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Interview with Hossein Ghassemi

Conducted by Jack Charnow at UNICEF HQ

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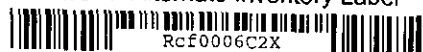
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Interview Hossein Ghassemi by John Charnow: Early contacts
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Early contacts with UNICEF in Iran

Charnow: Hossein, how did you happen to come to UNICEF?

Ghassemi: I came into contact with UNICEF for the first time in my own country, Iran. The first time that I heard about UNICEF was when I was a student at the University and at that time which was around the mid-fifties and the Department of Preventive Medicine which became School of Public Health later on was serving as the focal and technical institution for the Malaria Eradication Programme. This Programme really was between the Ministry of Health and this group from the University which was the technical part, WHO and UNICEF.

Influence of malaria eradication programmes

Now, one of the things which I observed in this situation which was very important was the process through which the whole institution-building in the field of public health really emerged from the Malaria Programme, and that was a vertical Programme which was dealing with one of the specific public health problems in that country which at that time, obviously, in the fifties had started ??? after World War II, and that had reached the national coverage in a period of less than 10 years, and a lot of young

medical and para-medical personnel were attracted to this programme partly because of its sort of emotional commitment and socially oriented action, and partly because the Programme was designed with a certain amount of flexibility which satisfied intellectual curiosity; it satisfied probably, the immediate financial needs of the young doctors and so on, who through this Programme learned how to go to the village and how to understand public health problems at village level.

Charnow: What were you studying at that time?

Ghassemi: At that time I was in the School of Pharmacy and I was studying Pharmacology and a lot of colleagues of mine at that point became interested in the field working the laboratory side of the problem and we were studying together with medical students. Now later on, what I want to tell you was that out of this project was established an Institute of Malariology then later on Parasitic Disease and then it grew into the School of Public Health which eventually became recognised as an institution at the regional level with a lot of participation in research and training inside the region and even outside the region, and I saw this as a process of doing village-level work dealing with one problem but at the same time attracting a lot of young talents where over the period of less than two decades we became the backbone of public health training and research in the country, and that was one case where UNICEF's money, little money, could go a long way.

Charnow: You think this wouldn't have happened if we hadn't encouraged the Malaria Programme, in a way?

UNICEF vehicles

Ghassemi: It's very hard to say it would not have happened at all, but I can say that there were certain aspects of this Programme that I don't think the Government at that point could possibly design the way it was designed with flexible funds of UNICEF, the way UNICEF was willing to come out and work. For example, UNICEF was very well known in those days by having the cars marked with UNICEF's emblem around, and being we were in a country with a lot of foreign exchange problems and difficulties, I don't think at that time that many people - we - appreciated as later on when I think of the process. As to the fact that a car was the most critical element of programme operation when sitting in the capital and the question of reaching the village on very very rough roads hundreds of miles away was the most critical part of reaching out and really dealing with the problem which is communicable disease and you have to be there in order to monitor it and control it. These are some of the things that make a great deal of difference.

UNICEF flexibility

Also, the fact that UNICEF had the capability of facilitating very quick transfer of resource training and technique. This was something that was extremely effective in addition to the logistics. The second example....

Charnow: Would you give some examples of what you mean by that?

Ghassemi: Yes. The other example I was about to tell you was that later on in my own professional life UNICEF's money and funds and also the facilitating in terms of the international world became extremely effective in establishing the national nutrition perspective in Iran. That is where I really became personally involved. That, I think, in a general sense I have seen how UNICEF has effectively helped young professionals to provide the opportunity where they can participate in the social sense. That is where you take your technician - on a social arena - that is where UNICEF I think has been extremely effective, and these are the people who drew this kind of help over the years. Many of them have reached the position of leadership in many an institution which needed catalytic support - not so much the money but the fact that it has given them the opportunity to intervene and bring down the social issues to the right perspective, that is how I came to know UNICEF. Then I came to know UNICEF at a regional level.

Charnow: Before we move out to that, were you aware at that time of the role of the UNICEF people who were responsible for the programme of Iran, and any effect they had aside from our material aid, in working with Government Ministers or people at a high level.

