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Interview with H. R. Labouisse

Conducted by Jack Charnow at UNICEF HQ

on 21 February 1985

Charnow: Well, Harry, in our previous two interviews we covered the period before you came to UNICEF. How did you come to head UNICEF?

Labouisse: Well, I got to come really because I received a letter in November 1964 from Maurice Pate (copy annexed to this interview transcript). At that time, I was the American Ambassador in Greece, having been there going on three years and very happy at that post. The letter from Maurice Pate, a rather lengthy one, said that he was getting ready to retire, and before he retired after some 18 years with UNICEF, he thought he'd like to find a successor. He discussed briefly what UNICEF and he did and so forth and asked me if I would be interested. I must say it came as a terrific surprise to me. He said that he thought that I would be approved by the Secretary-General and by the United States Government and by the staff, although I don't believe that he talked to the staff about it, except possibly Dick Heyward. Anyhow, it came as a big surprise, because I didn't know Maurice Pate all that well.



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Interview Harry Labouisse by John Charnow: How came to he:
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My first recollection of Maurice goes back to the days of the mid-fifties, when I was the head of UNRWA and Maurice was the head of UNICEF, and there were certain villages along the border demarcation line between Israel and the Arab countries which fell partly in Israel and partly in the Arab countries. Under the General Assembly resolution which created it UNRWA was to deal with Palestine refugees who had lost their homes and their means of livelihood. There were these villages - 111 of them, as it turned out - along the demarcation line, full of people who had lost part of their land, some had lost their homes, who didn't really fit into the definition. So I got in touch with Maurice Pate to see whether or not UNICEF could do something about the children along that line and that was done. In addition to which through the Paris Office of UNICEF, a lot of assistance was given to us in UNRWA during my years there. So I knew Maurice but not very well. When I came back to New York from time to time, I saw him. He would invite me to lunch at Union League Club and that sort of thing. I had been asked by Hammarskjöld to come to New York on the Congo business when I was at the World Bank as a consultant in the summer 1960. I know then that Maurice Pate went down to the Congo on behalf of UNICEF and had established some sort of operation there. I do not recall meeting him at that particular moment. So to repeat, I was very surprised at this letter. And the more I thought about it, the more I felt that this is something I should like to consider, both from the standpoint of the objectives of UNICEF and what was being done,

and also that of leaving Greece. I would have to leave Greece before very long and I didn't feel like retiring.

One of the difficulties was that I was 60 years old at the time and 60 years old was the retirement age in the UN. But I decided nevertheless to come back and to talk to Maurice about this. I did come back and had talks with him. I felt that he was somewhat ill at the time I saw him. His wife was in the hospital and he was up there because of her. At one point I wanted to see him, and he was lying down on another bed some place, he seemed to be kind of worn out. I saw him at the apartment and we talked over various things. I liked him very much and he was a good salesman for UNICEF and persuaded me that this was a very interesting, challenging and important job.

I also thought I wanted to check it out with others and I talked to Hubert Humphrey, in Washington. I had known Hubert Humphrey over the years. It happened to be that I was having lunch with him in the Senate Dining Room. It was his last day as a Senator. He had retired from the Senate because he had been nominated as Vice-President to run with President Johnson and so we were having kind of a celebration in his being unemployed for the first time in many years. I asked him what he thought I should do. He said there were three agencies of the United Nations which were important and very good agencies: one was UNICEF, the second was WHO and the third ILO. He said, "I would

urge you to take over heading any one of those three agencies if the opportunity opened." I talked also to Paul Hoffman, who was the head of the Special Fund of the United Nations, an old hand. I don't think the name had yet been changed to UNDP. He also knew Maurice. My question to Paul was, shouldn't eventually the UNDP take over UNICEF? He said no. He thought I should take the job. He thought it was a very important job and we could work together.

I talked also to Dean Rusk, who was then Secretary of State, and asked him about it. I said it was important to know whether or not UNICEF had the full support of the American government. He assured me it did, and he urged me to take the job. I talked to a number of other people.

