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Interview with Dr. Lester J. Teply,
Conducted by Dan Jacobs in New York
on 19 August 1983

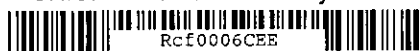
Jacobs: Can you tell me what your role was at UNICEF at the time of the Nigeria/Biafra emergency, between 1967 and 1970.

Teply: My name is Les Teply. I have a background of training and some experience in the fields of biochemistry, nutrition and food science. I got my first international experience in a nutrition survey in Ethiopia in 1958 and that led, really, to my joining UNICEF in 1960. I served as Senior Nutritionist up to the time of the Nigeria/Biafra conflict.

Before the famous phone call from Mr. Labouisse in Geneva in July 1968 I was, of course, aware of the reports of developments in Nigeria - in the press and from other sources. However, that call really was the starting point of very serious activity on the part of UNICEF. I and Sasha Bacic happened to be sitting in Mr. Heyward's office at the time of the call and in fact, as I recall, we were in the process of developing some background information on food nutrition in Nigeria, and so on. Well, right after that call, it was more or less settled



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that at least the three of us and one or two quickly added to the group - it was expanded - and it was agreed we would be a core group to devote very special attention to this problem.

So immediately we began to put together information on foods in Nigeria and Biafra - the nutritional conditions of children, mothers and so on, that we knew of in the past, and made suggestions as to what foods might be available and what might be shipped in in the way of relief operations. I recall that Dr. Egger, who was working in Geneva on these matters, reported back to us that he found this information to be very useful in his discussions with various groups in Geneva. It was a day-to-day process - almost every day there was some kind of decision to be made. I recall, for example, that we were somewhat desperate to get foods quickly. We approached, with the help of the U.S. Committee for UNICEF, several food companies in the United States. You may recall that at that time there were private groups that were collecting food items from the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral and that sort of thing. Well, that was a very fine spirit but it was not a very efficient way to collect and distribute these foods. Many of these items ended up being used by expatriats for moral support and what not. However, I think it's interesting that we made these appeals, it happened, on the very day that a very fine gentleman, Mr. Gus Murusy became Chief Executive Officer of the Bordon Company and we sent a wire to him and he wired back immediately offering to supply some \$600,000 worth of a soya-based infant formula preparation, dry powder. Well for

various reasons this was turned down, which I always regretted, because I think that offer was made in a very good spirit and I happen to know that Mr. Gus Murusy over the years has been involved in private international charitable activities in a very important way. These are some of the sidelights of the beginnings of our work.

We were trying to think of every possibility. For example, we had a special adviser who had lived in Nigeria, and we were assured that for one thing every village in what was now Biafra had a central oven and a baker who baked bread, so if you got them the things to make bread, they would make bread. I knew we had possibilities of getting wheatflour from Australia. So we had 2,000 tons of wheatflour and we organized a bread boat. Wheatflour and I think shortening - butter, oil, or something and salt and dried yeast was used, and this was shipped off to Nigeria. When I travelled in ex-Biafra, two weeks after the fighting stopped, I found that almost all of that wheatflour had sat in a warehouse in Enugu through the entire war. Our adviser on child feeding, Miss Cornegracht, had begun to teach people how to make their local dish, fufou, using that flour. Now what happened to the 500 tons of butter oil, or whatever it was, we never found out. It got through the crack somewhere, who knows what happened. But these are the things that sometimes don't work out as you might anticipate. You see, people were starving all this time, while a large amount of food was sitting there in the warehouse.

One of the things that came up fairly soon was with people from the churches going in and out and some advisers to UNICEF going in and out. One thing we were told was that they really needed some special preparation for the treatment of severe protein/calorie malnutrition. So I said, "Alright", and I simply looked in the literature, in the book of medical care in developing countries, it is very well documented that during the 50's people working in Africa found that while most of the children with severe malnutrition could not tolerate milk as such very well - mainly it seems because of the high lactose content - they could cut down that lactose content by adding sugar, and fat and then the milk protein casein. This was all very well tested and I checked with Dr. de Mayer of WHO, Geneva, who had worked in Africa, in the Congo for some thirteen years on nutrition, and he said, "Yes, that's a perfectly good approach". Now it turned out that this had never been used very much because the protein used was the pharmaceutical-grade casein with the trade name KASELAN from the British pharmaceutical company. This was expensive and naturally wasn't used much. We arranged to have this mixture made up by the ton, using food-grade casein in bulk, and this makes it quite inexpensive in relation to the small amounts you need to start the treatment of these cases. So this went ahead and it proved to be very successful and when I visited Dr. Ifekwunigwe on my visit to Biafra, I observed how beautifully this worked and how readily the children took this material from a cup or spoon. And not much later, in the Bengal refugee situation, Dr. Ramalingaswami and his colleagues in India, had almost 100%

recovery of some 12,000 cases in the camps in West Bengal. Ordinarily, the recovery rates in hospitals for treatment of these cases are very low (it might be less than 50%). So this was a rather remarkable development and it has never been fully utilized, although K-Mix 2 is being used, has been used, in many emergencies, but it has not been fully utilized. It should even be used more in the so-called 'normal' situations in hospitals and centres.

