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Interview with Isaac Gomez by Michele Iskander

Translation From French

24 July 1985

UNICEF HQ

Iskander: Issac, as agreed, you may respond to my questions in French, even though my questions in French, even though my questions, may be given in English. This will ensure the best possible expression on your part. First describe to us the circumstance under which you joined UNICEF back in 1967.

Gomez: I was a high level employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Congo at the time, dealing with the subject of human resources and thus I was in contact with Hans Ereustrale who was representative of UNICEF and UNDP in Brazzaville at the time. He had come from Addis Ababa. The Government had some problems with UNDP at the time. As I said he represented both UNDP and UNICEF but was paid by the latter, although I would say be devoted about 80 percent of the time to UNDP.

I was not in full agreement with the government during that time, let us say I had ideological differences with its policies. I asked Ernestrale if UNICEF had a post for me. There was a National Officer post and I was interviewed by Paul Larsen who was deputy Regional Director under Mr. Kairouzi the Regional Director Liaison come from Lagos for this purpose.

UNICEF offices at the time were located together with WHO Regional office for Africa in facilities given by the country (via France), a location remote from the centre of town. And Erenstrale was UNDP representative to Congo with closer ties to the government he decided to move the offices to the centre of the capital, Brazzaville.

Iskander: It is interesting that you mention your appointment as a National Officer, because it was then a new category of personnel unique to UNICEF as to recall. Those are very interest recollections, because they do not only reflect your own situation, but also something of the overall administrative situation of UNICEF, in relation to government and large Specialized Agencies such as WHO. Well, you were appointed and started to work in Brazzaville, your native home; what were your impressions of UNICEF at the time, what was UNICEF doing?

Gomez: I was a Programme Officer on the spot, Brazzaville was an area office responsible for Cong, Gabon, Zaire, Cameroon, Chad, and CAR. Ernestrale was the UNICEF Representative (but devoting most of his time to UNDP); his number two was Mr. Gupta from Inda, plus two others; a programme officer and a supply officer (El Atki, resident in Hunshasa). Then El Atki transferred to Geneva. We also had Gershan Lari from Israel who had just joined the staff. There were the two of us, new, and Gupta, and we knew nothing about UNICEF. We were left pretty much on our own and Levi did not speak French and his English was only slightly better. I was a National Officer, but I was assigned

responsibility for two countries outside my native Congo, namely Gabon and Zaire; hence I had to travel quite a bit. I recall that a month later I was asked by the Representative to prepare for the Previews in Libreville (Gabon). I had little idea what constituted a "preview" but I went to Libreville to find my self in the midst of a "colony" of expatriates from the UN, FAO, WHO, and others. In those days technical support and approval by the Specialized Agencies of all UNICEF projects was indispensable. The duration of contracts of many of these experts hinged on the continuation of the projects. I was confronted with this not having received any orientation, training or directives from UNICEF. I returned to Brazzaville to prepare the project proposals for Gabon. There was such a lack of basic information and documentation to help in this task. As concerning Zaire ... the situation was similar. This in brief was my "debut" in UNICEF. You have to recall that UNICEF did not at the time prepare a "country programme" but several projects for each country.

Iskander: What were the nature of these programmes actually? Let's take the field of health to start with or any other.

Gomez: Fine. Zaire had three projects, one in health, another in education and a third was social affairs; Gabon had projects in health and education. As for education, the nature of the projects were similar in both countries and related to "ruralization of education" which was in those days really a misnomer because the primary education which prevailed earlier

had a rural bias. The primary school I went to myself in Libreville (Gabon) included in the curriculum manual was of an agricultural nature such as gardening which we did after the regular classroom session. In fact, it was the same old school inspectors who were assigned to implement the "new" system. New only in the concept looking it, namely that by introducing the pupils to more modern form of agricultural work, they could influence their parents. It was forgotten that in the African rural traditions this nation was taboo. Grown ups views were dominant in the family and a child's views would not influence thier parents.

Iskander: Issac, I would like to hear more from you of this "ruaralization" movement, because it figure rather strongly in the period of the sixties, especially in the Sahelian countries and as you related also in Central and West Africa. It was controversial. Some more background would be very helpful. The policy implied two systems of education, one for rural children, and one for urban child. UNESCO objected to it on the ground that it vegates the "democratization" of education.