Maurice had not talked to people in UNICEF other than Dick Heyward. I did talk with Dick and I was very much impressed by him. I asked Maurice during my discussions with him why someone from within the organization couldn't take over — why not particularly his Deputy, Dick Heyward. He told me at that time that Dick did not want to take over the Executive Directorship, that he was satisfied at being the Deputy, that he was convinced that Dick would be prepared to stay on. So after various considerations and an assurance that my age was not going to be a stumbling block, I finally accepted. But I didn't want to come, really, until later on in the year; I wanted more time in

Greece. Unfortunately, as you know, Maurice died in February very suddenly.

Zena Harman, who was then Chairman of the Executive Board of UNICEF, came to Greece to see me. We had a long talk about it and this also became a positive factor in my mind to accept it because of the people she represented who were so interested and would give a sizeable support to the organization and its administration. I thought this would be a kind of organization that would be fun to work with.

I also talked to a number of people in UNICEF without them knowing what the purpose was. I don't think they knew why I was talking to them.

So I accepted and finally resigned from the Foreign Service of the United States - much to my sorrow - not about the Foreign Service but as Ambassador to Greece.

I started with UNICEF at the Board meeting of June 1965, my first official wetting of the feet. That was a very interesting Board meeting, and I knew so little, but was ably supported by Dick Heyward and all of his colleagues. At that time you, Jack, were Secretary of the Board, and were a great help to me (Labouisse's first statement to the Board 15 June 1965 (E/ICEF/522) annexed to this transcript).

Charnow: About the time you came in the mid-60s, Harry — it was a period which began in the late 50s — UNICEF was trying to find its own identity as an organization and was beginning to think of adding development objectives to the humanitarian ones. But there were, it seemed to me, a number of images about UNICEF still persisting. One was that we were a milk agency, that we were a supply agency, that we were a junior branch of WHO and so on. I think it would be interesting if you can recollect how you felt about UNICEF as an agency and its place in the UN system when you came.

Labouisse: You know, Jack, I think it is an interesting question. I will try to answer it. But let me just say by way of a preface, it is very difficult after 20 years or more to be sure that you are being accurate in your recollections. I really felt that UNICEF was a glass of milk. That was my general feeling about UNICEF and I was very surprised to learn that its concern was not just for feeding children, that there was a broader concept. I remember one of my first conversations when someone spoke of the "whole child". This kind of drove me up the wall; I'm not quite sure what a whole child is or what was meant by that. I gradually understood it meant the development of the child as a whole human being, full capacity.

Charnow: Sorry about that. I was partially responsible for that kind of jargon.

Labouisse: But I suppose one of the reasons Maurice Pate had thought of me in the first place, and wrote me that letter, is that he knew I had been interested in development. After my experience with UNRWA, I had been with the World Bank as a consultant, and I had run a team doing an economic survey of the country to make economic recommendations of what Venezuela should do with its resources in the economic and development field. Also, when President Kennedy first took over, I was asked to reorganize the US Foreign Aid programme with emphasis on development. Maurice knew about this, and I guess that is one of the reasons he thought about me. I don't really know, however.

Charnow: Well, I know that Dick's thinking was that we had been, up to that point, too pragmatic, and that we needed to get more economic and development thinking within UNICEF. I wouldn't be surprised if Dick would have talked to Maurice about the need for that kind of experience in UNICEF.

Labouisse: I learned a lot. I came aboard because of individuals and circumstances. But as time went on, I began to know more and more about the organization, and to realize the tremendous potentials and what was being done in other fields. The most illuminating thing, when you take a job of this sort, is to go out in the field and see what goes on after having met people at headquarters, and this was an opportunity for a fascinating experience. It was important to see UNICEF -- what it did in the field, who the people were and where their hearts were.

I should say, parenthetically, that when I took this job, I was clear that I was old enough at that time not to want to be separated from my wife by wandering around all the time. So I was going to take Eve with me on field trips, but at my own expense. I paid her airfare and the rest of it, but she was a tremendous help to me because of her own observations, taking notes and what not.

