

Children First

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Front Page

Children First

The Story of UNICEF, Past and Present

Maggie Black

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Contents

Foreword: A Personal Tribute to James P. Grant	vii
Preface	xi
1. Children: A Cause Comes of Age	1
2. The Global Drive for Immunization	33
3. Unravelling the Nutrition Complex	63
4. Water, Environment, Sanitation: The Changing Agenda	91
5. City Streets and Children's Rights	119
6. Global Shifts	149
7. The Gender Dimension	183
8. Learning for All	215
9. Children at the Front Line	245
10. Towards 2000 and Beyond	275
Notes	307
Index	337

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Back
of

CONTENTS

Foreword

A Personal Tribute to James P. Grant

The title of this book, *Children First*, is the idea that drove Jim Grant during his years at Unicef. It not only drove him. It consumed him. And it shone from him wherever he went.

Many years ago, I went on my first field trip with Jim. This was soon after he became Unicef's Executive Director and soon after the beginning of the main story in this book. I was new to Unicef too, and proud to be its first woman Goodwill Ambassador.

I could not believe Jim's energy. We flew and we talked and he was never tired. We would run between villages in Africa and Asia because he had much to see. Time for Jim was always limited because the days had only 24 hours.

Upon reaching each new village or community or hut, he would stop and ask questions and see what was going on and explain his own point of view. Then off we went to new destinations. I was much younger than Jim, but still I was the one to be tired. He would turn around to me and wave 'come on!' There was no rest.

His purpose was always to make the world a better place for children. With him, it was always 'children first'. There was another way he used to put it: 'first call for children'. I shall always connect that idea with Jim. I remember his joy the day in September 1990 when he gathered 71 leaders from countries all around the world for the World Summit for Children in New York. What was it for? 'Children first.' I remember his determination that all the nations in the world, especially the US, should ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child. That, too, was all about 'children first'.

This book is not strictly about Jim, although Jim is hidden somewhere in most of its pages. This book is about what Unicef did over 50 years, especially in the past 15, to make the idea of ‘children first’ real for millions of people. Jim wouldn’t have liked a book that made it sound as though everything Unicef did during his time was because of him. That kind of self-importance was not his style.

But those of us who knew Jim, who saw him at work, coming up with his ideas, coming out with his roar of approval, coming on at a pace we could barely keep up with—we know that an incredible number of things Unicef did could be traced straight to Jim. Not just things done by Unicef, either, but by many other important people and organizations too—all sorts of things in which Unicef took a back seat because, he said, getting others to join in was what counted. So he always gave *them* the credit. Jim was an almost supernatural force who made impossible hopes and dreams come true.

When I was a child, one of my favourite stories was about a little boy who, by magic, became full of power. He spent his life flying on the back of a wild goose all over the world. In the wonderment of the boy’s eyes, the whole world became clear to him. He did not always know if the goose would fly with him high or low, or where they were going. But he always knew there was a purpose—to learn and to do.

And he listened to the dreams of the old people and the young people. The more he knew, the more he did, so that he could make hopes and dreams become reality. The longer he flew, more and more birds with passengers flew with him to help make the world a better place. When I think of Jim, I remember that story.

When Jim listened to a mother in a village in Africa or Asia and looked at her sick baby, and when he stood in front of a President, he used to put his hand in his pocket. And you always knew what he was about to do. He would pull out a packet of those oral rehydration salts (ORS). He would show the mother or the President how you mix the salts with water, and how you save the life of a child with diarrhoea. And then they would become new messengers for his way of solving the sad fact that so many children die quietly each day from preventable diseases.

And on those travels, when night came, he would still want to have new meetings—with health workers, teachers, officials, whomever. And again, from his pocket, he would take out his packet of ORS. And sometimes, I would be ashamed and think that, no, he must let these exhausted people eat their meal in peace. But each evening ended with another official, or health worker, or

Minister, or President promising to carry out his—Jim's—programme for 'children first'.

And then, coming back to the same country years later, I would see strangers stand like Jim and put their hands in their pockets, and take out the packet of ORS. And I would hear them talk with his enthusiasm of the lives they had saved.

Jim's work was a revolution for boys' and girls' survival and the dignity of life. This revolution saved more than 25 million children's lives in the years I knew him. And his revolution saved even greater numbers of children from growing up handicapped from diseases such as polio and from vitamin A deficiency.

Jim would go anywhere to promote his revolution. And he had great courage. Near the beginning of the war in the now former Yugoslavia, the fighting soldiers and their generals promised a week of no shooting. They made this promise in the name of 'children first'. Jim phoned me and asked if I would come with him on a peace march and drive through the most dangerous passage of all—Snipers' Alley—to show that peace and talk were possible. 'But,' I protested, 'what if the cease-fire is broken?' 'Well,' said Jim, 'we'll be there and find out.'

