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Interview of Mohammed A. Piracha*

by John Charnow, at UNICEF Headquarters

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Role in the SIAR study

Charnow: I understand that you played a substantial role in the UNICEF secretariat in connection with the SIAR enterprise. Do you want to give us a little background on that?

Piracha: I was working in the Asia Section, as you remember, during the time that UNICEF decided to have the SIAR management survey. Dick Heyward and Charles Egger, when they were asked to nominate one person by the SIAR group, asked me to be the staff officer who would work directly with the SIAR group. There was also a young newcomer, Mark Laurie, who was working with what was at that time the Administration Division and was also associated in the administration related matters. Mark also had the personnel interest; my involvement in UNICEF in the past and at that time too had been much more diverse. Therefore, in addition to my work at the Asia Section I was asked to work as the staff officer and in that context I worked very closely with the SIAR group from start to finish. I was also a member of all three working groups which were constituted, namely: the field group (because of my past experience in the field) the logistics group, and the personnel group.

Factors leading to study

Charnow: What was your perception of the internal conditions within UNICEF which led up to the need for a survey?

Growth of organization

Piracha: I think at that time UNICEF was in a rather interesting phase in its history. We were moving from a small "family business" to become a "multinational corporation". In fact we had already started to move in that direction but had not gone through the processes which are essential for this kind of transition. That situation was creating, I think, a number of concerns in the minds of a lot of people. Our size, in terms of money, was expanding rapidly but our institutional arrangements were not adequate. The programme policies were also changing and we were diversifying. All these things coming together at that point in time created an atmosphere of stress - they stretched the organization's capacity to a point where it was considered necessary to have a management survey.

Headquarters/Regional Office/Representatives divergencies

Charnow: Would you say that as part of this overall picture there were a lot of problems between the field and headquarters and the field and regional offices and so on.

Piracha: I don't know what you mean by 'problems'. I think there were considerable divergencies between the field and headquarters. When I came to New York in 1970, Jack, for example, I was one of the very few people at headquarters who had recently spent time in the field. My first surprise was to find that there were two UNICEFs. That was never the way I had thought when I was in the field but when I came here I was very often put up as an exhibit: 'Meet here Mr. Piracha who has come from the field' - something to be aware of!

Charnow: To be admired or to be looked down on?

Piracha: It was a very complex kind of feeling. In those days people didn't travel from and to headquarters at the drop of a hat - so having already done nine years' work with UNICEF I came to New York for the first time and that too for a posting. I wanted to see people to whom I had written and with whom I had communicated and I would see a name on a door that was familiar, like 'Jack Charnow', and he would say, 'Oh, come on in' and, 'You are from the field' and then they would call other people and say, 'Look at this fellow - he's from the field!'

Another thing I noticed was that people would meet you and say, 'Thank you very much for dropping by - and you are so nice'. And suddenly they would pick up a piece of paper and say, 'Look, this stupid man from the field has sent this report and does not understand, etc.' This made me feel a great deal of distance between the field and headquarters. It was almost 'we' and 'they'. And I did try to bridge that distance in many ways during my five and a half years in New York.

I was involved, you might remember, in the establishment of the Global Staff Association and was one who tried to bring the field and headquarters together. There were undercurrents and tensions because of the fact that we had grown so rapidly and become such a large organization, and some of these things had to be pulled together and sorted out. The Country office, Regional office and Headquarters relations was not a new problem at that time - we earlier had the Michelmore Report -- so UNICEF has attempted to deal with this problem at various points in different ways. I don't think it ever was or can be finally resolved in any one direction.

Charnow: I'm glad you mentioned the Michelmore Report because I don't recall that there is any place in the SIAR written report that mentioned that there had been a Michelmore Report and that it had suggested doing away with one of the tiers and getting to a two-tier system.

Piracha: They did mention it at one point but they didn't say what it

meant. There is a very brief mention of 'a Michelmores Study' but they didn't say what it was. But we did at the time of the SIAR have access through the people who were involved in it - I think yourself, Dick Heyward, and others - to look at this matter and it was quite evident to the SIAR group that this was not the first time that UNICEF as an organization was looking at this two-tiered, three-tiered system relationship between field and headquarters.

