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INTERVIEW NO. CF/HST/INT/CRC/RAC

Mary Racelis
Regional Director, ESARO

1 December 1989

Telephone interview (MR calling from New York)

MR Cronology

Worked for UNICEF in New York from '79 - '83. She was Advisor for Women.

83-85 ?

When became Regional Director E/SARO? '85 ?

First heard of Convention

First aware of it as an NGO exercise, but nothing serious. This was when she was Advisor for Women. By '83, she was beginning to hear, "Why isn't UNICEF interested in this?"

It began to get serious when the National Committees began to put pressure on Jim Grant about '85. Swedes in Board, some of the ferment in NGO world...

'85-'86 - began to hear about it seriously but Jim Grant even at that time didn't seem terribly enthusiastic. The "Children First" slogan was being discussed, promoted by some. I was Regional Director in Nairobi by then. I remember arguments in New York HQ that we would have (we Regional Directors) when we came in. People in Information Division were all for the "Children First" slogan and thought that was a great idea, but they were aware that JG was hesitant about making that a slogan. So from the field we were just kind of sitting there in the background watching these little tussles at HQ.

I myself did go on, but without, wasn't getting strong directives from HQ on this. I didn't oblige the country reps in my region to push this if they weren't so inclined. There were certain reps who were ready to go ahead, e.g., Namazi, who was personally very interested and concerned. He was the one who kept raising these issues in the region. But it wasn't until JG came out straight and said it, he himself made it a priority, and this made the difference...

Regional Directors are more conscious of what he is feeling about things than perhaps others in the organization are. Reg Directors feel that we are his personal representatives in the field. We are more sensitive to how he feels about things, in addition to the official pronouncements that come out.

Once he said "Go", the reaction varied according to the person. Some people thought legislation could help, but we are so busy...I don't think the majority were turned on. It was one more thing... Most interested in ESAR were Namazi and Scholastica Somazzia ? (find name). She has been in Botswana for five years. She was very interested.

Much depends on the level of the country and their impressions...many people saw this as a Western instrument. Even UNICEF people thought it was mainly Western, with its concern for child abuse and all that. There was very little

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consultation with the Third World until UNICEF funded the preparatory committee for three weeks and helped encourage countries to send delegations.

Because of Namazi's personal commitment, he got ANPPCAN to sponsor... We had helped them get organized and we support their activities. We were helping develop a network of Africans concerned about child protection. He supported the effort--and so did I--to get some Africans together at that meeting ...

There were two meetings in Nairobi:

1) 6 - 10 July 1987 - UNICEF-ANPPCAN Conference on Children in Situations of Armed Conflict in Africa. (PHS note: B Namazi's statement as UNICEF rep then in Somalia, promotes Thedin's idea of children as zone of peace, but no mention of Convention.) They talked about children's rights in warfare and displacement.

Once this meeting happened, ANPPCAN organized another meeting:

2) May 1988 - Workshop on Child Rights. Here we had a core of African lawyers, social workers, judges, concerned about these issues. And they went home and had local workshops.

When these people went home, they talked to their U country reps. U reps were educated by them, U reps saw that they had real people in their country saying, "We need to do this--look at our laws, see what happens to children who cross borders, etc." People were asking for support in doing this.

We saw in Kenya how being linked to a network of other Africans reinforced the work in our own country. The linking of supporting Africans from different countries, this was important for one's own country. You saw that you were supported in your advocacy.

* In 1987 things began to pick up: everybody in the field had directives from HQ.

The Convention was on the agenda of the first meeting (July '87). People heard about it. This is what created the desire for the second meeting, which was more specialized on the Convention and rights. The second meeting had lawyers, university people, etc.

Level of country's development influenced reaction to the Convention - For example, Botswana and Zimbabwe. They already had a relatively low IMR. Immunization rates were high. Reasonably wealthy, or at least not in such dire circumstances as other countries. Countries like this have better institutional set up and more well-trained people. They can look at these developmental issues, whereas those who are really desperate are trying just to find ways to keep their kids alive. The Convention applies to this, but such countries are less likely to look to the Convention for guidance. (And they have fewer people and resources to invest in preparation of something like Convention.)

But other countries have time and resources to think about largely developmental concerns. They tend to see the Convention as a guide. The aim was to link their program with largely social and policy planning. There is much advocating about policies in Kenya. This is a more sophisticated environment, stable. You can move.

So Namazi got program linked with high level policy makers, reaching planners and Finance Ministry and Foreign Affairs Ministry, trying to get a broader veneer of "Children First". They are moving on to a higher plane, partly because Kenya is strong in this area.

ANPPCAN headquarters is in Nairobi. The driving forces in the organization are Kenyan. They are working on their own.