It was Jim's idea that this book should be written. And it was Jim who asked Maggie Black to write it. She wrote a book for Unicef's 40th anniversary in 1986, *The Children and the Nations*. Jim liked that book very much. He was always telling people to read it. I'm sure he would do the same with this one. And like the little boy in the fairy tale, he would still be flying high, hoping that those who read it will feel the power of his message and help to make 'children first' a reality for millions more.

Liv Ullmann
Goodwill Ambassador for Unicef

X

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page

Back of

to return

Preface

It is important to stress at the outset that this book does not provide a full history of Unicef and the fields of activity in which it has engaged over the past 50 years. Jim Grant, who asked me to write the book, envisaged a sequel to my earlier volume, *The Children and the Nations*. This was published by Unicef in 1986 (a shorter edition was published with Macmillan Australia in 1987) and covered Unicef's history until that time—its 40th anniversary. However, this second book is not a 'Volume II'. I did not want to impose upon the reader any need to refer back to information given elsewhere. I have, therefore, adjusted the original brief by enlarging the historical perspective.

The first chapter contains an encapsulation of the entire Unicef story; and subsequent chapters, covering the various themes—child health, nutrition, education and so on—all begin with a review of how ideas evolved over several decades. Therefore, although the main period covered by the book is the decade and a half between 1979 (the International Year of the Child) and 1995—a period that coincides with the leadership of Unicef by the late James P. Grant—there is sufficient 'what happened before' to enable what has happened recently to be viewed within the framework of evolving ideas and practice. Those who need more detail can refer to the earlier volume. On specific subjects, readers may also want to refer to the Unicef History Monograph series, many of whose titles are mentioned in the bibliographic references.

To some long-standing associates and ex-staff members of Unicef, the approach adopted may seem to overstress Jim Grant's Unicef, and overglorify its—and his—accomplishments in comparison with the past. A considerable effort has been made to avoid the trap of projecting Unicef as springing newly formed into existence at the advent of Grant. This is not a version of the organization he would himself at all have supported, although some of his most ardent admirers have been known to imply it on his behalf. One ex-Deputy Executive Director, Margaret Catley-Carlson (1981-83) asked me to be sure, even in a contemporary review, not to understate the contribution of

E.J.R. (Dick) Heyward (Senior Deputy Executive Director 1949-81). It was her view—a view not in any way intended to be critical of Jim Grant—that Heyward had created a Unicef strong enough to withstand the maelstrom that Grant unleashed upon it. I understood this to mean the careful shaping by an earlier generation of leaders of a decentralized and relatively flexible organization, whose strength is in the field and grounded in local realities; an organization that has always valued highly the contribution of local national staff; and an organization that also, from its inception, cultivated popular support among civil society through its National Committees in industrialized countries and its Greeting Card Operation. This organizational character is unique within the UN system.

In some ways Grant might have liked the Unicef culture to be more attuned to unquestioned acceptance of directives from the executive centre. But at the same time he fully appreciated that these strengths of Unicef, while they must occasionally have seemed more like rocks in his path than a rock on which he might build, ultimately worked in favour of his grand designs. Certainly he showed great skill in persuading and enthusing the organization in all its many corners—staff at headquarters and overseas, National Committees, partner NGOs, the Executive Board, Goodwill Ambassadors, volunteers and associates—to believe in his vision and lend their energies to his initiatives. But without the existing strengths of Unicef, those initiatives might never have led where they did.

All of this I have tried to convey, but the importance of earlier leaders and thinkers in shaping the mission and its organizational expression can do with some reinforcement here. And if Dick Heyward was the most remarkable and the main intellectual powerhouse over more than 30 years, some others must also be mentioned: Dr. Ludwik Rajchman, Unicef's chief founder and first Board Chairman; Maurice Pate and Henry Labouisse, Unicef's two previous distinguished Executive Directors, both of whom were crucial in helping to build the unique character and strength of the organization; and Nils Thedin, the elder statesman of Unicef's Executive Board for many years. All their names appear in these pages, but not with the length of credit to their outstanding contributions that would be their due in a book with a less contemporary focus.