Charnow: I had the impression, preceding SIAR, that many of the people in the country offices felt a degree of frustration in that the Regional directors and Regional offices often really didn't know a great deal about what was going on in the representatives' countries and yet because of, as you mentioned, the lack of travel, communication and sometimes not having direct access to headquarters, some important components of the programmes they proposed were cut out without their being a party to what had developed. Did you sense that as a background?

Piracha: Yes, it happened. There were occasions when this would happen and people in the field would feel very upset. My experience at that time, when I came to New York, had all been in the ARO, or subsequently the EAPRO, region. I had worked as a trainee in Pakistan when I first joined, then as an international officer I established the Jakarta office; then I came to New York. I had an understanding of the feeling that people in that region would share. Very often they would complain that the programmes which they had developed with the governments were either financially or, in terms of substance, changed without due consultation - that was one of the reasons. And when I came to New York I had to deal with the same questions and situations from this end of the process.

Basic SIAR approach

Charnow: Would you like to talk a little bit about how you worked with the SIAR people, and how they worked - what they thought it was all about?

Piracha: I think SIAR was a very interesting group. You might recall that when the Board asked us to undertake a management survey, we looked at a number of groups. I think there were the McKinseys who were traditionally United Nations management consultants, and one or two others. SIAR was another group. I do remember that each of these groups made written presentations and some of them were also called to speak to a small group of us and following this whole process the rather unknown group of SIAR was selected. They were not the ones who had had any experience with the United Nations in particular and intergovernmental agencies in general. They were mostly

management consultants to business and industry and that also in rather a "remote" part of Europe, the Scandinavian area. But, having considered their background and interests and some of their methodology, I think UNICEF decided that they were the more appropriate because they had a social and a human dimension to their work rather than a purely business management, work-to-rule, and "how can you make greater efficiency and squeeze more out of the staff" attitude. These were some of the considerations which were given up in the interest of a more open and participatory survey.

The other feature which I believe attracted us (I'm not sure, but I'm trying to speculate) was - at least in the corridors and in other places where people talk informally - the fact that SIAR in their presentation had very clearly stated that they wanted full UNICEF participation; they wanted UNICEF groups. We didn't realize at that time how big an involvement we would have. I think we discovered this in due course and learned our lessons. But at that time, the mere fact that they mentioned they would like us to participate, put a lot of minds at ease - that if they went out of line we would still be able to maintain, or sustain, or save the chastity of, UNICEF, which was very dear to us. So I think it was from this point of view that SIAR was selected to carry out the survey.

I very vividly recall my first encounter with them - I think it was almost winter - before they started their work. They wanted us to (Mark Laurie and myself) spend some time with them in both Stockholm and Lund, which is where they had their main office. I really was surprised at how little they knew about UNICEF or even the UN system at that time. In fact they liked us so much they asked us to stay longer because although Mark was a relative newcomer to the organization I felt they were getting a lot of mileage from us both at no cost - understanding UNICEF, its functions, how we work, etc. So, from that stay in Lund and in Stockholm, they organized their approach, and as I said a little while ago, they were really not very much experienced in handling or dealing with an animal such as us - a social service international organization not having the profit making orientation of business groups.

Board interest in economy

Charnow:

Now, as Secretary of the Board, I saw the pressure leading up to a survey, the interest on the part of certainly the large contributors was to have a look at how economically we were administering our programmes. There was a lot of discussion on the ratio of administrative costs to overall expenditures. Are you saying that actually this was not an important issue with SIAR?

Piracha: Perhaps I did not make myself very clear, Jack. What I meant was that SIAR, as a group, was not only concerned with pure management issues or the economy of an operation from a profit making viewpoint, but they also had a solid and strong social and human angle in contra-distinction to the other groups, like McKinseys, who are very much management-focussed and management-oriented. They promised us a little bit extra that others appeared to lack.

Pros & Cons

Charnow: Let me ask you a question in retrospect about this selection. I have heard comments that they were not only a reflection, as you suggest, of the thinking within the UNICEF Secretariat, but also represented the current stage of advanced thinking generally at that period about staff participation and a certain ideological concern with the underdog (who were considered to be the field people!) and so on. Do you think it was a good selection in terms of the times and, if we were to embark on a survey in the future, what lessons would we learn from the selection of a group like that?