This does not directly answer your question, but one of the things that interested me in the early days, when I was told about it, was the pay scales. I thought some of the pay scales were rather strange. I asked why and was told that UNICEF had started as an emergency organization after the war, and Maurice Pate had taken over and enlisted the aid of a lot of people who had social consciences and big hearts as well as ability, and he saw no reason why an organization which needed money to help children should pay any more than it had to to recruit people. So a lot of people were recruited at very low pay, to kind of give of their hearts. This is all well and good to begin an organization, but when the organization becomes more permanent you've got to straighten that out. But I was very impressed by the dedication of the people to their work. There were two different kinds: some people were concerned about their position in the bureaucracy and in the pay scale, others really worked primarily in their jobs and you kind of felt this. But by and large, I think the staff was great.

Charnow: It occurred to me that, coming into UNICEF after Maurice Pate, who had been considered Mr. UNICEF to the world, and such a charismatic person, such a father figure, that this was a hard act for you to follow. I feel that many of us might have given you a hard time because you were not the Maurice Pate whom we had loved and grown up with. I assume that that was a challenge to you. You must have had some sort of a feeling about how to establish yourself with your own style as the Executive Director.

Labouisse: Well, I never felt any hostility or whatever, at all. I did know that Maurice had had a long, long career and was very loved by the staff at large. I also knew though that in the time since his death and I came on, Dick Heyward had run the organization, and my feeling was that Dick could continue to run the organization. So I tried to concentrate on learning more about it. I relied very much on Dick. I think possibly, at times, maybe Dick got fed up with me since I wasn't like Maurice. Maybe at times I got too much into Dick's hair so to speak. I don't really know. I didn't talk to him very much about that. He had been, I gather, kind of running the organization, while Maurice was doing the outreach. My feeling was that I had to learn the organization and to be a part of things that take place. One thing I can say, thinking of Dick Heyward, even though we disagreed on something, when we came to a conclusion, even though I wanted it my way and not the way he suggested, he was an

absolutely wonderfully loyal supporter. I couldn't have been blessed with a better, kinder man. So, I never felt really too much of a stranger. I kind of felt part of the organization from the beginning and, as I had tried to say, when I first came aboard.

I was very conscious of what Maurice had done, and I remember when UNICEF was given the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1965, that the one sorrow on the part of the whole staff was that Maurice Pate wasn't there to receive that prize for UNICEF as an organization based on what he had done. So that's why in my acceptance speech of the Nobel Peace Prize for UNICEF I emphasized Maurice's part. I always kind of felt that his spirit is incarnate in the organization. It never bothered me really.

Charnow: Just to interpret my statement a bit about giving you a hard time. We were all accustomed to a certain style of administration. Some of us just naively assumed that, after 18 years, we would continue in that pattern, and that pattern was one of just doing what we had to do. We really didn't hear from Maurice unless there was something that really went wrong. Maurice felt that the biggest sin was not commission but omission. In other words, he didn't mind if you made mistakes if you kept moving in the right direction. He was an action, operational person.

Therefore, I think that we had difficulty accepting the fact that in order to be Executive Director, you had to get to learn UNICEF and therefore you had to exercise control; you had to know what it was because you had decisions to make. As you implied, and as I observed, there was a certain amount of unhappiness in the field because of the inequitable grading, which was okay when they first came to UNICEF, but not as time went on. My impression is that a number of them came trooping into your office to talk to you about it.

Labouisse: I felt, and I still do feel generally that if you're in an organization, you ought to try to know what the organization is all about. I never understood why some of these big people in business concerns seem to pride themselves on the fact that they'd never seen the plant. I don't understand how you operate that way. I want to see things, do things. You know the old Greek adage - to hear is to forget, to see is to remember, to do is to understand. The general idea was you've got to do things. I think particularly coming to an organization which was 18 years old, I just couldn't sit down and tell everybody to go about their business and I'd travel around the world. I did want to travel around the world and I've done a lot of it. But also, as I recall, when I first came, I said I want my door to be open so that people could come in and talk to me. And I tried to do it throughout that time. Whenever anyone wanted to come in and talk, I wanted to hear it, whether it was complaints or what

not. I've heard some very interesting things. One secretary once came in, and she'd been there for three years in UNICEF, and I'd been there probably ten or more at that time. She came in and said you said, "Your door was open. I've been here for three years, and this is the first time I ever came in. But I just want you to know that I think something could be done better in my department."