Jacobs: Was it K-Mix 2 - when you were describing adding the casein - was that the product that was developed? It became K-Mix 2? It was tried out first and used in Nigeria/Biafra?

Teply: That's right. It was tried out by Dr. Ifegwunigwe. It's K-Mix 2 because he came back to us after trying K-Mix 1 and said he would like to have a little more protein in that mixture, more casein, and so we made it K-Mix 2. That's why it's '2'.

When Mr. Labouisse visited Nigeria/Biafra, shortly before my visit (I think he arrived in January 1970, right after the collapse of Biafra) and I came in February, in The New York Times, on the front page, there was a large picture of children who had been trucked to Port Harcourt. They were suffering and they a prolapsed anus condition because of, mainly, low energy intake in their diet. And there were thirty Egyptian doctors - many of them were just doing operations on these kids. Mr. Labouisse realized that they needed to mix some oil -- red palm oil -- into this dry mixture - oil and water, stir it up, heat

it. They weren't doing that. When Miss Cornegracht and I visited, they still weren't doing it because the medical people there believed that the children couldn't handle that fat. So we demonstrated to them and got the red palm oil and made the mixture and they finally were convinced. So these are some of the complications.

Careful guidance and follow-up that is necessary. If you don't have someone like Dr. Ifekwunigwe who knew the ins and outs of this there was no problem in his doing this material properly, but many medical and health people may have some prejudices against using even sucrose which is in the mixture - we ran into that - so, we learned that sort of thing.

There were a number of things we learned. One of them was that you can find people locally very often. We were asked to send experts to advise on infant feeding and so on, so we cabled back saying, "Look at the University of Ibadan you have Dr. Omolulu, Dr. Jean Ritchie, nutritionist from the U.K. Please talk to them and you can try to get nutritionist Leslie Burgess from WHO in Nairobi to come over", which they did. And they put out some very useful instructions about feeding in the emergency situation, the treatment of the severe malnutrition and so on. That was one thing.

Another thing that really developed I think partly as a result of the emergency in Nigeria was more attention to putting out manuals and guidelines. You see, I had to go through the files

and dig out individual papers and reports on various aspects of the relief and nutrition work and make Xeroxes and send these around and so on. So it was very clear we needed consolidation of these materials, so eventually the Protein Advisory Group put out a manual on nutrition and relief.

Jacobs: You did not during the Nigeria/Biafra emergency put out any kind of a brief nutritional guide that was used in the area itself, did you, that you recall?

Teply: We arranged for these local experts to produce them. Then we got Miss Cornegracht, the adviser - she produced guiding leaflets and so on.

Jacobs: UNICEF sent earlier - before Miss Cornegracht -- into Biafra, under the auspices of the International Union of Child Welfare but on UNICEF's payroll, Alida de Jaeger, a nutritionist from Holland. She was there throughout much of the war.

Teply: Yes, I remember. That is correct.

Jacobs: Going back to during the war period - throughout that period, were you yourself trying to keep track of the numbers in need and the kinds of nutritional needs that they had? Or was that not within your bailiwick at that time?

Teply: We did try to keep track of that and you may recall that we were

associated in helping to organize the group that went with Senator Goodell.

Jacobs: Jean Meyer was part of that group?

Teply: ... it's again very interesting. Again I was sitting in Mr. Heyward's office one Friday morning....

Jacobs: Senator Goodell called?

Teply?: No - Jean Meyer called and said, "I'm going to Nigeria and Biafra with Senator Goodell and he wants me to take along an agricultural economist and a paediatrician who knows Africa". So I said, "For the agricultural economist, you want George Axenn of Michigan State University, who worked in the University of Nigeria in Nsukka for a number of years and was an excellent man. I'll call you back later about the paediatrician". So after lunch I called his office back and suggested Dr. Roy Brown who had extensive experience in Africa. Well, that was on Friday, and at 8 o'clock the next morning at my home in Larchmont, New York, I picked up my New York Times and here was quite a long story about the whole expedition and they laid out the team with Jean Meyer and George Axenn and Roy Brown - all laid out in the New York Times. It was fantastic, I would say. And they left the next Tuesday.

Jacobs: I think they were in Biafra on Tuesday, in fact.

Teply: It could be - maybe they left Monday night. So, Jean was a remarkable person and through these various sources it was fairly clear to me that conditions were rather serious, very serious, despite what some people in some countries and some parts of the press were saying, which was trying to minimize the situation.

Jacobs: What did you rely on for your figures on how many children were in need since this affected the amount of food which would need to be shipped? What kind of sources do you recall receiving that information from?

Teply: I really don't recall that. I think Mr. Heyward is the one I think who followed that most closely.

Jacobs: Yes, he prepared tonnages based on estimates which I recall in July - Charles Egger at the time you mentioned he was conferring with the various relief agencies and had sent a series of reports back from those who had field operations going.