Ghassemi: I think this has been really, what you may call, a synergistic experience, because the government officials who usually were drawn, or are drawn, today to work with UNICEF obviously are the ones who are looking for an alloy of this nature and that sort of an alliance becomes extremely reinforcing and mutually rewarding because, one example I can give you in this sense was that in another context like many other bureaucracies there were many government officials who are committed to certain activities and certain causes which need certain attention at certain points of time and sometimes their hands are tied but they are in a bureaucratic system and the UNICEF's flexibility is extremely effective in those situations. When I look at other institutions within the UN system they may have many other strengths but none of them has this kind of strength. We have institutions like the World Bank which has been very effective in doing major things, but in outreach not flexible in the past. We have institutions in the UN who have been extremely effective in assisting the government with technical know-how, as to how to do things, but once you want to do things and you have to do it very quickly, that is where UNICEF has been extremely effective in practically all of these places.

Beirut regional nutrition experience

Charnow: Well, you were going on now to your regional experience.

Ghassemi: Yes. So in a way to be rather specific, the first inter-action that I had with UNICEF in a substantial sense was when I became involved in the development of the beginnings of a national nutrition plan and policy in Iran. This was in the beginning of the seventies, and this was reviewed by a regional team from UNICEF and Charles Egger came from Headquarters with a couple of other colleagues, but that was really when we began a substantive dialogue on these issues and I think my colleagues from UNICEF and the region were quite pleased with that experience and that may have had something to do with the fact that I was invited to go to the Middle East region in 1972 to work as a Project Director in a regional project on food and nutrition, and that really gave me the opportunity to come to know UNICEF as Regional Officer.

Charnow: That was in the Beirut Office?

Ghassemi: That's right, and in that context I came to know UNICEF in dealing with several countries and that was really my sort of expansion of experience from one country to a region; and also working with the different agencies, working with a lot of

professional and academic institutions, and NGOs, for that matter, on an issue which obviously was my professional interest. In that respect I must say I could see UNICEF doing a number of things in the region. I think at that time, early seventies, was when we were beginning to speak more systematically to planning for nutritional improvement in the countries, and that was the time when nutrition began to become recognized as a factor in development. In a way we were moving from the health sector more into an inter-sectoral development. UNICEF was very much in the business of an inter-sectoral approach to nutrition, but at that time, I think, became more sort of what you may call, more of a mandate and message of the Organization. My experience was more geared to working with high-level government officials, with academic institutions and with the implementers. In other words, we were facilitating inter-action and effective working relationship between the government system, which was making decisions, and the institutions which were training the leaders, sort of giving out substantive information, and also dealing here with those who were running the programmes, well, assisting the programmes, including mid and local level managers and the other UN agencies. We were at that time trying to see how through development planning malnutrition could be more effectively addressed. That was my second level of experience.

Relations with agencies

Charnow: What were your relations with the people from the agencies - FAO, WHO, UNESCO, Social Affairs, and so on?

Ghassemi: Well, we really had numerous working relationships - one was the specific need within the frame of the project that I was responsible for, for this was an inter-agency project, so in a way I had four bosses because I had the Regional Director of UNICEF, WHO, FAO, UNESCO and the American ???? to Beirut. So our working relationship at the technical level was with the nutritional advisers of these agencies where we worked together in developing our activities in the countries in the region. Then we had a higher level inter-action with Regional Directors where my experience was extremely rich in functioning, in continuous working relationship in discussing the activities and programmes of different agencies within the region so far as nutrition was concerned. That was obviously broader than what UNICEF was doing, broader terms in the field of nutrition in relation to WHO, in relation to FAO.

The third level was really that I was personally involved in teaching at the University of Beirut; in other words, it was a very interesting arrangement where UNICEF staff was actually in a teaching/research situation, and not only dealing with teaching

to the students as to what we were doing, but also functioning as an academic person.

Specialists vs. generalists

Charnow: Any feeling on the part of the people from the agencies that UNICEF was moving into a field outside its own mandate?

Ghassemi: That's a very interesting question because this has I think always been there ever since I came to know UNICEF. You see, to me UNICEF not being a specialised agency has a strength and has a weakness. The strength is that you do not develop a specific professional hang-up; that's very important. I think when you are not in the atmosphere of the specialised agencies you have a lot of fresh air, you have a lot of room to manoeuvre, you don't have bias once against the other, you can be very relaxed, you can have access to all doors without being limited - that is the strength which I think UNICEF has capitalized on a lot, a great deal. The weakness is that UNICEF people are not being viewed as specialists working into an office and speaking to an issue.

