

Review - UNICEF: Global Governance That Works

Written by Maggie Black

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UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund): Global governance that works

By: Richard Jolly

London and New York: Routledge, 2010

This volume in Routledge's 'Global Institutions' series, like previous ones on member organizations of the UN system – *The World Health Organization (WHO)* and *The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*, for example – analyses UNICEF within the framework of the intellectual, ideological, and human influences that have shaped it through the post-War, post-colonial, and post-Cold War eras. The underlying assumption is that the 'global'-ness of an organization such as UNICEF – 'international' used to be a sufficient aspiration, but this has been superseded in the era of globalization – confers upon it transcendent powers and opportunities to transform the lives of those it exists to benefit. This is a thesis which this reviewer does not take on trust, and since it is reinforced in this volume by the sub-title 'Global governance that works', I return to this theme later.

Richard Jolly was a Deputy Executive Director at UNICEF from 1982-95. He served under James P. Grant, a charismatic and effective Executive Director (1980-95) whom Jolly deeply admired. Grant's invitation to serve at his right hand was due to Jolly's pre-eminence as a development economist of the non-orthodox, 'fulfilment of basic needs' persuasion. Jolly earned his laurels at the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex in the 1960s and 1970s, when he and others played an important role in establishing the parameters of progressive post-colonial international development thinking. Jolly has therefore sat at the top table of humanity-focused development discourse for his entire career. He has also had exceptional exposure to the ideas and policies that UNICEF put into effect over a significant period of its institutional life. These unique qualifications are certainly put to good effect in this volume.

Three elements: ideas, people and institutions

UNICEF is an extraordinary creature, and it is difficult to blend its multiple strands into a coherent literary structure. This I know well, having written two histories of the organization which are drawn upon extensively by Jolly: *The Children and the Nations*, in 1986, and *Children First: The story of UNICEF*, in 1996. The structure Jolly has adopted is historical, starting with the Fund's origins in the post-War world of humanitarian aid and reconstruction, and characterizing its subsequent evolution and growth in more or less time-bound chapters. He states early on (p.3) that his focus is on three elements: ideas, people, and institutions. He gives considerable prominence to individuals, to the extent of entitling sections of the story 'The vision of two early giants' and 'The Jim Grant years' (Chapters 1 and 4).

There is a degree of over-personalization throughout the book which I found uncomfortable, partly because it is contrary to bureaucratic (UN) convention and historiographical fashion, but mainly because the singling out of certain individuals risks ignoring or understating the contributions of others. In the introduction to *Children First*, I quoted Margaret Catley-Carlson, a co-Deputy Executive Director of Jolly's, who insisted that EJH (Dick) Heyward's contribution as the chief architect of UNICEF over more than 30 years must not be understated. She observed – without implying criticism of Grant – that Heyward had created a UNICEF strong enough to withstand the maelstrom that Jim Grant unleashed upon it. Jolly does not ignore Heyward's contribution, but he limits it and definitely understates it, given the extravagant praise he heaps on others. And inevitably, certain names are missing.

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In other chapters, Jolly focuses on the particular role of economists and planners (the 1960s, with later repercussions in the 1980s/90s) and on policy areas: 'basic services' and 'health for all' in the 1970s; human rights-based programming in the 1990s and early 2000s; and the subsequent assertion of an 'equity' agenda by Anthony Lake, the third successor to Grant (2010-). As one would expect, Jolly is particularly strong on the occasions UNICEF contributed a human development perspective to social and economic thinking in key forums, helping gain traction for the idea that issues such as child mortality and spread of primary education have to be taken seriously within economic policy, not seen simply as a soft humanitarian adjunct to GDP growth and balance of payments. Jolly also finds space to summarize programme areas complementary to the principal child health focus of UNICEF: nutrition, water and sanitation, education, and child protection. The panorama of subject areas and sectors is vast, much larger than for any other UN organization, and it is impressive that he manages to cover the ground so effectively in such limited space. There are some omissions – for example, slum improvement, child labour, and early childhood care – and some of the emphases could be disputed, but given the difficulties, the scope is impressive.

In this, Jolly more than lives up to his aim to expound on ideas as well as people; but there is less about 'institutions'. He notes certain UN policy committees and inter-agency mechanisms in which UNICEF participates. We meet the WHO and UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) at appropriate moments, and there are mentions of UNICEF's national committees and other strategic partners. He pays tribute to UNICEF's decentralized internal structure and the autonomy enjoyed by country offices. But he does this *en passant*: there is no separate analysis of UNICEF's own governance and managerial apparatus, starting with its Executive Board, nor of the relationship with UN member states, notably key donor and recipient governments. Jolly pays homage to these and other relationships from time to time, and maybe it is simply a matter of space and priority. But in a series on 'global institutions', a specific chapter on the organization's institutional composition and operational structure would have been valuable.

The UN system

Such a chapter would also have allowed more of an exploration of the ways in which UNICEF's modus operandi differs radically from that of other UN bodies. UNICEF is a very untypical UN organization, one that would never now be created. It has flourished largely by playing Jekyll and Hyde with its UN and non-UN personas. UNICEF came into being by decision of the UN General Assembly, as a temporary post-War concession by the Western powers to the humanitarian needs of children in Eastern Europe; and since it managed to stay in existence thereafter, its authority remains vested in an Executive Board composed of UN member states who formally oversee its activities and also comprise its principal paymasters. It has mostly enjoyed a loose relationship with the rest of the UN system, which does not take UNICEF very seriously, being more concerned with international security, peace-keeping, protection of the global commons, and other topics that out-class child well-being in the global arena. This has often been used to advantage.

