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Interview with Maxwell Finger*
Conducted by S.Moe at BUNCHE INSTITUTE
on 16 January 1985

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This is Sherry Moe, Consultant to the UNICEF History Project, I am having the honour and pleasure of interviewing Mr. Maxwell Finger, who is currently the Director of the Ralph Bunche Institute. Max and I go back to the late '40's early '50's when he was Commercial Attaché in the Paris Embassy and I was a junior economist in the Marshall Plan Mission to France. We've maintained our friendship on and off ever since and he will be speaking particularly with regard to his experience with the US Mission to the UN in 1956-1971, the last five years as Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative. I've suggested to Max that we focus the interview around the usual three basic questions — namely UNICEF as an organization, UNICEF in relation to the UN system and UNICEF's work in relation to the general objectives of development — that is the importance of the human factor, but he need not confine himself to that straitjacket. He has, I think, some interesting things to say about the origin of UNICEF and its place in the UN system in relation to other organizations. Max the floor is yours.

Finger: Well I was, at the time UNICEF was established, involved in foreign service posts in Europe, but I became involved with UNICEF in 1956. I was then greatly impressed by the quality of the UNICEF administration in terms of efficiency and its ability to project its activities before the general public in a way that was appealing and made sense. One of the things that stand out most in my mind was in 1961 when a new representative to the Economic and Social Council came aboard, one Phillip Klutznick, who was both a close friend of Adlai Stevenson, then the Permanent Representative, and an extremely successful businessman. I was his senior advisor. He asked the question "why do we need UNICEF"? He made the point, quite logically, by someone concerned with organization, that most of the activities UNICEF would finance or sponsor were actually carried out by the World Health Organization or the Social Affairs Bureau of the United Nations, etc. So why do you need a UNICEF? My answer, and I think this is quite relevant to your basic question, was "In the first place UNICEF is perhaps the best organized and administered unit in the whole UN system, from the standpoint of professionalism and getting the most out of the dollar contributed. Secondly, UNICEF can raise money that no other organization could raise; therefore, it is an essential ingredient in making possible these activities of WHO and the Bureau of Social Affairs and other parts of the UN system".

Moe: This is interesting. Go on if you like on how you saw us working with the rest of the UN system. As I think you know, our raison être as we saw it was that we sought the technical advice of all the organizations, the specialized agencies, which presumably had the technical advice to give and we then provided the funds to implement programmes. We always tried to cooperate with them but we felt that our particular concern with all the needs of children provided a

certain special justification for that kind of an organization, putting the needs together, seeing that they were met more or less simultaneously, since childhood is a limited period of time and if you don't get it then you don't get it all.

Finger: Well there I agree with you Sherry. But, of course, the problem of aiding mothers and children cuts across the whole spectrum of the UN system. There are two things that I believe in strongly that come into focus here. One is the importance of leadership and dedication. At that time Maurice Pate was the head of UNICEF and he was one of the most dedicated, stubborn, quiet men I've ever met. He knew exactly where he wanted to go. He would not be deterred from it. He knew how to get along with agencies like WHO or FAO or the Social Bureau or UNESCO, for that matter, covering the whole spectrum of children's needs. He could get along with them but he never lost sight of his own objectives, his own goals and in that he was a very determined man. People often underestimated him because he was quiet but I had reason to know from personal experience that it was a mistake to consider that he was easy to maneuver. He was not. He knew exactly where he wanted to go and gave a direction to UNICEF. I think highly of Maurice Pate, but also his successors, for that matter. I pick him because when I got involved with UNICEF he was the head, but I had equal admiration for Harry Labouisse and Jim Grant. All of them have been unusually dedicated individuals who knew their place in the world. They didn't need UNICEF in order to make a name for themselves; they had a name. But they demanded the most of themselves, gave everything of themselves and thus they set an example to the staff so that the latter became an unusually competent and dedicated staff in the image of the heads of UNICEF.

Moe: This ties in, I gather, with one of the basic themes we discussed at lunch in your previous book and your forthcoming addendum to it about the importance of personality in any organizational structure. Maybe you want to say a bit more on that?

Finger: Well I firmly believe in that, of course, Schumpeter has developed that with respect to commercial and industrial enterprises. I had twenty-six years in government and, by the way, eight years in private business, so I could see that side of it and I was impressed by the fact that so much depended on "who the guy" was. You could look at organization charts all you wanted to but they really didn't tell you much until you know which people had which job, which people really were concerned, dedicated and involved and which ones were simply inert in filling a job and just anxious not to get caught doing the wrong thing. That's why I think people make a big difference. I think the history of UNICEF would have been tremendously different under different leadership exactly as I feel that the history of the United States would've been tremendously different if the first president hadn't been George Washington, who set a certain standard of excellence and integrity that was expected. By contrast, the third French Republic had a first president, Andrew Grévy, (whose name could just as well have been gravy) where people simply expected corruption and they got

it. Oh, sure, there's corruption in the American system, too, but by and large we came to expect over time that presidents would be decent, well motivated people and that helped to get a lot of them to work that way.

Moe: So there's really no answer to the perennial problem in any organization—that is, geographic or functional, as distinct from the lateral multisectoral. This is always going to be a problem in any organization, in any structure, just as we have it in every government and we have it in the UN. The UN development programme is, in a way, like UNICEF in the sense that it is multisectoral as compared with the sectoral agencies, so what it comes down to is the need for both I suppose and whether it works or not it depends on the individuals concerned.

Finger: Exactly. I don't want to denigrate the importance of a reasonable structure. In bureaucracy is important to have a system that works but if I had to choose between great leadership and mediocre organization or great organization and mediocre leadership, I would take great leadership.