Piracha: In dealing with a group like this, Jack, I think there are pros and cons. They had advantages. I think it was a lively survey that they did. Now, whether they did it or we did it - I think they gave us the impetus, they gave us the methodology, but we did the work. As far as I am concerned, let there be no questions about that. They contributed two basic approaches: one is what they call 'Historical Analysis'. That was a nice expression but I didn't see much of an analysis coming out except when we talked - and I had a lot of talking with them - when they would ask 'who did this' and 'why did he do it', and they asked this question of everybody. If it was going into any process and was being used in an analytical way, that would be fine, but I didn't see much evidence. You remember we had a long sheet in our sixth floor (East side) meeting room which got to be longer and longer because every time we ran out of space we would add more pages. People were invited to go and add anything - any event, any person, anecdote, whatever - of any value that came to their minds. And people did that. I doubt if that was put through any systematic analysis because they didn't have time. They did put a lot of emphasis on what they called 'historical analysis'; but it was to a considerable extent based upon picking up innuendos and interesting snippets here and there rather than on documented historical facts.

The second was a confrontational approach/style. They would put people against people and throw in an issue and that created a lot of upheavals and if you will recall, those were very tumultuous times. The meeting they had in Latin America

exploded. The meeting in Lake Minewaska had a "field" group which was pitted against a group of people from headquarters and they were locked up for two or three days and we had a lot of trading of accusations and things like that. So they would regularly bring in these confrontational situations. They had, for example, in the same confrontational system, a whole lot of interviews that people did confidentially. I was the one who co-ordinated all that. All the interviews, both of the interviewer and the interviewee, were not identified, and we put that information into the survey. We had reams and reams of informational material and I don't think that when the final report came out even 5% of that material was actually reflected. They came up with rather superficial things.

Charnow: Where is this material? Whose property is it - theirs or ours?

Piracha: There were several copies floating around. We must have a record somewhere in our files in the DPA. I think it would be a shame if we let it go to waste. I am sure they had a system by which all the work that was being done was copied to them. Once the survey process had started, however, UNICEF got hold of it with our traditional dynamism and ingenuity. We really took over the survey and using our imagination we carried out a number of significant reviews.

You have to understand there were three very interesting personalities in the SIAR group, very interesting. We had Jan Lundeburg, David Palin and Professor Erik Rhenman. Lundeburg was a nice, soft, philosophical, genuine person and I think once he discovered UNICEF he really started to appreciate us, he was very much for preserving the tradition of UNICEF. I think, at some point later in the survey, he had some kind of parting-of-the-ways with the other two in the group, because they wanted to go out and wield the hatchet much more strongly than they actually finally did. Palin, on the other hand (he was English as you know - the other two were Swedes) was actually the one who they actually put forward to us as a bait to indicate that they were an international group and that they had some international experience or capability. Palin was a smart fellow, and he was also their scribe. He wrote the report in English.

Rhenman was a leader, very ambitious. His objective was to internationalize SIAR. UNICEF was a God-sent opportunity for them to have. An organization as prestigious, as well-known and respected as UNICEF lying in front of them at the examination table, and they were diagnosing, probing. This gave them the opportunity to internationalize and Rhenman wanted to make a big deal out of it. I think Palin wanted to play his game. This is my reading, Jack, based on the very close association I had with this group.

Value in light of results

Charnow: Some staff members seem to believe that this probing, confrontational, participation thing was too costly, both in terms of time and energy for UNICEF. And as you indicated it turned out that we did practically all the work anyway, so the fundamental outcomes that remain from them were ours. So the question was 'was it really necessary - should we have had an outside firm do it?'. The second feeling is that it stirred up such dissatisfactions and high expectations that it took us an awful long time to get over it. What would be your reaction to that?

Piracha: Well, I re-state: we did all the work. I know that we did, because even when they were not here - they were not with us all the time, they would come and visit us - the personnel group would be functioning and the logistics group would be functioning, the feed-backs, the interviews, and all these other activities would continue. And we were the ones. I was personally in each of these groups and the ideas would come from us and we would mention them and they would say, 'Oh that is a very good idea' and they would go ahead and put it into the process. Like the interviews with people in the field, when Headquarters people were going on official travel or home leave. I did several interviews, Wah Wong, Martin Sandberg and several others did, too. All the people who were going out either on visits or on home leave would visit the offices en-route in our own time, do the interviews, consolidate things, etc. There is no question that we did all the work. They would only provide minimal inputs.