Gomez: In colonial time, under the French, the education provided included much manual work mainly agricultural. This was true in Congo as in Gabon and other territories. In other works manual agricultural work was added to the normal academic curriculum (reading, writing, arithmatic) and was carried out after classes. In fact, there were two different kinds of schools: one for the native populatin "autochave" and the other under

French statutes for those who were French citizens, which included Africans. After World War II 1945 - 1966 there were important changes, a political and a social evolution was taking place. Politically the colonies were given legislative representation in the French Parliament, and were to join what was then called the French Union, a kind of commonwealth arrangement. The objective of the objectives of the colonial power was the integration of the colonies into the French system. The result was to create a uniform system of education and the establishment of secondary schools known as Lycees, which provided the same curriculum as the schools in France. The aim was to produce graduates for the government civil service and other functions. Graduates in fact were sent to France to do higher education. At the time of independence there existed what were called "European Schools", the "native" schools at primary level continued to exist. But the new European schools represented, just the same a kind of opening for advancement, let us say for brighter children. In these latter French education as applied to the letter, i.e. the same as given to French children in France. Integration was the main objective. After independence, the feeling was that this form of education was maladapted to the needs of the African children, and new formulas had to be found. The "European" secondary schools were suppressed. In other words, there was a strong desire to suppress or abolish the colonial past. It was thought that those schools created "superiority complex" in their students, and produced only people for the civil service administration only and did not meet the development needs of the country.

In effect, the reforms introduced amounted, to an extent, to a return to previous forms of education, thought to be more adapted to the present needs, and that would provide a balance between training and development requirements, two different things in fact. What was the response, the reaction? Those who were to implement these new policies were themselves the product of those "superior" schools. Additionally, those who graduated from professional schools found little employment, since efforts at employment creation lagged behind. The graduates simply joined an already inflated government bureaucracy. Education reforms were launched without adequate study or concern with the political implications. All the education reforms promulgated, even though they were preceded by public debates, meetings of parents and other forms of consultation, failed because of the lack of political will and resistance for the reform by the very powers that promoted them.

Iskander: Thank you. These are very useful observations. Returning now to what you were doing as a new programme officer in Brazzaville. What form of assistance did UNICEF provide to education? Was "reform" an issue for UNICEF?

Gomez: The emphasis in Gabon was on training the trainers, while in Zaire support was given directly to training of teachers, since the country had already created mobile training teams, based in the "Institut Pedagogique Nationale" (IPN), who travelled from district to district to help improve the knowledge and skills of the underqualified teachers. UNICEF provided much assistance, especially in development of text books for the IPN.

Iskander: These were in which language?

Gomez: In French. At that time there was no question of using the local languages or dialects (mother tongue). This came later. For instance in Zaire in the earlier days children were in primary schools were taught to be literate in their local language, for instance in Swahili, or chuluba, or Ligala depending on the area of Zaire where they lived.

Iskander: What was the attitude of the Zairian intellectuals on this subject at the time? Did they consider this a colonial policy to keep the children backward and isolated?

Gomez: The answer is generally yes, for you have to remember that those intellectuals (officials and other) were educated in French schools, and went to France for higher education, and were often of a colonial mentality. In Zaire children were educated in their mother tongue, and hence they developed as written languages early on; a development which took longer in other countries.

Iskander: Was UNESCO an important adviser to the Governments and to UNICEF on these issues?

Gomez: Yes, it played an important role. So did the other specialized agencies, in relation to health, WHO, for nutrition FAO (particularly from their office in Accra); community Development the UN, etc. In fact the Specialized Agencies had to give their technical approval before projects were presented to the Board. And after Board approval the Plans of Operations had to be signed by the respective Specialized Agencies. These Plans of Operations always included the item "contributions of" ——— WHO, FAO, etc.

Iskander: Did UNICEF express any points of views of its own on such subjects as we discussed e.g. educational reforms etc., or it simply reacted and responded?