Anyhow, I think that there are different ways of running an organization and I think that you try to know it, to feel it, to get to know the people, the quality of people, understand who you can rely on, who you can't rely on, and then delegate your authority to those that you have real confidence in and just then follow it lightly.

Charnow: You brought in several -- not very many -- people from the outside that you had known, that you had worked with.

Labouisse: At that time I think I brought in three aides -- Sherry Moe, who had worked with me originally in Paris when I was the head of the Marshall Plan mission in France. Sherry was already there as the Special Assistant to my predecessor in that job, and when I moved to the Middle East to head UNRWA, Sherry came with me there. So we'd been together for many years. So when I came, he was still with UNRWA. He wasn't with me when I was in Greece or at the World Bank or when I was with the ICA in Washington. He'd stayed

on in the UN with UNRWA, so he came with me shortly after I came here as Executive Director.

Another one I brought in was Louis Gendron. Louis Gendron had worked for me in UNRWA; he'd been one of the top fellows. Louis, as I recall, was the head of the UNRWA office in Damascus. So sometime after I came to UNICEF I persuaded Louis, by twisting his arm, to come over because he was an excellent fellow.

Another person was my wife's secretary in Greece, Mary Diamanti. She came over as my secretary here when I was first needed a secretary.

But those are the only ones I remember having brought in. I interviewed various other people and approved of people coming over, and suggested other people; but those were in a rather special category.

Later on I tried to persuade Jane Campbell, and she came. This raises the question of the problem of women in this organization. She went to Indonesia for us as a single lady and she met John Devon who was in the British foreign service in Indonesia. John was assigned to Lagos, Nigeria, and Jane, of course, wanted to go with him. Fortunately, we had an office in Nigeria and moved Jane to our Lagos office. John was then moved to NY as Commercial Attaché to the British Mission, so we managed

to get Jane to come here to headquarters, where she headed recruitment for a while. Then, unfortunately, John was moved to San Francisco as British Consul-General, and Jane had to move there. But she still misses it, and she comes back she's here from time to time, as you know, doing special jobs.

Charnow: Later on, wasn't there Mike Polemacharkis?

Labouisse: Yes, Mike was the head of the administrative office of the US Embassy in Athens. I got Mike to come over in our administrative division. And there probably were a few others.

Charnow: It certainly was a very small number. Basically, you had the same staff you inherited.

Labouisse: I didn't feel, as I looked around at the staff, that it needed all that changing. It seemed to me it was functioning. There were some people over the course of the years that I did recruit, but I didn't try to make any major change. I don't believe in that. I think that if an organization is running well you ought to let it run but try to improve it - make it better, make it more efficient, and so forth.

The only other person that I can think of that I recommended, in effect, was my successor, Jim Grant. I had tried to leave two or three times. The Swedes were very anxious to have this job and

they had a man's name up. I knew they wanted the job very badly. I talked to Jim Grant because he'd worked under me at ICA in Washington, and asked if he would be interested and he said he was. And I told Cy Vance, the then Secretary of State, that you couldn't beat somebody with nobody, and so they finally did send Jim's name over to the White House, and that was approved. We had a long talk before that. I can't say I brought him in — the Secretary-General appointed him after the Board was canvassed. But I had a hand in advancing it.

There may be others I brought in, but those are the main ones I can think of.

Changow: You mentioned earlier that you had a discussion with Paul Hoffman and he felt that there was no reason for UNICEF to be absorbed into UNDP even though maybe it was moving in towards development matters. What was your feeling about the relations with the other agencies?

