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Interview with Heino Wittrin*
By Jack Charnow

CF/NYH/OSEB/HST /1995-049 on May 12 1986 at UNFPA Offices, N.Y.

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Recruitment into UNICEF

Charnow: Heino, to begin with do you want to say something about your recruitment into UNICEF?

Wittrin: I came to New York from the University of Chicago for interviews with companies and in the process I also visited the United Nations which I looked up to as an organization with great prestige and hope of the future. As a citizen of the Federal Republic of Germany. I could only go to one organization, UNICEF, because all the other organisations would only recruit nationals of member States, and to make a long story short I was given the option of coming to UNICEF.

Supply operation evolution

Charnow: I think it might be useful if you just talk about how you saw the supply operation and its development.

Wittrin: Well Jack, I spent roughly eighteen years with UNICEF -- very rich years. During that time I had occasion to grow and to see things in different perspectives at different times. When I first started as a procurement officer in the Supply Division under Bridgewater, we were doing procurement in the mostly old fashion sense -- hard work and assembly line type activities. Later I got larger responsibilities in working with the Food Conservation Division in the procurement of standardized dairies components for diaries all over Asia. After a number of years in Supply Division which was also included a short stay at the Paris office, which was then headed by Charles Egger, I left UNICEF and went to the field with UNDP to return again in 1968 to head the Paris supply operation.

There is no question in my mind that the period in the field with UNDP changed my outlook. In the early days UNICEF had been a primarily a supply operation and I think Bridgewater led it with considerable imagination. But when I came back I thought that UNICEF supply operation had not really grown with times. We were sort of caught in a fairly old-fashioned set of principles -- savings were viewed in dollar terms, not necessarily in terms of utility or in other terms. I also felt that the three supply units were not truly integrated. There was a headquarters Supply Unit which set the policy and told everyone else how to operate and then there was the European Supply Unit which was an appendage to headquarters and then there was Copenhagen which was without doubt the favourite child of Bridgewater and could, at that time, do no wrong.

Non-convertible currencies

Charnow: During your period weren't you very active on the issue of non-convertible currencies?

Wittrin:

That was a technical issue, very well handled by Ed Bridgewater with certain barter deals. When I became Director of Supply Division in 1972, I continued on this path and I think we managed to have very good results in Bulgaria, the Soviet Union and Poland — mainly in Poland which revived the old relationship of socialist countries with our supply function through midwife kits and microscopes and other items.

Relationship supply to programming/field support

But I think the primary goal that I had was to make the Supply Division an integrated part of the overall field support and programme function. I believed that assistance to the field in specifications was the key to good buying as distinct from the marginal savings improvement. So I wanted to strengthen the professional capacity of the procurement officers. I really felt that interlinkage with the programme and the field was one of the main objectives of the Division. I think with our devoted colleagues in the three parts of the Supply Division we managed to get a better working relationship without having too many acromonous debates.

The Supply Division always felt it was the down-trodden part of UNICEF but everyone in it knew that we did often the good part of the work, be it emergencies or in other aspects. I think the main thing was to not blow our own horn and to become a member of the team and to see the importance of programme and the overriding importance of the field function. I wanted to contribute to a greater service component to the field before procurement took place.

Charnow: I have always felt that that was your point of view, and your contribution , but it also seemed to me that it was a long time coming and I never quite understood where the resistances were.

Wittrin: Well, in a way procurement officers were viewed as narrow types who had not really seen the world. They hadn't had much of a chance to travel, as Bridgewater pointed out in his interview. I think there was a certain intellectual snobbery in the programme part of our organization regarding Supply Division. Some of it might have been merited but I think over time by having better dialogues, by having high calibre staff, this distinction disappeared on its own.

Another thing was that Dick Heyward was a very difficult taskmaster. He was a brilliant man but he was perceived by some of our staff members as having certain aspects which made a dialogue at times difficult, I personally had never had any trouble and I looked back with great affection to those days where we jostled over all kinds of issues, but in the end it must be said Dick Heyward always knew best. This set a certain tone that prejudiced, lets say, an equal partnership for the staff as a whole.

Charnow: Heino, as you know we now have again a consolidated Programme Division, with planning and operations under one head. What do you see as the relation of Supply to Programming?