In that respect, it has been a very unique struggle in the sense that UNICEF I think, as I have watched it, over a period of almost three decades now, really grew out of an agency which was seen by a lot of people as a provider of supplies and very small assistance into an image it has now that is well appreciated by

specialized agencies that it has a very, very substantial reservoir of its own kind of knowledge and specialities which is so different, and that is UNICEF understands how social and economic changes come about from the perspective of those who understand how society ???? changes at a very local level, which is so very different from technological approach to the problem. I think that is being increasingly appreciated ...in other words, the technician has a certain contribution to make, but I think the technician may have certain limitations in understanding how the society on a broader term changes and develops. These are two totally different points. A specialist tends to be narrow and deep by definition of his area of work, and a generalist may have the limitations of not being deeply knowledgeable about complicated issues, but has a broad understanding of how society develops, so they become highly complementary. I think that is how UNICEF staff is now being appreciated.

Charnow: Do you consider yourself a specialist or a generalist?

Ghassemi: To answer your question - when I was working in Beirut one experience that I always remember was Jim Cowan who was at that time Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture in the American University of Beirut came to see me one day and he looked at my bookshelf: there was one book on the principles of biochemistry, there was one book on introduction to economics, something like

agricultural economics or economic development - I don't remember - and he looked at me and said, if there is one man who can understand biochemistry and economics at the same time, he can do a good job in nutrition; which means that obviously you cannot be a specialist in both, and in that sense I really have tried to make a generalist out of myself although at certain points in my life I have studied some of these things in depth; but I think what I have achieved in which UNICEF experience has been extremely helpful in that, has been trying to see how you can broaden your appreciation by understanding the linkage.

Strength in UNICEF decentralization

Charnow: Some staff members in discussing relations with agencies have said that they felt that on occasion the flexibility of the UNICEF person in being able to say, OK, we will move forward and get the money without having to refer to many layers, to go back to Geneva, Rome or to Paris, as the agency people do become, was a matter of jealousy on the part of these colleagues and therefore relations were not always easy because of that. Did you sense any of that?

Ghassemi: Absolutely, that's absolutely true. I think even today UNICEF staff in the field and Representatives have quite a bit of strength in that sense for they can back up their ideas and

suggestions. Not only that, they can also back it up very quickly, so they have a great deal of credibility in that sense, and the governments know that quite well. This is one of the very important strengths of UNICEF. I may add to this that I was talking to one of my colleagues the other day and I was saying that if you work in a technical agency you perpetuate your work by talking to other technicians in the country and as a result I have seen some of my colleagues becoming so experienced and strong and constantly saying what needs to be done in development. In other words, the whole strength is in judgement and "what" and very, very little of "how", and over the years I think where UNICEF has been much stronger than others in a sense is really by more becoming a specialist in "how" leaving the question of "what" to others. It doesn't mean that we don't know enough about "what" but our strength is very much in the question of "how". This has been expressed by many people in different ways; some people say UNICEF is an action place - they are doers - so if you invest your time and energy and resources in learning how things can be done, that becomes your strength....

Agency guidelines in nutrition

Charnow: There was a period when we had technical approval of projects by the agencies. The agencies had, in a sense, control over whether we go in or not because of the technical approval part. In some

cases they got reimbursement from us for more people than sometimes we felt were needed. Some people have commented that the agencies at that stage felt less of a pressure to develop overall guidelines and policies that should guide operations, because they had control at another level. Now the question is, in the field of nutrition, what have you sensed in your period as guidelines that we have gotten from the specialised agencies, or where have we developed them? Have we developed them ourselves or with a lot more groups and our expertise have we gotten together in which we have taken the initiative. I am talking generally about the kind of overall "what" in addition to the "how" that you as an operator in the field may have sensed?

Ghassemi: This is a very complex question. The best comment I can make is that ... you ask what is UNICEF all about? One of the answers you get is that OK, we are an advocate of children. We really don't ... as I say we are a funding agency ...we see ourselves as people...our mandate is really to speak to the problems and needs of children and if we have a little moneys to back it up, and that is a combination of ideas and having resources to back it up in a way that ???? The advocates are really people who should be by definition prepared to speak to the issues that the others don't speak to, and make it politically good and rewarding thing to speak to those problems. That is the role of UNICEF.