But the question, rhetorical as it may sound, Jack, is 'O.K. if we had that capacity and we demonstrated that we had the capacity, then why didn't we do it?'. So probably you needed a catalyst to come and agitate us to a point where we would be able to look at ourselves seriously. You are right - every time a catalyst is brought in, it agitates things until things settle down.

You have also mentioned in your question, 'Was it worth it?' - and not only in terms of staff time spent, which was plenty, but also in monetary terms? I think it did cost us a pretty penny. I would say that it was not entirely wasted. I think it brought out a lot of pent-up questions, problems, issues, that were in the minds of people, not only in the field, but there were people in New York who had problems. I think it provided the opportunity to the organization to speak to itself, to communicate with itself. What cost is too much? It's really something I cannot answer. But I believe if we wouldn't have done it ourselves, it was the Board and then the SIAR group

which forced us to think. I am sure if it was another group, a traditional management survey group, this kind of results wouldn't have come about. But, in the case of SIAR we were out on the sidewalk in full view of everybody and ourselves. The self-realisation did create a lot of maturity in our ranks and also stabilized the organization to a point where it started to come at peace with itself. There was a commotion but I think that after the commotion, when things settled down, you enjoyed the peace even more. I don't know if I've answered your question.

Essentially, I think tremendous work was done but it was not fully utilized. Maybe it was too much - the job was too big for them to handle.

I think SIAR, from what I saw, Jack, was very small - these three people and a few secretaries, and that was SIAR. It was a very small organization. Their methodology I think was excellent but they didn't have the capacity to absorb, react and then help.

SIAR overemphasis on personalities; Heyward

Charnow: Let me ask you there's another point here about SIAR and its recommendations that I've heard and that is that some of its actual recommendations were based upon key personalities within UNICEF rather than looking at the long-range nature of the organization. For example, SIAR seemed to have a feeling that Mr. Heyward was running too many things and therefore it was necessary to work around him. My view was that in some cases there was a misconception of Heyward's role, rather than a more fundamental approach towards organizational problems.

Piracha: I think I basically agree with your formulation, Jack. I have great admiration and respect for Dick Heyward. Although retired he still is a giant among us. Also, as you know, many people were afraid of Dick. In many ways he was very knowledgeable and therefore he was very powerful and he could out-do anyone in any department. So no matter which way you see it, eventually when the chips were down the work of UNICEF got personified in him.

Essentially what they did was, I think, to go in and listen to people and they all gave the same impression - that the power structure in this organization was one man. They thought and believed this was not healthy - people said it was not a healthy thing and they wanted it to be somehow, you can say, decentralized - but, on the other hand, spread out.

One of the things which gave Dick Heyward the power over people was his being the chairman of all the three APC committees, and

even before the report came out, while it was still in the process, Mr. Labouisse declared that we would observe the procedures as followed by the United Nations and that the APC would elect its own chairman. And so Group A elected Martin Sandberg as the first elected chairman, Group B elected me as the first elected chairman and Group C, which covers only the GS staff at headquarters, elected, I think, Betsy Wright.

So this was, I believe, an expression of the feeling of a lot of people. I have also enjoyed very close association with Dick, we worked very closely, and at occasions I asked him, 'We must see a time when you will not be with us. We must plan and prepare for it'. I personally talked to him about this.

Headquarters/European Office relationship disregarded

Charnow: I was surprised in re-reading the SIAR report that they really didn't go into our relations with our European office, which has been a continual problem. Do you have any recollection as to why they didn't get into that one?

Piracha: I don't have any specific recollection. The European office was at that time considered a regional office. If you remember, Jack, at Paris/Geneva did have some programming responsibilities - e.g. - North Africa and I think Turkey. So, the configuration of the European office was not what it is today. It was therefore, to my best memory, it was looked upon as a regional office - nothing special, nothing peculiar about it.