Wittrin: Well, I have always been a strong advocate of a strong Programme Division and a strong linkage between Programme and Supply. Now apart from petty hierarchical rivalries I have never felt that we should be segregated, but we do have different functions working on the same issues. Everything starts with concepts and knowledge of the country and with funding. So, I am very happy to hear that the Programme Division has been put together again I believed it should never have been separated into two functions. We always had in my time excellent relations with the individual desks. A lot of my colleagues gave advice freely when they came to ask for it. We would plead with them at times and when when we thought things became too high-handed. But in general I think

it is fundamental that programme and supply are in the same continuum and work together with as close communication as possible. And I think the field is an extension of the programme; that is where it starts. No programme function can work without a well managed delegated operation in which the field has the optimum latitude to make decisions on the spot and good linkages within the organization.

Charnow: How do you see the Headquarters supply function relating to field offices?

Wittrin: Well, I'm sorry to hear that the field logistic services that I had felt very strongly about has been abandoned by Supply Division or at least down-graded. I am also sorry to hear that there aren't so many regional or local supply staff because I always felt that they were an essential element in the work of Supply Division — to supply staff in the field who might eventually become programme officers or rotate into other function into UNICEF, as many have done or will do. So I am slightly disappointed in the indications that I have, and I hope that they are not altogether correct.

Supply guidelists

Charnow: Would you like to say something about the supply guidelists?

Wittrin: Guidelists started with the work of George Mar and Tony Parenti and others. Sam Keeny should also be mentioned. They were meant to be guide lists only, but they became essentially sort of tools to avoid thinking. That was the danger of guidelists. They had a model character which was to be used in modifying local requirements or in patterning those local requirements, but they then became sort of routine representative means for getting out procurement requests.

Lou Shapiro

We wanted to stop this, and this is where Lou Shapiro's work came in so well because Lou Shapiro was a person with deep field experience a great willingness to help and a great found knowledge. So Lou Shapiro at that stage was asked to review all supply list coming from the field in order to help the field to avoid errors. In his nice manner he managed to convince our colleagues he was not a policeman but that he was a friend and helper. And they would say in the end, Lou, do what ever you want; we trust your judgement.

Improving definition of supplies requested

Help to field

Now this was the approach that I think was important, that the greatest waste lay in the wrong definition of what was wanted, not in the process of buying it, and I think that that lesson was the one that I would like to be remembered for among the staff.

I think the staff appreciated this both in the field and the procurement function. Our work had to be adapted to what it was supposed to do. If field offices needed the help we should give it so they could do what was required to make a more viable project or get a more viable supply component, or whatever. Wrong definitions will lead to the wrong results.

Horror stories

Charnow: I would hear horror stories from time to time about overly sophisticated supplies stored away and not used and so on.

Wittrin: Well Jack, I think when you are in development you have to take certain risks. There will be mistakes made. Understanding time aspects the programme officer has discussed the project two years ago; he put it out the supply list a year ago, and then he wants to have instant results. The fact that people cannot understand that the process does take time is one of the problems.

Efficiency of supply function

But I think on the whole I have not seen in my life at the UN which is now a span of twenty-eight years, a more efficient supply function than that which we had at one point of time in UNICEF.

Local procurement

Charnow: Heino, do you want to say something about the issue of local procurement?

Wittrin: Local procurement is a part of history. At one point local procurement was totally inappropriate because there was hardly anything that one could buy. But later I think one needed to open one's blinkers and say certain items are no longer needed to be stored in Copenhagen, one can buy them almost anywhere. There was a built-in resistance by the supply system to our local procurement which, in retrospect, probably could have been loosened at an earlier stage. But fundamentally the procurement function was always interested in cost and quality, it was not interested in what I call the political dimension. For this I think UNICEF should take some credit that we were not politicized. We tried to do a professional job in the best and most efficient and economic manner possible.

Unsung successes of supply function

Charnow: I have often speculated, Heino, whether UNICEF in the field of milk conservation, in disease campaigns by adapting what was available in medical technology for large scale application, in initiatives as with the water pump or the enrichment of the foods, has not made important innovative contributions to development. Maybe I'm overestimating our contribution, but I

wonder whether our role in the adaption of knowledge from the western countries to situations in developing countries for large scale application is one of the relatively unsung achievements of UNICEF.

Wittrin: Yes, Jack, I do agree with you. I think UNICEF and, of course, the Supply Division as part of this has made contributions that are largely forgotten even though they were tremendous success stories.

FCD

We can talk about the dairy projects in India where today you have one of the strongest most modern dairy industries on a cooperative or private basis. The foundations were layed by UNICEF, whether it was a dairy in Turkey or a diary in India or Pakistan, they were all more or less started with the aid of UNICEF, FAO and the Supply Division playing its part in this endeavour. The colleagues in FCD, I remember with great warmth the excellent relationships we had with the engineers in FCD. We worked as a team - the supply staff with FCD staff - and managed what I consider an extremely successful programme.