So if we say, that is our definition. We can then go back and ask where was it that UNICEF made a difference in raising the issues. Advocating means that we can do two things: one is that you speak to the issues that do not receive enough attention by others; second is that these are the issues that may be ahead of time, in other words, you are hoping that 10 years later it may become the issues of the day, but you should be willing to speak to them so you would be in a way out of tune and ahead of your time.

Looking at what UNICEF has done in the field of nutrition I think basically if you want my frank judgement, for 20 years UNICEF has sort of in its public image has lived with other technical agencies as his smaller brother but at the same time effectively pushing for these issues, and sometimes even at the end of the tongue when they were willing to come out and publicly speak to them. In other words, if you are not a technical agency, you really want to share the credit with the technical agency, that is something I think has been the politics in it, and UNICEF has been extremely effective in that. With its small resources, with its attitude of being avant garde and willingness to share the credit, I think that has been accomplished. In other words, if you look at the fact that UNICEF works in its operations for relief which today has a lot of experience and reservoir of capability in dealing with emergency problems, it has moved from a sort of local level approach which was ??? which really was

dealing with the problems at village level then trying to link it into a very strong advocacy at the national level. So that is how ...I think at the beginning obviously UNICEF was not strong enough technically and had to get technical blessing and approval. Later on I think it is really moving to an era where it had to develop it was yet a blessing but to be very frank with you, one of the what you may call the maturing and emergence of UNICEF's strength that I see today is that UNICEF can afford today to have its own sort of mandate which is Child Survival and Development; but this now today is UNICEF's mandate which to me is a very important development in the life of this Organization in the sense that we really started at the time when we didn't have the image of being able to speak to the issues independently. In a way it was a following, then we became equal partners, now we are maturing to the point that we can stand up and say that in a way we have reached the age of what you may call beyond the teens as right now we have our own mandate. If you want to look at it that way, this is the point I hope you will give me a chance to discuss in the next interview; that is the way I see it vis-a-vis the position of our colleagues in the I was telling you one way to look at the present programme perspective and position of UNICEF in Child Survival and Development to me is the further emergence and maturation in our working relationship with other agencies that we had the role of a follower, the role of a partner and now somewhat the role of

having our own message, our own mandate which technically is very substantial, very complex, and I hope we have a chance to talk about it later. I have in a paper which was circulated in the January JCHP just last month in Geneva, it is really a synthesis of what UNICEF is doing at the time that paper is in - we are looking for a global strategy of child survival and development which is really independent of economic development in the sense of redistribution of wealth. In other words, in the last decade we have said we want child health and growth walking with development. I think we are becoming courageous now - I don't think it is naive - but extremely ambitious to say that we are asking the world to do something about child health and growth without waiting for poverty to disappear. In other words, we are asking the toughest question: what is it that can be done while we are waiting for poverty to disappear. So to me, looking at the evolution of UNICEF's growth, this is probably the best way of looking at it.

Charnow: That's a very interesting formulation and I should like to get back to it in our next tape. But I want to pick up one aspect of it. Now, in the seventies, when you were in the Middle East you talked about talking with our movement into getting accepted by the Planning people, and as I recall it, the case we were making for that was that if they invested in children this would promote development, contribute to development, and we were moving away

from our image as a humanitarian agency. We felt that that was not going to raise money and was less popular in terms of the general thinking at the time, and yet, a little later in your comment, you talked about working at the local level. Now, I wish you would comment about the relationship between the two as somehow or other I have the feeling that our evolution from moving to the local level followed more or less the emphasis on the planning, national capital thing and that we discovered that that was not enough. Am I correct in that?

Ghassemi: In other words, you see the process of evolution in UNICEF's work starting in the capital then going to the village?

Charnow: I don't know - I am asking a question.

Ghassemi: OK, in the field of nutrition, if you really looked at the first phase of UNICEF's work in the field of nutrition, it was very much humanitarian relief operation emergency. In other words, that was not operating within the system. It was not institutionalizing something so that it really went to where the crisis and need was. It could be in the school, it could be in a drought area, it could be an earthquake situation, after the War effects.

Charnow: And the MCH centres.

Ghassemi: And the MCH centres. The next phase of it which gradually when UNICEF started working and assisting the developing countries it was very much the idea of going to the health-based institutions, so in a way, that was very much at par with the whole field of professional approach to malnutrition. In other words, malnutrition at the beginning was the clinical approach to the problem. It was based where there was the disease. There was a sickness and there was a sick person, so it really developed after that. But when it became, evolved into a population problem, in other words it was seen as a problem which was the problem of many who didn't go to a hospital or didn't go to a health centre, so it really was the second phase.