Lack of analytical depth

I don't think SIAR people had enough acumen or even enough time, to get into the real analytical issues and depth. They were not even familiar with the whole development philosophy.

They did not even touch the surface of our programming universe, that is the work of UNICEF. They mostly concentrated on people and personalities and the inter-relationships and they looked at the regional offices, they looked at the persons of the regional directors; the sections, programme section, etc.

Insufficient use of staff work

Moreover, the SIAR did not make much use of all the work that had been done. This is one of my biggest "gripes," if you would like to call it that way. I was on the front line, working with all the groups and I know what kind of ground we covered and the materials we produced. I was really proud of my organization and our work and my own involvement. They did not even touch one fraction of that whole work and I only wish somebody would make use of it, because a lot of people spent a lot of time.

Charnow: I hope the History Project can find it in the files and then we will get back to you on it.

Piracha: I don't have a complete record but I have odds and ends and things which have somehow moved with me I have not had time to look at what I have, but we did a lot of work, Jack.

Knowledge networks/centres

Another comment I would like to make concerns the whole gambit of knowledge networks and knowledge centres. I am truly and really disappointed in our reaction to the concept that was behind these. Perhaps the reason is that it didn't come out clearly in the report itself. I read over the report this weekend and I think it somehow says it but not as clearly as it developed during the survey and discussions. The knowledge network/knowledge centre complex, if I remember correctly (and I was very much personally involved) was one practical way, to get around this whole two-tier, three-tier system. 'Knowledge-centres' would go right to the root of our work. It all actually happened in Lund when we were sitting around the fire; it was Santa Maria Day and we were drinking glug - warm red wine - and the whole idea was developing. The basic idea was that these regional offices would have the kind of specialized services that UNICEF programming environment in the field needs but which are not available from any of the specialized agencies; we don't want a doctor but we want a doctor who can think like an educationalist and act like a water engineer and behave like a social worker, for example - the complex inter-relationship. Out of that basic idea we were hoping to create a regional service centre.

These specialized people would be the centres of excellence, really top-class people and they would follow a regional career within UNICEF and would move between the regions. They are too expensive to be posted in one country office, but they are necessary to the organization. They may not be required full-time for any one project or programme, but, when shared within the region, they could act as a knowledge centre. This rotation between regions was necessary in order for them not to become stale. I think this was a big problem which the field signalled that in headquarters there are people who never move.

This need for rotation was one of the main points which kept coming up in the field group, the logistics group, the personnel group, but strangely enough NOT in the policy group. Just so that we do not create another sort of fossilized group in the regional offices, the recommendation I personally made was for them to move from one region to the other and enrich themselves from varied experiences and contribute.

The way to knowledge networks was paved with every good intention. However, by the time we came down to its implementation, it became a grouping of people with similar interests and through circulating lists they were put in touch with each other. I think we really debased the whole idea of a knowledge network.

Self-analysis a continuous process

- Charnow: Would you say that the conclusion that could be drawn was that this kind of self-analysis is really a continuing, internal, job which cannot ever be conceived as being a one-time thing done by outsiders, to yield the kind of results which you suggest are needed?
- Piracha: Absolutely. There is no question in my mind. And I believe we should involve our own people. I think, when we draw people to do this kind of work or help in doing this work, we should not give them two jobs. This I am saying from personal experience.
- Charnow: And then after that, you were kind of out of the picture weren't you, so we didn't benefit from any of your experience? You got back to your regular thing? Was there someone like you who was the overall liaison?
- Piracha: No. There was a policy group in the Front Office but it was something which we didn't know very much about. There are no records, I think, of their deliberations. But there are records, and they should be available, of the field group, the logistics group, the personnel group.
- Charnow: Thank you very much. This has been a very lively period between us. I wish we could go on for a longer time. Sooner or later the idea is going to arise of having another management survey. SIAR said that its survey was good for the next ten years or so. Well, ten years have passed and we need to learn from the SIAR experience.
- Piracha: Thank you very much, Jack. I really have to scratch my head for memories - they are not all that sharp, but I was so closely involved that I really felt very much a part of the whole process and I think it was very exciting. I was ten years younger. I like doing certain things and this is one of them. It was a lot of fun.

End of interview