Teply: You see, I came after the Secretary-General of the U.N. announced from Lagos that -

Jacobs: You are thinking of January 1970 again?

Teply: Yes. He said, "Things are under control; some people are a bit hungry but nobody's dying". It was absolutely untrue. When I arrived in Lagos, I got the story that everything had

been exaggerated. I said, "Wait a minute, I don't believe that. Let me go and see". And I went, I met Miss Cornegracht, and she told me there were some two hundred sick bays where people were more or less dying like flies. They were dying in these sick bays, people of all ages. Despite the fact that, if you drove along the highways and through the cities you would see a few chickens walking around, there were cassava fields with pretty good stands and so on. There was some food around. You could see people on the roadside selling from plastic bags what looked to me something like CSM. The sweet flour was sitting in Enugu, and all those things. As a matter of fact, at that very time there were large stocks of food on the docks in Lagos and Port Harcourt. There were 165 brand new Mercedes trucks sitting on the docks in Lagos which were not being used. One official called me, "Well of course we have trouble distributing from the stocks at Port Harcourt because you can't expect the drivers to work on Sundays. "Well", I said, "I would expect them to work on Sundays when people are starving". I just couldn't understand this. So, anyway, Miss Cornegracht showed me this list of sick bays and said, there is a number in our general area that we could reach conveniently in an hour-or-two drive, just pick one at random. So I just picked one, at random, and we went. Even before getting to the sick bay, which was just off a main road - there was no indication on the main road that there was serious trouble - but as soon as we entered the sick-bay you would see bodies, people crawling and trying to get to this place and then you would see inside, people of all ages in an extremely serious condition. Now, Dr.

Ifekwuenigwe was going around and picking up some of the young children and taking them to his centre and treating them, but many of these people died.

Jacobs: Why was there still starvation or malnutrition months after the war had ended?

Teply: Partly because of logistics of distribution. As I say, the snafu. The trucks were there, food was in the warehouses, coming into the port in Lagos all the time. It wasn't getting distributed as it might have been.

Jacobs: What was UNICEF's role in this during the post-war period? Was UNICEF attempting to help with the distribution?

Teply: We had a man based in Port Harcourt who was working on these matters with the warehouses and so on, but I don't know the detail of his exact involvement. I met him only by chance on the highways in Biafra. Ockwell was his name. He was dashing around Biafra trying to do more things than he could do, obviously. So when I eventually got back to New York I was asked what should be done. I said, "For one thing, get a programme officer sitting in Enugu with a lot of supplies in the warehouse - UNICEF is providing a lot of that - and we need somebody to see that these are used properly. Just keep a check on it". So we got a programme officer out of UNICEF Nairobi, Fred Collins, and he did this job. I saw him later

and he had organized local production of desks and chairs for the schools - very useful things. So that was one thing.

Our very good friend Poul Larsen didn't want to build up too big a staff - he was resistant and I fought him on that one. He didn't want any more people coming in, he said, "No, there are too many people coming in". I said, "Well, there are not enough to do the job". So we got Fred Collins in.

Jacobs: What was his reason for that?

Teply: I think this is part of the psychology of working in a disaster. I have been told by experts that many times it would be so devastating to a person working in the situation, where people are dying and so on, to admit to himself that they were not coping with the situation. We're not able to deal with it, it would be devastating to admit that. So they say, well thing's are getting ... I found a very prominent person, very well known in medical relief circles, who I ran into in Enugu and he said, "Oh, yesterday I was back in the bush and I found some cattle surviving back there". I said, "That's very nice, but I'm going to cable Mr. Labouisse that there's an extremely serious situation here, and people are dying". He said, "Yes, well that's true". And it was true.

Jacobs: Would you have any observations on any lessons to be learned? You have touched on a number of them. Did you have any

thoughts on what UNICEF learned from that experience in the Nigeria/Biafra situation?

Teply: Well, you see, the K-Mix 2 experience was transferred directly to the West Bengal camps.

Jacobs: Was that the Bangladesh situation?

Teply: That's right. Twelve million refugees came over. So that was extremely useful. Of course India was pretty well organized itself there. But that's one thing we helped them latch on to.

If you take Kampuchea, I think I really would have to think a bit more, beyond the things we've already mentioned.

One thing I found very interesting was that during the conflict Biafra had a very serious problem in getting enough protein, and yet when I visited East Nigeria in 1965 I read in the newspapers stories in which the governor of the state was saying, "We've got to get rid of all these cowpea production fields (a very important source of protein - the main legume in Nigeria). This governor said, "Let's have cash crops - red palm-oil plantations. We could buy cowpeas from other parts of Nigeria, we can get dried fish from Chad, we don't have to worry about these sources of protein". Well, when they were isolated, they had to worry about them. So that was one thing. So I think, again, in relief operations to the extent possible it is very

good to keep local production going if you can. This of course was the terrible problem in Kampuchea even for the rice supply alone.

Jacobs: We are finishing this side of the tape and that winds up pretty much what you have to say this time?

Teply: Yes. I may have some further thoughts. I'll take a look at the transcript.

End of interview