Moe: Maybe you'll want to say a bit more about the human factor. UNICEF likes to think it was one of the leaders in advancing thinking about the development process. Of course, we were focussing on children but it was really the human factor that we were stressing. What about your experience in that?

Finger: I think that's tremendously important on both ends of the equation, if you will. When I mentioned to Phil Klutznick that UNICEF raised money nobody else could raise, there's a simple reason, UNICEF could appeal to human instincts and the theory that children should be helped to develop as human beings. It was not a bureaucratic message, it was not an academic message, it was not something in high-tone multisyllabic terms. Here was a child who needed help to develop into a successful human being. People could relate to that and I think that was tremendously important to any of the programmes of governments and of international organizations. They come out as abstractions that people find it hard to relate to and I think it was a great contribution by UNICEF to, put things in human terms.

Moe: Why for example has UNDP not been able to attract the same support? It after all, just as UNICEF, in a sense, provides assistance for people. It focusses on people but it does provide material aid also. UNDP focusses on the material side of development through providing experts whereas UNICEF has been focussing on the needs of the children but in fact has provided largely material things but as a means to develop a human personality, the individual, the child rather than this more abstract thing of efficiency in industrial production or in agricultural production. I guess maybe that's perhaps the reason why it hasn't been able to attract the same kind of support.

Finger: Yes. I think this has a great deal to do with the different origins of the two programmes. The UN Development Programme was put forward by the United States as a counter proposal to SUMFED which would have involved vast amounts of capital assistance. There was a great deal of emphasis on magnitudes, how much money would go into it, how rapidly it could develop. A friend, whom I admired so much, Paul Hoffman, having come out of the Marshall Plan 13 billion dollars was involved--and having some chits to collect from Conrad Adenhour and various other people, placed his first emphasis on building the size of the programme and the programme's contribution to economic development in a macroeconomic sense. Once that tradition had been established, it became the major focus of the UN Development Programme. One rarely saw a film or a story about how an individual in a third world country has been helped by UNDP. Maybe there was something about how UNDP had helped in the resource survey of the Mekong River. There are other resource surveys but the emphasis was on the macroeconomic concept, on how much money was being spent and much capital investment that engendered, because it was after all a pre-investment programme. Paul Hoffman, I think, was one of the greatest salesman in the world. He was responsible for building up magnitudes, just as McNamara was at the World Bank, and this also has an important function. UNICEF from the beginning while it has constantly, as far as I know, increased the magnitude of its operation, nevertheless continued to focus on individuals and their problems, on children and their problems.

Moe: This is an interesting concept which you might pursue just a bit more. You could say more about this than I can from your experience in dealing directly with governments in your experience in the UN. It seems to me that on the whole Europeans probably because of their colonial history have a kind of more intuitive sense of relationship to the Third World. They have perhaps a more natural inclination toward promoting their development in general, probably because of certain affinities and also for practical reasons realizing that a prosperous and developing Third World provides markets for their products and so on. It promotes a generally more stable, more profitable relationship whereas the United States, because it didn't have a colonial experience (except in a very limited sense with the Phillipines and a few others) doesn't seem to have that kind of empathy with the so-called Third World and therefore is only responsive more to the needs of individuals as in the case of famine in Ethiopia now and that sort of thing. Do you want to say more on that? Am I in the right track?

Finger: Yes I think so. I think there are two facets. The one that you've mentioned the which partly a function of economic geography. The United States for practically all of its history has been virtually self sufficient in natural resources. We need a few things like cobalt and manganese but, by and large, we could get along on our own resources or those to the north and south of us, in Canada and Mexico. We need some OPEC oil but we are reducing dependency. The Europeans and the Japanese have always been dependent on outside raw materials from Africa and parts of Asia. Consequently they have an interest there, they have a history there, they have a cultural

relationship. One of the interesting things, which I am sure you have observed in the post-colonial period, is that the former colonies tend to have rather close relationships with the former metropolitan powers. They know the language. They have experience with the institutions and so on. That's why more of them can relate to France and Britain than to the Soviet Union and the United States, because they have very little experience with their systems. The Pacific basin is somewhat different. There the US has always had some interest. In Latin America, the US also has an interest. But when George Ball talked about some African country whose name seemed to be a typographical error, I think he was reflecting a truth about the American public's experience. We can be excited about famine in Ethiopia temporarily. We can get excited about a drought in South Africa but, by and large, what happens is simply not of great interest to Americans as it is to Europeans who've always had a vital interest there. I think that's one of the factors.

The the other is in patience, or call it the long-term outlook. Europeans are used to the notion that problems last a very long time and sometimes never really get solved. They have to be lived with. You don't have to lecture a Pole or a Hungarian or a Czech about these things; they know it from experience. Americans do not have that experience. We've been fortunate, generally speaking. You see a problem, you throw enough energy and enough money into it and you solve it. If you have a war like World War I, you get in there for a year and it's over and you can go back to your normal pursuits until Hitler and Hirohito shake you out of it and you have to do it again. But there's still the feeling of "war to end war," the war to "make the world safe for democracy". You do it, it's finished and you go back to your normal pursuits. Most human problems just aren't that simple or that temporary. Experience over centuries has brought Europeans to that realization, so they a longer-range perspective. Americans are learning. Vietnam was a learning experience but we still would like to think that we can set a problem right and then go back to baseball, football — normal living.

Moe: Well Max I think we've temporarily exhausted ourselves if I have more questions that occur to me I hope I can come back but I thank you for this opportunity.

Finger: Certainly, Sherry. Glad to.

End of interview