It was said that the first thing we had to do in India was to teach farmers that it didn't hurt cows to be milked, the second thing was to get the cows off the roads into colonies and then the third thing is to make it worthwhile for farmers and to

provide a clean milk product. At one point the milk available in Calcutta had as many microbes in it as the sewage water of London. So today you can find very palatable milk products everywhere in these countries, and when you go back, whether it is in Terehan or in Rashquat or in Worli, wherever you want to set your foot, the initial beginnings were aided by UNICEF, not to forget the Governments own efforts in this regard to eventually provide the management, to train technicians, etc.

Health

Charnow: Can you give examples in other fields?

Wittrin: Well, to my mind, the greatest contribution made by UNICEF in the history of its existence to the well being of children are largely in the medical field. I have always been partial to investment in type projects like dairies; DDT factories--things that are of lasting value for the transfer of technology etc.

ORS

But on the other hand I think the greatest stride had been made in the medical area in cooperation with WHO and I think the medical equipment that we provided starting with the midwife kit eventually culminating in concepts like ORS which was to some degree, a joint invention of WHO on one side and Jack Richman Lou

Shapiro and Wittrin on the other. Take ORS which now is something that is accepted in our day. When I first greeted Mr. Grant, he was not terribly excited by it because his mind was on Kampuchea and water.

Charnow: Would you like to elaborate a bit about this joint invention of ORS that the three of you and WHO put together, obviously there must have been some experience someplace that you felt was adaptable for UNICEF purposes?

Wittrin: Well Jack, the story is that the concept of rehydration salts is an old one and Lou Shapiro knew this from his early days as a pharmacist. There was also a formulation that WHO had approved. The question was as to how would you as UNICEF get this into use and how would you present it to a child. So Jack, Lou and I were discussing first of all flavors which in the end was a question which nobody could judge because it involved, say, eventually the particular taste buds requirements of an Indonesian child versus a Bolivian child. So we just left it eventually at its normal taste. Next, the consideration was how to package it, and I suggested that we should try along the lines of the refreshment one gets in an airplane, namely a sort of sachet type package. Then the question was where would we try this out. We found a firm in Australia that was very inventive in doing our first production run. The next thing, how would you increase the shelf-life, avoid caking, avoid browning. All kinds of additives were tried, and a proper formula was found so this product would

remain stable for a long time. The next thing was the instructions, the packaging. We even had a search for a brand name; we were going to call this Oralite, and make this the UNICEF trade name which we would give free to any developing countries for local production. Finally, we found that a New Zealand firm, in spite of our search, had this name, and then we just decided to name it ORS or rehydration salts. So that was the story of this product. It really went further because we were trying to ship out bulk material in drums to have it done locally, which was done in Colombia and in Latin America. We hired an adviser to test overseas local production. So I think this is a story where we started with the product that at low-cost could save lives, and then we saw to it that it became known, and I think that we saw to it that countries if they wanted to could produce it themselves. So actually the UNICEF story is to put yourself out of business, to have countries do it themselves. That I think is the greatest success any UN organization can attain.

EPI/Essential Drugs

EPI is now a large programme with immunization proving now to be what I always knew, namely one of the crucial elements of UNICEF assistance to developing countries. And last but not least, I think the essential drugs programme has a fantastic potential in saving millions of dollars for our third world countries, and at the same time providing safe and stable low cost pharmaceuticals to them.

Relations with WHO

Charnow: In all these innovative developments how did WHO fit in?

Wittrin: Well, Mr. Henderson in EPI and the various colleagues in WHO that we had to deal with were, on the whole, very helpful technically. Sometimes however we had the sense that we regarded a bit as to junior partners. But on the other hand, people like Lou Shapiro and Jack Richman and others could speak to them on an equal basis. If you look at the first publication on essential drugs you will see that Jack Richman, Dr. Probst — people of professional calibre were cooperating in establishing this. So on the whole I think the relationship between UNICEF and WHO as well as FAO was very professional and a good one.

Encouraging commercial production

Charnow: Did some of the things we did make commercial people more interested in taking them on, because we helped create a greater market through more wide spread application of things like syringes, needles, cold chains, that sort of thing?

Wittrin: Well, I think we did contribute to a number of technical developments - certainly with syringes. We had certainly a large hand in establishing standardized guidelines for cold-chain requirements because you cannot take on a vaccination campaign without a cold-chain. These concepts were very clear to UNICEF long before others knew about it, or recognized its importance. It also meant that we were inquiring into new heat-resistance types of vaccines and then working with the industry to the extent feasible.