Most UN bodies provide forums in which international diplomacy is carried on, or where the best expertise from around the world can be assembled, or which lay down norms or policies having multi-governmental endorsement, representing the best international synthesis of agreed ideology or behaviour that can then be obtained. But UNICEF, which began life sending relief supplies to children in war-torn Europe and whose whole evolution was shaped by the delivery of material assistance, is a *programme* organization. Its international framework supports and facilitates things that have to happen on the ground. The knowledge gained is passed back into debating and policy-making forums, but the quintessential character of UNICEF is that its centre of gravity is in the field, and the programme and its direct implications for children's well-being are what counts.

The only other similar UN bodies are UNHCR, the WFP (the World Food Programme), and a few specific crisis bodies such as UNRWA (the UN Relief and Works Agency) in the Middle East – all primarily relief operators. None of the regular programmes, funds, or agencies that support anti-poverty development activity have anything comparable to UNICEF in terms of programme staff or in-country establishment. Even UNDP (the UN Development Programme) has surprisingly little field programme expertise and operates at many more steps removed from any concrete impact on people's lives. And however valuable the work at the policy-making centre, it is at the practical programme cutting-edge that most obstacles to human development have to be overcome.

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At the time Jolly arrived at UNICEF, Grant wanted it to become more of a think-tank plus ideas-marketing operation, but he was stopped in his tracks by the Executive Board. There is always a tension in development aid circles between those who think that a programme is mere drops in the ocean and that big ideas are what count, and others who think that the programme is the only guarantee of bringing tangible benefits to people's lives and without it all you have is words. At UNICEF, Grant began by belonging to the first persuasion and later moved closer to the second. He may well have entrusted Jolly with taking his original mission forward behind the scenes, which Jolly certainly managed to do. Whatever his own predilection, the practical field-based nature of UNICEF, which is the key characteristic that sets it apart, does not sufficiently emerge from Jolly's text.

If UNICEF had been more typical of the UN environment, offering a set of technical super-stars, gatherings of 'global' excellence, or a monitoring mechanism for member states' delivery on agreements they have signed – all things that fit the 'global governance' paradigm – no UNICEF Executive Director, Grant included, could have done what they did. It was because of the UNICEF network on the ground that Grant managed to raise the profile of children on the international agenda and start the process that led to the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals. Jolly is correct in attributing to Grant the seed and germination of the MDGs. There would have been no 'global' crusade against poverty post-2000 if Grant had not earlier deployed UNICEF's country programme machinery to support childhood immunization and other components of a pro-health, anti-poverty agenda.

Global governance

For this reason, Jolly's focus on 'global governance' and UNICEF's contribution to it find little sympathy with this reviewer. Governance is essentially about power and its exercise, and no inter-governmental mechanism, including those in the UN system, has any overarching or 'global' power. Nonetheless, there is today a substantial academic discourse on 'global governance' carried out in its own special institutes and journals. Perhaps the concept has gathered such a following because it reprises the idealism that was once attached to international effort as a morally superior alternative to nationalist enterprise and confrontation. But whatever 'global governance' is, and Jolly provides various formulations from the literature (notably in Chapter 8: Conclusions for global governance), this is not what UNICEF is about. It contributes to international debates on principles and practice concerning all policies – public health, education, protection, gender, security, environment, even macro-economic planning – affecting children. But any contribution to 'global governance' is incidental. For UNICEF, the primary consideration is what happens for children and families actually, where they are, in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere.

In a world where 250 girls can be kidnapped in Northern Nigeria because they went to school, and others may be gang-raped and hanged on a tree in Uttar Pradesh because they went out to defecate under cover of dark, it is not possible to accept the thesis that if the 'global' policy and norms articulated by the 'global' institution can be rolled out on the ground by various foot-soldiers and local partners, transformation of women's and children's lives will be assured. My father was a mathematician and an engineer, and he once told me that the maths may be perfect, but the bridge may still fall down. In the same way, the institution may be perfect, but the programme may still fall short. 'Global governance' is far from preventing widespread abuse against children, let alone universal access to the basic health care, nutrition, education, water, sanitation, and minimal livelihoods first identified as 'global' aspirations in the UN conferences of the 1970s. Until that day comes, we cannot talk of 'global governance that works' on behalf of children or anyone else.

Despite this caveat, I highly recommend Richard Jolly's book as a powerful synthesis of UNICEF's story and potential. It contains a wealth of information and perspective which probably will not be surpassed in any similarly compact account.

About the author:

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York. She is the author of two histories of UNICEF: *The Children and the Nation* (Macmillan and UNICEF, 1986) and *Children First: The Story of UNICEF* (OUP, 1996); a history of Oxfam: *A Cause for Our Times* (OUP, 1992); *The No-Nonsense Guide to International Development* and *The No-Nonsense Guide to the United Nations* (New Internationalist, 2007 and 2008, respectively); and other books and reports on child rights, basic sanitation, and other topics.