Apart from the existence of a fairly thorough previous history, there are, I believe, two arguments in favour of a book about Unicef that primarily covers 1979-95. The first is to do with the extraordinary changes in the international environment, coupled with increasing consciousness concerning the many predicaments of children in contemporary society, that have taken place in the

last decade. When I wrote *The Children and the Nations* in 1984-85, there was really only one framework within which to examine Unicef's record: the effort to bring about 'development' in the regions collectively known as the third world or the 'South'. Almost everything (other than emergency relief) in which Unicef had been involved since the 1950s, in either the context of programmes or advocacy, had been directed at improving the well-being and family life circumstances of children disadvantaged by gross poverty in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Ever since the 1960s—a defining period in the Unicef story—the energies of the organization had been devoted to claiming on behalf of children a special priority within activity that formed part of this great post-colonial crusade. Under Jim Grant, that sense of organizational mission did not change, but other trends have recently overlaid and even begun to supersede it.

One of these is the end of the cold war and the huge sea change in international affairs that it has brought about—a change which has major repercussions on the old East-West, North-South dichotomies that provided the context in which the 'development' idea so long retained its potency. The loss of old certainties has helped to reveal that this idea—of an imagined community of nations undergoing an identical process of transition from the pre-industrial to the modern state—has run its historical course. At the same time, the Unicef mission has been deeply affected by the rise of the international human rights agenda, in particular the rise of children's rights and their encapsulation in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child; this is now the most ratified international human rights instrument in history.

Meanwhile, the negative impacts of some aspects of 'development'—such as rapid industrialization and urbanization—on the cohesion of family life and on childhood itself have moved much closer to the centre of social policy concern in developing and industrialized countries alike. The overall effect is of increased attention to children and childhood as an important issue in its own right, rather than as a subset of the 'development' agenda. There is a mounting awareness in the world at large of the need to identify policies that will protect children and young people from the fallout of economic and social distress, as well as from the disastrous effects of the 'new world disorder' of pervasive violence and conflict. The seeds of many of these changes may have been present in 1986, but in 1996 they have become dominant characteristics of the framework within which any international mission on behalf of children must be examined.

The second justification for a book on the period that more or less coincides with the tenure of Jim Grant's Executive Directorship is Jim Grant himself. At

present, it is unfashionable among historians to describe the ebb and flow of human affairs as dominated by heroic exploits and personalities. I myself subscribe to the view that it is the conjoining of forces rather than of individually decisive actions that bring about major changes of direction in public affairs. Any apparently instrumental role that an organization such as Unicef (or its chief executive officer) may have is, according to this view, mainly a reflection of the fact that it represents an organized expression of a cause at a time when that cause is rising in public popularity. I have been careful to attribute the rise of children on the international agenda that has occurred in the past 15 years to a number of trends, some of which have been slowly maturing over at least five decades and longer.

However, I also believe that it would be almost wilfully incorrect to downplay the influence certain individuals can have and have had on events. In the context of the recent story of the children's cause, the late Jim Grant was in a class by himself. He was an example of that rare type of leader who not only anticipates how a wave in public and official perceptions is forming and positions organizational efforts to take advantage of it, but he actually managed to help create the international wave on behalf of children, and even the ground swell out of which it was formed. I do not believe any larger claim could be made on behalf of a particular individual in their chosen field of human endeavour.

The way in which, through Unicef, Grant engineered the partnerships and the political action that propelled forward the children's cause during the 1980s and early 1990s is really phenomenal. Every new announcement of the identification of a major political figure—Hillary Clinton, for example—with the children's cause is, in part, a product of a seed sown by Jim Grant. I find this evidence of his advocacy of the children's cause so striking that it has caused me to rethink my views on the nature of potential relationships between people and events.

Under Grant's leadership, Unicef became an instrument for making happen things that were much larger and more significant than its size or character would ever have given grounds to expect. Some of this may be fortuitous; some is certainly due to people all over the world who made Grant's cause their cause and laboured to fulfil his vision. He himself always wanted to share credit with as many people as possible—partly because of his generosity of spirit, partly out of commitment to a common rather than a personal quest, partly out of a strategic sense that this encouraged them further. But much of it is due to him—to his energy, his optimism, his acuity, his unconventionality, his lack of self-importance, his capacity to transcend and to circumvent so as to keep his

and others' eyes on the prize, and his refusal to accept that the undoable could not be done.

Many tributes were paid to Jim Grant at the time of his death and memorial service in February 1995. There was a quote from George Bernard Shaw he liked a great deal, which was used in the 1995 *State of the World's Children* report and in many memorial tributes, about life being like a great blazing torch that he had managed to get hold of for a while. I also have a quotation from George Bernard Shaw that I find especially apt for Jim, and I would like to add it here: 'The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.' Both as a reasonable man and as an unreasonable man, Jim Grant's contribution to the cause of children was immense. And if the frequency with which his name appears in these pages in comparison with that of others sometimes makes it seem as if he stood like a metaphorical Colossus over Unicef during his regime, the fact is that he did.

