

## U.N. WATCH

### Suffer the Little Children

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UNICEF has recently released its 1982-83 annual report, including its third report on the "State of the World's Children." It is cause for dismay.

Death from malnutrition is the subject, and the statistics are shocking: Forty thousand children die *each day* from malnutrition. In the preface to the report, Executive Director James P. Grant is guardedly optimistic about reducing that figure.

Grant notes that hunger in children is "invisible." A political leader walking through a village in an underdeveloped country would see only 2 per cent of the actual malnutrition around him. In the poorer countries, mothers are unaware that the lack of nourishing food is draining the energy and hindering the development of their children.

The subtitle of the report is "New Hope in Dark Times." In 1982, world economic growth was at its lowest level since the 1930s, slowing the progress of decades. The World Bank and various U.N. agencies predict that a billion people will be living in absolute poverty by the end of the century. Child death rates in low-income countries already have begun to climb, and unless the trend is reversed, the number of malnourished children will increase by 30 per cent by the year 2000.

With the world worried about population growth and the scarcity of food in such areas as Asia and Africa, isn't UNICEF fighting a losing battle with the wrong weapons? In a section entitled "Birth Spacing," the report addresses the harsh question, Why save children who are condemned to a life of poverty and disease? In fact, states the report, child survival and limiting population growth are intimately related:

When people become more confident that their existing children will survive, they tend to have fewer births... *No nation has ever seen a significant and sustained fall in its birth rate without first seeing a fall in its child death rate.*

Thailand, Costa Rica, and the Philippines testify to this observation. In the Philippines, for example, an 8 per cent fall in the death rate was accompanied by a 12 per cent decline in the birth rate. If the equation holds, reducing the child mortality rate in the developing world by half—that is, saving six to seven million infants a year—would also preclude some twelve to twenty million births a year. Is such a projection meaningful? UNICEF officials think it is.

Drawing upon thirty-six years of experience in the field, the organization has proposed a plan of action for the rest of this century—and beyond. To date, UNICEF has not been hampered by the disruptive political rhetoric that marks the specialized agencies, such as the World Health and International Labor organizations. Indeed, UNICEF is not a specialized agency but a subsidiary body of the General Assembly and reports directly to the Assembly through the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Established in 1946, UNICEF was intended as an emergency unit to meet the immediate needs of children in countries devastated by war. "Emergency" was the key word then, but, like the "transient" refugee problem, the

emergency never subsided.

For its funds UNICEF depends wholly on voluntary contributions from governments and individuals. It prepares its own budget and regards itself not as a relief organization but a supply organization authorized to purchase food and medical supplies. Volunteers like Danny Kaye, Liv Ullman, and Prince Talal of Saudi Arabia have provided enormous help in fund-raising.

#### The Four Elements

An all-out program for the rest of the decade consists of four crucial elements to combat child deaths from chronic malnutrition and infection. The cost of this program is estimated at \$6 billion a year. The realistic budget for 1983—realistic in the sense that it is all one can hope to get in a world preparing for wars in space—is \$410 million, about the cost of a small squadron of fighter aircraft.

The most important element of the proposed program is a rather recent discovery known as oral rehydration therapy (ORT). The dehydration caused by diarrheal infection kills five million young children a year. By mixing glucose and salt in boiled or drinking water, a parent can halt dehydration and slow death. The great utility of the treatment lies in its simplicity. No technical equipment is required, only the ingredients and the cooperation of a family member. UNICEF has produced inexpensive packets to distribute where the ingredients are unavailable or families too impoverished to purchase them. ORT programs have already met with success in Peru, Bangladesh, Haiti, and India.

The second element of the proposed program is universal immunization against the usual childhood diseases: measles, tuberculosis, whooping cough, and polio. It is the growth of community organizations that has made such a plan possible, the UNICEF report notes. And today's vaccines have been so reduced in cost that a dose of measles vaccine is less than ten cents.

The third element involves breast-feeding. UNICEF regards the trend to bottle-feeding in poor countries as disastrous. Mothers unable to read the instructions on formula tins, unable to purchase a sufficient supply of artificial milk, or careless about sterilizing equipment are exposing their children to malnutrition, infection, and early death. In cooperation with the World Health Organization a campaign is under way to reverse the trend to bottle-feeding.

In countries as widely separated by distance and culture as Brazil, Egypt, Chile, and India, studies have demonstrated the advantages of breast-feeding. At Baguio General Hospital in the Philippines a UNICEF program involving ten thousand babies produced dramatic results. As the chief of pediatrics described the process: "We stopped giving our babies the standard dose of infant formula. Down came the colorful posters;...everything conducive to bottle-feeding was removed...." The next two years saw a rapid decline in diarrhea, infection, and death among newborn babies. Papua, New Guinea, had a similar experience.

The fourth element of the proposed program now seems an obvious one indeed: to supply growth charts for the home so that mothers themselves may check on a child's development. Invisible but serious malnutrition will show up on a chart on which a mother records her child's weight each month. At monthly "rallies" in Indonesia, two million

mothers in fifteen thousand villages weigh their babies. Those who can read help the illiterate. A report on this program will be available later in the year.

### What Next?

At the recent meeting of the UNICEF board, on which forty-one U.N. member-nations are represented, the executive director called attention to the dismal world economy. "Government budgets for social services—particularly those affecting young children, including nutrition, health and education—are often the first to be cut back," said Grant. "Unfortunately, special action to protect...children and poorer families has generally remained the exception, rather than the rule. We must change that rule."

Operating in 112 countries on an inadequate budget, UNICEF is seeking to reduce administrative expenses by consolidating its offices and sending greater numbers into the field. To increase effectiveness, the organization is working more closely with other U.N. affiliates, among them the World Bank, World Health Organization, Food and Agriculture Organization, UNESCO, and the U.N. Development Program.

In an interview with *Worldview* immediately following the week-long board meeting, Grant said he was pleased with the support his program received but that the problems facing UNICEF were immediate and desperate. Even with 80 per cent of UNICEF personnel in the field, the staff is stretched thin over the impoverished countries of the world. The approved budget will only begin to meet the immense needs of mothers and children. And UNICEF is also concerned with clean water, sanitation, and education of the young. Fortunately, despite these difficult times, U.N. member-nations have not lowered their contributions to the organization. Even the Reagan administration, despite threats to cut all U.S. allotments to the United Nations, has maintained its previous commitment to UNICEF in the present year.

Obstacles arise in odd places. Some medical groups object to the training of mothers in the rehydration method, obviously defending their turf. The packets of oral rehydration salts, the key to saving children's lives, are being scrutinized by our Food and Drug Administration, who feel the packets should warn against use without a doctor's guidance. How many doctors can be consulted in a small African nation? Or in Appalachia, for that matter.

Grant is looking to church groups for help in the campaign against malnutrition, supplementing the usual government and private agency sources; local pastors can be quite influential in helping gain acceptance of a UNICEF program. Extensive use of the media has already helped to publicize the "four basics." In fact, media coverage of the 1982-83 report on the State of the World's Children exceeded that of any previous year—including a first-time article in *L'Osservatore Romano*, the official publication of the Vatican.

Grant is convinced that UNICEF can, with help, reduce the infant mortality rate by half by the year 2000. One surely wishes him well.

**STEPHEN S. FENICHELL**

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