Charnow: Wasn't there also somewhere in this our emphasis on milk conservation and applied nutrition? And local production of weaning foods.

Ghassemi: That's exactly what I was coming to. In that particular phase, UNICEF was really capitalizing on its experience in dealing with production and distribution of special foods which would meet the needs of children which was partly for the malnourished and also partly for the needy children in the population which were reached through schools health centres, reached through areas like that. But out of that phase really came when the problems of malnutrition began to be addressed on a broader basis and in a sort of preventive basis. And at that stage which was the early sixties, the applied nutrition concept was devised and under that, it was really a combination of education, provision of food

for the children in need, and also combining health care services, basic services and there you may say there was a lot of effort at the national level, implementation at the village level, because especially when this was linked to agricultural extension activities, nutrition education, reaching the population through rural development institutions, all I am trying to say was that applied nutrition was a concept that was not at that time able to become a national policy committee. In other words, it was seen as yet a more developed version of humanitarian caring. There was a time distance between when we were really dealing with malnutrition on a purely relief humanitarian basis and the time when it was dealt with as a development particle. The evolution from this sense to the other one took roughly a decade. So in the sixties, there was a lot of effort in training, in supply support, in programme development, in emergency assistance, there was a combination of many things for working with those people in health centres, and then of course the population activities came along - all these things are really what you may call the time when applied nutrition paved the road and developed the basis and the start of human skills and institutional capacity up to the time of the early seventies when many countries accepted nutrition as a factor in development and were willing to plan for it in their development at national level. All I am trying to say is that we did not achieve the scale, we did not achieve national policy committee.

Charnow: In the UNICEF literature in the Board Reports and various other places we kept always talking about the importance of the

national nutrition policy in which these various elements would fit; on the other hand, there was no place where they seemed to be a nutrition ministry like there was a health ministry, so it was a matter of fitting it in various places, and I suppose, I guess that was where you fitted in at the planning level at the national level?

Ghassemi: Yes. Well you see that particular problem unfortunately, even today, is not resolved and I don't think will ever be resolved. Nutrition is not a sector. If you were aiming to create a sector, you might have been more successful in finding a home for it, a ???? an institution for it, an organization, but the ???? has not evolved that way and cannot evolve is the weakness of this. But we also have the difficulty of planning for something without having an institutional base. In the sixties, nutrition in terms of its political leverage, in terms of level of attention, was very low because it was considered a subsidiary to the health sector. The fact that it moved to the level that it became the concern of the Ministry of Planning in a way politically was a big push. One thing we realize is that what happened in the seventies did not come out of the blue. A lot of institutions were working on it for probably half a decade or a decade until it began to bloom, and UNICEF - that is what I am saying as an advocate - if you really go back and search, UNICEF money and advocacy had a lot to do with this evolution. In other words, UNICEF was working, in a way it was struggling, with raising the political and development significance of nutrition and malnutrition in the eyes and judgement of developing

countries' authorities for a decade before it was accepted. Now, the critical ??? came in early seventies when people from different sectors and different disciplines began to join and the credit I think should go to the economists around for when they began to talk and write and discuss this, because the economists obviously had the open channel to the planning people and the nutritionists were more in the circle of health, nutritionists by alliance with the economists began to bridge the distance between health, agriculture and economics, that is when this factor took a totally different perspective in the seventies and to me UNICEF has played a major role because as you know being a specialized agency you deal with one sector, and WHO was always there as the health sector and FAO has dealt with the unionized culture sector and UNICEF was really in a very politically administrative and viable position, advantageous position of being able to go to planning as well as these other Ministries in trying to serve as a bridge. To give you my final example or leave it for next time? In one of the visits that I made to Sri Lanka just two years ago, although there is a nutrition division in the Ministry of Planning, when I went around and searched for information and data on action on different parts of the system and I went to a meeting, and told them all the different things people were doing, in a very diplomatic way I said you people don't talk to each other. You can't believe they all came and said, we want UNICEF to be the honest broker and bring us together, and this is

exactly what is happening today with the UNICEF project. Even when the sectors are there, the inter-sectoral communication and working relationship is poor.

Charnow: Well that's a very interesting example.

Enf of tape

Interview to be continued

