, for the most part, an excellent and factually correct analysis of UNICEF's position in the early 1980s. That the NGO community was primarily interested in the protection rights against child abuse and exploitation, whereas UNICEF's primary interest had been on the right to health and education, or child survival and development, did create some inconsistency in the priorities for the Convention. It was UNICEF's advocacy that led to the inclusion of strong provisions on health, education and other development rights. And it was the success of the child survival effort on the ground all across developing countries that gave credibility and legitimacy to UNICEF's advocacy for inclusion of survival and development rights. Later, when the Convention was finally

<http://www.intranet.unicef.org/IRM/Staff.nsf/9e65f7589e32d73a852566ab007b6...> 05-Mar-2003

adopted, its ratification was accelerated in an unprecedented manner by UNICEF's advocacy both at the grass roots and at the highest levels of political leadership, including at the World Summit for Children.

Children First seems to lament that Grant's and UNICEF's delayed support of the Convention perhaps led to missed opportunities for its earlier adoption and ratification. That may indeed be so. However, had the Convention been rushed to finalization earlier, it would probably have been more of a traditional human rights convention primarily focused on civil and political rights, with considerably weaker provisions of social and economic rights. Supporters of the Convention would today argue that one of its great strengths is that it has helped elevate what were once regarded as basic *needs* to fundamental *rights* of children. It is doubtful that Grant or UNICEF would have succeeded in persuading the international community to include such strong provisions without a demonstrable track record of achievements in child survival and development - and that was not there in the early 1980s. Once again, Grant's sense of timing was propitious; lamenting his delayed support to the Convention misses this important strategic consideration.

Grant saw and tirelessly promoted the Convention as the Magna Carta and Bill of Rights for children. His last public speech was an address to the UN General Assembly, making an impassioned case for child rights as a central moral imperative of our times. His last official act from his deathbed was a plea to the US President to sign the Convention. He viewed the goals and strategies for children that he had persuaded the World Summit for Children to adopt as the first installment towards keeping the full promise of the Convention. The Convention and the Summit follow-up were therefore complementary, one giving powerful leverage to the other.

Since Grant's death, some have argued that the visions of the Summit and the Convention are somehow contradictory; that a rights orientation somehow is incompatible with goals and needs-based approaches. It is said that the goals-oriented approach of the Grant era needs to be supplanted with a rights-oriented approach. Two lines of reasoning are invoked in this discussion. The first is that the Convention requires *universal* adherence; therefore acceptance of any goal that is less than 100 per cent is antithetical to the spirit of the Convention. This 'all or nothing' approach specifically ignores the explicit acceptance in Article 4 of countries pursuing the economic, social and cultural rights "to the maximum extent of their available resources" and in Article 28 of "achieving this [education] right progressively." A second line of reasoning argues that all rights of all children in all countries at all times are equally sacrosanct; therefore goals that try to prioritize some rights over others are incompatible with the spirit of the Convention. This fundamentalist line, too, seems to ignore that some rights are prerequisite to other rights and that sequential pursuit of certain rights does not necessarily diminish the sanctity of the Convention. For example, the right to secondary education would seem to be meaningless if opportunities for primary education are not first guaranteed. Similarly, when public policy choices need to be made, it ought to be perfectly permissible under the Convention to consider the right to survival and basic health care for the neediest children in the poorest communities more 'sacrosanct' than, say, the right to leisure and entertainment for children of well-to-do families.

Priority setting is an essential part of public policy. Using goals and targets to first reach the neediest children, then create momentum to reach many more, would seem to be a sensible strategy to accelerate the full implementation of the Convention, not an impediment to it.

Children First caught the beginning of this goals/needs 'versus' rights debate that has intensified and sometimes polarized UNICEF since Grant's death. After meandering through the various pros and cons of this debate, the book comes to the sensible conclusion that, "Whatever have been the dichotomies of the past, the framework of needs and the framework of rights now seem destined to mesh." Though somewhat premature in the context of the still continuing debate in UNICEF, this is a conclusion worth arriving at if in the next decade UNICEF is to match and hopefully, exceed, its achievements of the past decade.

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