Honesty in the supply function

We have always had a very proper relationship with our companies and I think that is another thing that I would like to stress I never had much to worry about this. The supply function, was think it was correct and above-board during my ten years. I knew of no abuse, of no hanky-panky going on. I think is a remarkable achievement.

Views on future of the supply function

Charnow: Heino, in looking toward the future from the standpoint of the supply function, what are the things that you would like to encourage and what are the things we should guard ourselves against?

Wittrin: Well, I have always felt that supplies are means, not an end, and if they become an end then I think that would become a very sad story. I think supplies in the world of today are probably less important than they were in the early days after World War II. A lot of things are available in the countries themselves, and I think UNICEF would be well advised to stick to items of strategic value or whatever the policy of UNICEF may be. I think this would essentially be health, might be water, but it would certainly be a lesser emphasis on transport and certain educational materials that are more or less available everywhere. So I believe that UNICEF would, as far as Supply Division, is concerned be well advised to continue to look at the local availability of items and to limit its supply function to those goods that are of sophisticated technology, they are best provided centrally as distinct from each national programme level.

I do feel that UNICEF is no longer in the general supply business and I subscribe to that because that is a phase that we can consider as concluding.

Charnow: Where would the control be? Would it be in the Supply Division, in the Programme Division or some combination? Would it be Copenhagen?

Wittrin: Well, I am not totally in the picture as to the current status, I am partially guilty in having developed Copenhagen and to have helped the initial discussions with the government on the new UNIPAC. At the same time, I sort of fear that a supply function that is completely divorced from the Programme Division and Headquarters policy, is sort of potential risk, and I would not have subscribed to that as a good way to go. But maybe I don't see it quite correctly, maybe this is not the case. I certainly know that when Maggie Catley-Carson was in UNICEF, we had long discussions about the fact that supply is a service function, but as a service function it should also have an equal voice saying how its service might be provided better in another fashion. But the concept of it being a service function needs first to be understood.

Emergencies

Charnow: I know your time is limited but could we turn for a moment to UNICEF's provision of supplies in emergency situations. Am I correct in my understanding that the early days we were the major, the outstanding agency that could get things there fast when needed, but that in later years, however, a number of other organizations - voluntary and perhaps inter-governmental - have developed that same capacity, and that we need to re-examine what we provide?

Wittrin: Well, I do think that you are quite right Jack UNICEF was without an equal in the early days, and the early days even went as far as the Kampuchea days, where we provided massive amounts of supplies and equipment. But one of our objectives always was to provide the best product at the lowest price, and in some ways we were often a little bit too penny-wise, and a lot of other organizations like UNHCR had better concepts, sometimes, I think, of what time-utility meant. They would not squeeze the last cent out of a dollar, but they might get it there faster because they would cut some of the corners that we in our possibly old fashioned ways would not cut. This is another process I think we have gone through.

Pennywise or otherwise

Writtin:

I look back and see that how we controlled travel and how we controlled expenses was in some ways unique. At the same time when I look at what is going on today, I wonder whether some of that is not overdone. So each generation has its regrets. I remember Archie Rothery in Paris, one of the most professional of colleagues and a very kind person in addition. When he had a call from New York, that had to mean disaster and if he ever dared to call to New York he would have to explain at length why he had dared make a call to New York. Today people discuss the weather with Nepal and Cairo at the drop of the hat; there are

even predialed numbers in existence. Rothery who essentially ran the procurement operations in Paris has never been to New York in his whole professional life because that was too expensive. Today people take a trip to New York for a half hour discussion that might not take place in the end. So I think there are some lessons to be learned on both sides.

Individuals

Charnow: Well, now earlier in addition to Ed Bridgewater you mentioned others who made important contributions - George Mar, Lou Shapiro, Jack Richman. Do you want to say something in addition?

Team Work

Wittrin: Well, naturally I would first of all like to say that all the colleagues that I worked with. I had the greatest regard for them. It was the joint effort aa a unit, between the headquarters group, the Geneva group and the Copenhagen group that made team work possible. A lot of the procurement officers that I engaged I hope they have a full and happy career in UNICEF are people that I will always remember. Now to single individuals out is difficult, because I did feel that we had an excellent team spirit and a team.

Pate, Labouisse, Heyward, Catley-Carlson, Grant, Egger and Others

But I must say first of all I would like to say that Mr. Pate, Mr, Labouisse were Executive Directors that commanded respect and affection. Heyward inspired fear but not necessarily in me, but he was also a person that worked hard and was dedicated and a man beyond reproach, and in spite of some of the practical difficulties between us I hold him in highest regard.

