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Interview with Nils Thedin*

ILO Headquarters, Geneva, on 2 December 1982

by Tarzie Vittachi

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* Mr. Thedin has been Sweden's representative to the UNICEF Executive Board since 1961. He was Chairman of the Programme Committee in 1969 and Chairman of the Board in 1970, 1971 and 1972. He has been Chairman of the Swedish National Committee for UNICEF since 1954. He has been Vice-Chairman of the Swedish "Save the Children" Fund, a member of the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA) and board member of the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation. Since 1935 he has been active in the Swedish Co-operative Union as teacher, editor and Director.

Thedin pre-UNICEF experience

Vittachi: I would like to ask you, Nils, what made you first interested in UNICEF?

Spanish child refugees

Thedin: That is a long story but I think that I should tell you something about the background. Before World War II in the years 1937 until the end of 1939, I was working in Geneva with the ILO. There I got in contact with people who were interested in assisting children in war-torn Spain. A Swedish friend of mine was working there, and when he came to Geneva he persuaded me to go down to Spain.

Vittachi: That was the Spanish Civil War.

Thedin: That was the Spanish Civil War, in the autumn of '38. I took a leave of absence from the ILO and went down to Barcelona working with something called The International Committee for the Assistance of Child Refugees in Spain. Those who worked there were mainly Quakers, British and American Quakers who impressed me very, very much. I was staying there for some time going out to the refugee camps, to the food distribution centres and to the children's hospitals, I was really shaken by what I saw - thousands and thousands of undernourished children, sick children, abandoned children. One day I got a cable from the president of this organization, Mr. Michael Hansen, who was at the same time the director of the Nansen Office for Refugees. He asked me to go to the northern countries in order to try to raise money. So I went up to the Scandinavian countries on a fund-raising mission. I had no experience whatsoever in that field, but nevertheless the mission was quite successful, mainly because of the Swedish Minister of Finance who got interested and gave me half a million kronen. At that time it was a lot of money. This made it easier to work in the other Scandinavian Countries.

Rädda Barnen

Then I got in contact, for the first time, with Rädda Barnen, the Swedish Save the Children Fund. The Chairman of Rädda Barnen was a remarkable woman, Margit Levinson who was deeply engaged in the task of helping and saving children. After the defeat of the Spanish democracy, I went back to Geneva. Then came the outbreak of the World War and I returned to Sweden. Margit Levinson then asked me to join the Board of Rädda Barnen.

Swedish UNICEF Committee

Origins

In 1954 she took the initiative of establishing a Swedish UNICEF Committee. She asked me to chair that committee. But the background of all this was the suffering of the children in Spain during the civil war.

Vittachi: In 1954 already the decision had been taken that the character of UNICEF, which it had begun with, would be altered. You remember that in the beginning it was a response to emergencies but now it had already begun to develop into a development agency to help children (what at UNICEF we call 'the silent emergencies'). When you entered UNICEF, when the Swedish Committee was formed, what were your ideas at that time about this change that took place from largely a supply organization to becoming involved in developing countries? We didn't know about developing countries at that time.

Thedin: This was the time when the developing countries were more or less "discovered". Earlier, I believe that we in Europe had been looking upon the Third World, the African and Asian countries, as something picturesque and interesting but we didn't see very much of the social side of it.

Part of Board delegation

To begin with the Swedish Committee did not take a very active part in the work of UNICEF. We were not represented at the Board meetings. Sweden sent to the Board representatives from the permanent mission. But then there came a hint from UNICEF that it expected more from Sweden than just the usual formal interventions and, consequently, we on the UNICEF committee were asked to discuss policy questions.

Board issues

Family planning; survey children's needs

The first time that a representative of the committee went to a Board meeting was in 1959, and it was Sixten Heppling. He had been instructed by the government to take up the problem of family planning, which he did. He informed UNICEF in advance about that. There was a lot of lobbying. Delegates tried to persuade him not to bring up that very controversial matter, but after all he had his instructions, so he did.

But he also introduced another subject, which had been discussed in the UNICEF committee: the necessity to make a survey on the needs of children in developing countries. The idea behind this proposal was that the needs of children were interdependent. It was of no avail to prevent a child from starving to death if the child instead died of malaria.

The first time I came to a Board meeting was in 1961 before going to New York. I went to our Minister for Development Cooperation, Mrs. Ulla Lindstrom, and asked her for instructions. She said, 'I think you should talk about family planning.' 'Oh, yes', I said, 'And what more?'. 'Well', she said, 'I think you know this matter as well as I do, so I give you the free hand to formulate your own statements'. At that time we didn't have the type of detailed instructions that we do nowadays.

This proved to be a very interesting meeting because of the material we had on our tables, namely the first study on the Needs of Children, which was really a pioneering effort by UNICEF. I don't think any study of that type had been undertaken before. So it was fascinating to work on that and I believe that we had a very constructive discussion in the Board. Then, of course, I had to take up the matter of family planning and that was really controversial even if it dealt with it as part of the problem of the health of children and mothers.