Labouisse: When I talked to Paul, he thought very favourably about UNICEF. He told me, however, that Maurice Pate — Maurice was still alive when we spoke -- should make up his mind that he either was going to be a children's agency or a development agency — words to that general effect. I didn't agree with what Paul said. I thought we could do both. But he did raise that question, and I talked to him subsequently after I'd taken the job, from time to time

before Paul died. I talked to him about it -- that from the point of view of organizations -- his organization was expanding and becoming the UN Development Programme, and they were doing some of the things which had been very useful which we were doing and could do. But UNICEF should be a part of that, should be the children's aid part -- it would be a more effective operation overall and save some money for the total UN operation if these things were brought together in some way. He told me no, he thought that he had more than he could do, and UNDP had more than they could do; and he felt UNICEF should continue doing what it was then doing. What it was then doing was pretty much what it had been doing before, and we've been doing since.

Charnow: That's very interesting. You have put your finger on what has been, for many years, an issue because theoretically we were not a very tidy organization for the UN. At the very origins of UNICEF we were not accepted by the specialized agencies, who fought against us being established except for a very short emergency period, and they certainly were opposed to our continuing on the same basis in the big fight in 1950. The issue has come up from time to time: does it make sense to have a separate children's agency when you have a number of other agencies who are interested in health and education and nutrition and development and so on? Were there any questions in your mind about that at any time, or did you feel when you got to know UNICEF that there was sufficient justification for our remaining a separate organization?

Labouisse: No, there was never any real question in my mind. There was a need for an organization to do what UNICEF was doing. I didn't think that this was something that could be done in the health field by WHO, or in the education field by UNESCO, or in nutrition by FAO and so forth, and I didn't really think that UNDP was capable of taking that kind of responsibility, because we were focussed on one thing, a very important thing - the young child. There were many places where wires were crossed, and this has caused a lot of trouble over the years. I remember when I first went to a meeting of the heads of all the agencies - that particular one was when the agencies were small enough in those day, and there weren't so many agencies in U Thant's office - that one of the heads of the old-line agencies (called specialized agencies) kind of looked around and frowned on me for being there, and he also frowned on the head of another agency which had a status something like UNICEF. In other words, we were not one of the big specialized agencies, and they made us feel that we were interlopers in this place. No one said anything; it was just a kind of an atmosphere, and I started to talk about some of our problems that I thought were very important - to have meetings like this where we could kind of exchange ideas. The other agency head that was there at the time agreed with me then, but later on he became the head of one of these specialized agencies and his view changed on this. But it depends on whose ox gets gored.

Yes, there was trouble. We used to have a UNESCO, WHO, FAO adviser in the headquarters office, and I thought that was a useful thing depending on the individual. If the individual was good and co-operative and wasn't bureaucratic, he served a very useful purpose and I think this was true throughout. I went through this in UNRWA when I had as head of the education section a man from UNESCO. The man from the health section was a man from WHO, appointed by the heads of those organizations. They were under me, but our health programme was a huge programme. We had 3,000 or more people involved in education, even more. But my feeling then was - and I took it over to UNICEF - that they had responsibilities, special responsibilities, and it wasn't for us to try to duplicate them. It was to encourage them to do the things which we saw were not being done or to improve things we thought could be improved in the field of health as it applied to children. And I still think that is the way it should be.

If we try to do everything they're doing, you have utter confusion. But I wouldn't want to leave the children's problems all to the specialized agencies; I don't think they think in those terms. Some of them are more political than we are, one of them is much more. They focus on a broader thing, they don't focus on just young children; therefore these are overall problems. Some of them have headquarters far removed from where the action is, and from my experiences in the field, very often I don't find anyone from the agency concerned about the immediate

problem, which is what UNICEF is all about — our concern for the grassroots community where people have to live. You've got to see them and understand them. I think some of these agencies just don't do that very well.

Charnow: Well, Harry, despite your earlier statement of confusion about what the whole child is, I think you just made a persuasive case for it. We shall resume.