Catley Carlson

Then came Maggie Catley--Carlson. I always remember her as one of the most brilliant and cheerful persons I ever worked with, not afraid to make decisions, even wrong decisions, a marvelous person to work with.

Grant

Jim Grant, we often had the feeling, he had the answers to our questions before they were asked. But in the end I adjusted to Jim. He has incredibly energy, and enthusiam and he is a master fund raiser and I think of him as a person of unique qualities.

Egger

Charles Egger I was very fond of. You know Charles never did have much time for the lowly Supply Division people, but this had no effect of our personal relations I enjoyed working with him.

Other programme people

There were many other colleagues in the programme division, and in the field - a number legendary figures, whom I felt it was a privilege to work with. Sam Keeny, Paul Larson, Knud Christensen, Tony Meager, and many others.

Gendrin

I enjoyed working with people in the administration. I think Louis Gendrin was a man who gave a certain style to the administration and he kept his word when he gave it, something that wasn't always true of administrative officers.

Middleman; Cavaglia

I really must say that my relationship with the Comptroller was most harmonious. Middleman often the Cassandra, a very good professional person, Cavaglia and his colleagues were very easy to work with.

Shapiro

But the person that I probably have the greatest affection for was Lou Shapiro, who I thought was a very great human being, and truly a person that gave and gave and gave and enjoyed giving.

UNICEF/UNFPA Relations

Charnow: One final item. You have seen UNICEF's involvement in family planning throughout the years from the UNICEF side and now you have seen it from the UNFPA side. I wonder if you would just like to comment on that a bit.

Wittrin: I was part of the early links UNICEF had with the UNFPA in the Supply area. I think they weren't altogether well planned on the part of UNFPA. At the same time we as UNICEF, were ready to provide a service which in the end turned out to be slightly miscalculated.

Charnow: In what sense?

Wittrin: I think the strictly supply aspects were not the problem. The problem was that there was a certain miscalculation on requirements and countries willingness to take standardized supplies so there were large stocks in UNIPAC of certain contraceptives that just wouldn't move, and that was tied up capital. Also it is not good to stock pharmaceutical products too long.

Charnow: Which were they?

Wittrin: These were standardized birth control pills, supplies that UNICEF bought on behalf of UNFPA. We are now doing our supply work in UNFPA with the help of two former UNICEF staff members. But there are aspects much more important than the supply aspects. I think the Programme Committee at the last Board session encouraged UNICEF to enlarge its scope toward mother and child health and birth spacing. I think on programatic lines much greater cooperation at field level in

programmes affecting mother and child health and family planning could be undertaken by the two agencies. I think there is a very good meeting of minds in the top levels of the organizations but I think what actually happens in field level could be significantly strengthened. I don't think any fear need be had by UNICEF that this would result in controversial consequences for UNICEF because mother and child health is mother child, health - whether it is financed by UNFPA or financed by UNICEF, or by UNFPA and then executed by WHO. So, I believe there is a lot of room for joint programming on the basis of our respective mandates in getting the job done in a more appropriate and more effective division of labour, especially in Africa. And I am pleased to know that the Programme Committee has raised this issue.

UNICEF approach to family planning

Charnow: Do you believe UNICEF has taken a too cautious approach in bringing family planning into maternal and child health?

Wittrin: No I don't think so. I think it is much more a question that is of a philosophical nature. Jim Grant always speaks of saving children and a lot of people say the unanswered question is, "For what?" We will have a serious population problem in Africa, and the continent is doubling its population by the early 2005 or so again, and we know that the continent now is only being able to support the present population, with difficulty. So these

questions have to be philosophically evaluated so to speak. Saving lives is not the whole story: it is the beginning of the story. The question is where is the education coming from, where are the jobs coming from, where is the infrastructure coming from and these are the questions where I think we need to sort of have more sophisticated answers to the questions that might be asked, in the end I think on the programme level. We are involved to a large extent in Africa in mother and child health projects that include family planning advice. And in Africa it is very popular to speak of birth-spacing. So birth-spacing is good for the mother, it is good for the children, and it is good for the country, and ultimately it is good for the individuals concerned. So I think we need to practice what we preach, and we preach cooperation and coordination. But I think this can be vastly improved, both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Charnow: Well, thank you very much Heino. I appreciate very much the opportunity of finally being able to get to this interview despite your busy schedule. Perhaps we may get back to you later to elaborate on some specific points.

Wittrin: It has been a pleasure Jack, and thank you for coming by.

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