When I accepted the assignment to do this book, he and I understood this would not be a hagiography, an unqualified paean of praise for a great man. His selection of me for the task is, in my view, a clear indication that that is not what he wanted. Life in Unicef under his leadership was not always comfortable and by no means excited only unqualified support from all sides and at all times. Some of the tensions and differences of view have been captured here, especially as far as the evolution of policy is concerned. However, I would very much have valued Grant's own views on the text, and I know he would have taken considerable time and trouble to give them to me. When I wrote *The Children and the Nations*, he and his then wife Ethel (who died in 1988) were among my most assiduous readers and commentators. It is a great sadness that he lived long enough to read only the first two chapters of this book. His death, however, has made no difference other than that I lost a valued critic. In all the outpouring of appreciation of his life and work in early 1995, it was my conviction not to change in any way what the book would contain, or to add any degree of praise or detraction because he is not still around. I am sure that is what he would have expected.

I have tried hard in this history, as in the last, to avoid writing a 'vanity book'. Most literature that Unicef puts out as public information—as in the case of any organization—is, essentially, propaganda. Even if it is not about Unicef but about its cause—children—the stance of the publication is: 'this is the world according to Unicef'. But in my books, the task has been to treat both Unicef and 'the world according to Unicef' objectively. So this book contains comment and it contains admission of mistakes and

naïve assumptions; to the limit of what is possible in a book commissioned by the organization itself, the book contains some of the tension in Unicef's world of human affairs without which human affairs would not be what they are.

For Jim Grant, this was a difficult issue. He always wanted everything and everyone to be better than they are. And he was afraid that if people got caught up in the tensions and dissensions intrinsic to the normal course of human affairs, the pace of the great movement he wanted to be a part and a leader of would slacken. And when things slacken, the strategic element of surprise—the momentum gained simply by being out in front—is lost. If you reveal your hand and open up discussion, the forces that spread doubt and disagreement have time to build obstacles to your advance. I know that there are many passages in this book, as in the last, that he would have wanted to discuss with me and over which he might well have pleaded an alternative case: on selective primary health care, for example; on the tardiness with which Unicef took up children's rights and child protection issues; on the degree to which water and sanitation and urban basic services became overshadowed by his 'child survival revolution'; and especially on Unicef's poor performance on gender and on family planning. But I also know he would have put his point of view to me, but never forced it. This is partly to do with his innate sense of respect for others. But it is also because he understood that if an account that claims to be historically accurate fails to be open and honest about what has not worked, its plausibility and credibility are suspect. On the occasion of the previous book, he said that he would respect my independence of view and he stuck to it. I'm sure he would have done the same on this occasion.

One other point of explanation about the textual content is necessary. Some commentators have regretted very much the lack of a personal touch—the mentions of individuals and their contributions other than those of Grant and a handful of top advisers and colleagues inside and outside the organization. I, too, regret this. But I found that any mention of one individual elicited a chorus of requests to mention 20 others. In a contemporary study this is understandable, but it makes the task of distributing credit virtually impossible. There seemed only one sensible course of action, which was to remove all names other than those of the indisputably significant, especially among those who were extremely senior, certain non-staffers, and a few staffers who are mostly mentioned in the context of other parts of their careers. To those many who look in vain for their names and those of colleagues, and richly deserve credit for their personal contributions to the cause, I apologize in advance.

The only remaining task is to acknowledge the help of many individuals in the preparation of the book. Apart from Jim Grant, to whom I owe the assignment, I would like to express appreciation to many of those who read and commented on the text: Manzoor Ahmed, David Alnwick, Sheila Barry, Robert Cohen, France Donnay, John Donohue, Brendan Doyle, Leo Fonseka, Gourisankar Ghosh, Jim Himes, Mehr Khan, Peter McDermott, Richard Jolly, Stephen Lewis, Bertil Lindblad, Erma Manoncourt, Nyi Nyi, Marti Rajandran, Jon Rohde, Michel Saint-Lot, Karin Sham Poo, Monica Sharma, Jim Sherry, Frances Stewart and Philip van Haecke. I would also like to thank the staff of Unicef offices in Brazil, Bolivia, Mexico, Indonesia, Thailand, India and Viet Nam, which I visited in the course of the book's research, and the government officials, programme and project managers, and programme participants with whom I came in contact. As always, it is ultimately these people from whom the most telling information is derived, and by whom my viewpoint has been most influenced over the course of 23 years of research and writing in this field.

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Maggie Black
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70 111

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page

Back of

reference