Charter for African Child

Idea may have been discussed in the meeting on children in armed conflict, but definitely it was discussed in the rights of the child workshop. We had been told to get countries to discuss the Convention and find out African reactions, but we were to encourage countries to accede to it even if it doesn't fully meet their needs. Main priority: we should get it passed. Countries should not insist on revising every passage that doesn't fit with their particular perspective or desires.

These were the marching orders from New York. We had to lobby that point, because it was certain they were going to say, "This and this is missing, or this doesn't fit..." We hoped they would go ahead and vote for adoption anyway. But the outcome of the discussion was, "This is not enough. There is an African perspective on the child that is not reflected here. Therefore we must add..."

So the Charter is not a substitute for the Convention (which the African countries did not want to block), but it is in addition to the Convention, contains points that Africans feel are vital. For example, one has to speak of apartheid as a violation of children's rights. This is the sort of thing, one type of addition. Then there were concerns about the strength of the family as depicted in the present text. They were nervous about the child's individual rights. They were willing to let this go by in the international, global instrument, but will incorporate it in the African charter. They also wanted to highlight the children in conflict issue.

Believe the Workshop on Rights was in '88.

In May/June 1989 they (ANPPCAN?) brought together specialists to review the Charter. After the Convention meetings, they said, "These are the things that are not sufficiently covered, here is what should go into the Charter." They had guidelines. This year a small group of specialists got together and drafted the Charter.

We had invited the OAU to be represented by their Social Development section at these ANPPCAN meetings. OAU said they were very interested. 1990 is the Year of the African Child. They said that when the Charter is ready, they will put it through their system for approval, which means it goes out to the Ministers, it will be tabled formally, etc.

For text of Charter: ask Namazi.

PHS: Other issues that caused problems for Africans?

MR: Some problems related to age of maturity. Uganda, especially, had child soldiers, and their President said several years ago that this was all right, that in natural village environment little boys would be learning to use weapons.

Implications for programming - Convention puts things in a framework. People can see themselves working in that context. Gives some direction to program, and clout to those who want to move in a country. Supports those who would be hesitant otherwise to speak out on these problems. Sometimes, and in some countries, the atmosphere for critical discussion is not that great. For NGOs, especially those working in the human rights area, at least with the Convention they have a shield. We can support them, saying that it is part of the UN commitment to children. However, we can't be too strident, nor can they, even with the Convention.

UNICEF will not monitor, but we can help those who are responsible for raising consciousness on these issues. Have to reassure people that on the topics covered in the Convention the issue is "Are we moving towards it?" Not so much whether you have already achieved it. This is good because it gives people a set of targets. Especially good for NGOs.

Once Convention is ratified, national laws will be looked at all over the place. U. funds (or could fund?) many of the workshops that review the Convention, bringing in many groups to make comments--lawyers, social workers, etc.

(PHS thought as transcribing--any formal involvement of teachers and parents and children themselves in these discussions--could it be done in African context, the children?)

PHS: Do you see any danger that people will expect UNICEF to do something about all the issues that it encourages people to look at and discuss in connection with the Convention?

MR: No, a good staff can deflect this. No, this is your concern. Any good rep would know how to draw the line between what is relevant for U programs and other issues that affect child.

But training and sensitizing the staff is very important. And the directives that come out from HQ will be important. There has to be a feedback mechanism through rep meetings.

The Information Division is also very important, the kind of material they provide. We will be having meetings on the Convention for our own people. We are going to hve workshops not only for people in the countries, but for UNICEF staff also. There must be constant feedback to see which issues, and how....

It is very important, for something to work, that the Directives are good. And that there are chances for individuals and groups of program officers or info officers to meet and clarify questions they have. They need to meet. In the regular program workshops, we will always have a segment on the Convention.

Eventually this will all fit into programming and advocacy work. People will not be so anxious as they are now. People should not be so anxious.

Summit - the ~~Convention~~ is a natural for preparing the Heads of State on the Convention. High level people will have a chance to learn about it.

There are opportunities not to be missed: If and when OAU accepts the African Charter. This could be as soon as July 1990. Have to take initiatives to make this happen. Djibril helps us there, works with us on that. There is a whole team that deals with things like that. Can fit it in with the decade of the African Child. Have to seize all these opportunities.

Now that it is clear that there will be a Convention, things will move. There was a holding back until it was adopted, but now we must see about ratification. Don't think there is any problem about ratification.

However, New York wants the first 20 countries to be a mix of strategic countries around the world. Might take a little work to make sure this happens. If one region moves too fast...

In Africa, UNICEF is really appreciated. The African countries have less in terms of funding, so a little goes a long way. Our role, UNICEF's, is significant here and we are appreciated. If we say, "This is a good thing" people tend to agree.

If PHS wants further information, get in touch with Edith Simmian in ESARO. She organized workshop on the Convention for the media. She is the one to talk to about the Convention. She knows what they are doing throughout the region.

Also, get in touch with Scholastica in Botswana. Call her.

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