Gomez: The technical opinions of the Agencies were more important at the time and were listened to by UNICEF. However, bit by bit UNICEF developed its own "personality", if I may put it that way; because UNICEF was more active, and had more freedom of action. Not that the Specialized Agencies lacked to means for action, it is that they in most cases lacked the direct authority. A Plan of Operation in health for example was negotiated in WHO's Regional Office in Brazzaville, and a local WHO officer was not in a position to take action, which proved a frustration for the UNICEF officer on the scene. In UNICEF, the opposite phenomenon prevailed, it was the field officer, who had more contact with local population and the authorities who provided information to HQ's, on the basis of which projects were developed and approved. This gave UNICEF staff a great

advantage over their Agency counterparts. For example, we were involved with community development programmes, and sensed directly the views and attitudes of the population, and had basic information. Primary health care is an example. It did not really start at Alma Atta, Niger, and other countries such a health system was in existence and developing. Which explains the lead role UNICEF was able to play in promoting this system which eventually led to Alma Atta jointly with WHO. UNICEF was to counter on fight against the "orthodox" health professionals, the doctors who were trained abroad, often under WHO and other fellowships, because they favored hospital and urban medicine or private practice. We could not have done that except for the presence of our field staff.

Iskander: This brings us to the field of health. What was the situation of health services, what there the discussions going on, what changes were taking place when you joined UNICEF?

Gomez: Basically, at the time, most of our support went to mother and child health, MCH services, also to paediatric and gynecological wards of hospitals. We provided equipment to these types of facilities. And training of paramedical personnel was important. We supported training of nurses, midwives, lab technicians, and sanitation workers.

Iskander: Was there any interest in traditional birth attendants, the so called matrones?

Gomez: This came later. It must be remembered that in most countries of Central Africa this category of TBA's did not exist. But in West Africa beginning in 1969 already we supported such a category e.g. securistes (first aid workers) and matrones.

Iskander: What do you recall about the period of campaigns against endemic diseases?

Gomez: There were the French health services and a different structure called "Luthe Centre the Grandes Endemries". This duality, inherited after independence, put a strong brake on the development of basic health services such as MCH. It was often necessary to negotiate with the health advisers to the Ministries of Health (these were French) to promote such activities. There were also the Regional Services, for Central Africa and for West Africa, of the campaigns against endemic diseases. One of these was the OCEAC in Central Africa and the OCJJ in W. Africa. These were run by the French military. Mobile teams carried this work which did some preventative and curative work, "Equipes d'Hygiene Moblies et de Propylaxie".

The campaigns were against Malaria, Leprosy, and Yaws. UNICEF provided great support to these as is well know, essentially providing large supplies of materials.

By the time I joined, UNICEF's emphasis was shifting to the promotion and support of basic health services, especially their extension to rural areas. One obstacle was the policy of

counterpoint support: for every dollar expended by UNICEF, governments had to put up 2 1/2 dollar. It was only gradually that this policy was relaxed, with resulting expansion in these services. The governments did not have the means to provide the personnel and materials and hence they greatly appreciated the aid coming from UNICEF and the flexibility with which it was provided. It was a necessity to rely on existing providers of health services, the "securistes" and "matrones" while at the same times auxillary personnel of various types were being trained and put into service. This was the prelude to PHC. The famous Professor Dehie played a big role in this effort as an advocate and support, because of his prestige and the respect with which he was held. I would like to pay homage to his memory.

Iskander: There is another area of programmes that I would like to get your recollections about: water supply and sanitation.

Gomez: In the beginning our concern and support went to sanitation. This latter field of work was the jurisdiction of the Ministries of health and I consider that it was a total failure. In charge of sanitary engineers trained by WHO. They were stationed in the capitols, had little means with which to do their work or to travel to rural areas. They were also responsible for development of water supply. This was also a failure. While in countries like Niger which had a separate sanitary body for water supply, much more progress and well drilling took place. I would like to take advantage here to express my views on this

subject. We have two ways to carry out these projects, one is to enforce the capacities of countries to carry out rural water supply activities. This requires much time. But I think in the long run this more effective. In fact this what happened in Zaire, and the nationals were enabled to carry out their own water supply schemes. This is the "transfer of technology".

The other means, what we are doing now, we go with great means and carry out water supply work as if we were a company. We can be judged by criteria like: have we reduced the incidence of water-borne disease, or diarrheal diseases. Our objective should be to aid in water supply with a view to reducing diseases and mortality, which should combine water supply with sanitation efforts. This latter point we have been paying more attention to in recent times. However, my main concern seems to be increasing our capacity for the transfer of water and sanitation technology and capacity.

Iskander: Issac, Thank you very much for your time. I hope to have an occasion to come back to you for more of your recollections and views.

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