I spoke, as I said, about family planning and part of my statement was supported by two countries, Pakistan and Tunisia. In these countries Sweden was working, collaborating with the government in the field of family planning. Adelaide Sinclair told me the following day that she had been to a dinner in the evening, and she was seated beside a man who had listened to this. Adelaide said to him, 'Isn't it remarkable that these delegations have spoken positively about family planning today?'. And the delegate said, 'Yes, it is a shame that such things should be discussed in the United Nations building'. It took several years before family planning was recognized as a field of activity which should get UNICEF support.

Vittachi: How did that controversy get settled in one way or the other? How did UNICEF avoid an official active participation in family planning?

Thedin: The Swedish delegation brought up this matter every year. It was a standing point on our instructions. The real big fight about this came in 1966 when we had the meeting in Addis Ababa. Every delegation spoke for or against UNICEF involvement in family planning policy. There were fifteen delegations who spoke against and fifteen who spoke for.

Vittachi: Did they fall exactly in developing and developed countries?

Theidin: No. One could generalize here that most Catholic countries and the communist countries were against it for quite different reasons. Other countries were in favour of it and those were countries in which governments in one way or another supported "responsible parenthood". In 1966 it was strongly supported by the United States, which was not the case when we started this campaign. The Turkish delegate, Professor Dogramachi, and I were sitting one evening with the Soviet delegation and we tried to convince our Soviet colleagues that this was a matter which was progressive and ought to be supported by a communist community. We actually came to a point where we thought, 'Now they are convinced and now we can get the support of the Soviet Union'. Then suddenly we were back at the beginning again; it was like a Sisyphus's everlasting labour with the stone. At three o'clock in the morning Dogramachi said to me, 'No I give up. I don't think we can achieve anything'. And so we had a big fight the following day. One of the delegations said, for instance, that family planning leads to prostitution, to sexual perversion and so on, which just goes to illustrate the very hard language in this debate. It was the United States' delegate who solved the problem. He proposed that the Executive Director should present to the Board the following year a paper in which he discussed the possibilities of UNICEF aiding family planning as part of the health programmes, and only in the field of information and training. Thanks to the diplomatic skill of Harry Labouisse the proposal was accepted the following year. Since many years this had ceased to be a controversial issue. We are taking for granted that child-spacing is something which is desirable and even necessary in order to protect the health of mothers and children.

Vittachi: You'll be interested to know that at least African parliamentarians had meetings that must be concluded that child-spacing, as a policy for Africa, as far as the parliamentarians were concerned, was unanimously accepted to be recommended to their governments.

Non-official Board delegates

Vittachi: It fascinates me to see the distinction between the UNICEF Executive Board character that existed so far. It's the only Board in the United Nations system that I know that has such a large representation of unofficial members who are directly concerned with the needs of children and are totally backed by their governments. You mentioned how it happened in Sweden. But it did happen in Sweden - arising out of the Save the Children's Fund and then the National Committee that was established. Was Sweden the first in this? Were there other countries in Europe also who had that same kind of impulse to make a children's agency more of a family Board, more of a people's Board rather than an official diplomatic Board which was already entrenched in the United Nations system?

Theдин: Well, you know we had on the Board, for instance, Professor Robert Debre, who did not come from the diplomatic service. He was an eminent expert on children. Hans Conzett came just a little later than I did and there were many other "non-official" delegates.

Secretariat role in policy formation

Vittachi: In the formation of policy, what, according to your impressions and your memory, was the Secretariat's role in this? Your discussions with Pate and Labouisse, for instance - what role did they play? Were they submissive civil servants? Did they themselves act as partners in policy-making with the Board?

Pate

Theдин: Maurice Pate, a man whom I admired very much and remember with reverence, was not so much interested in the policy questions. In his days, UNICEF had fairly limited fields of activity. What he was interested in in the first hand was to strengthen the financial resources of UNICEF in order to increase its capacity to do a useful and effective job.

Vittachi: What was the budget at that time? \$25 million dollars or something? Something like that?

Theдин: In the early sixties, UNICEF's income was around \$30 million. It was a small amount. And so, Maurice Pate spoke at every Board meeting about the necessity of increasing the contributions to UNICEF, and he did wonderful work in that way. He started a process of growth for UNICEF. But he was less interested in the more controversial and intricate policy questions. Even if we must recognize that it was during his time as Executive Director that UNICEF published such important reports as "The Needs of Children" and "Children of the Developing Countries".

Vittachi: You spoke about Maurice Pate's fund-raising capacity, his interest in fund-raising and its growth. I would like to know more of your impressions of him as a person. How did he begin to shape UNICEF, to give it that special kind of flavour that UNICEF has? I would like to know your impressions of him as a person. You said you looked upon him reverentially.

Theдин: Yes. I remember one little episode when the European Office was in Paris. We had a meeting there where Maurice Pate was present, and during the meetings he sent a slip of paper to me asking if I were free for dinner. I said yes, thank you. To my surprise afterwards, when we went out to dinner, I was the only guest. I thought there would be a big gathering, but it was only me. He had also bought tickets to the Comedie Francaise. So we had dinner. It was delightful to listen to him, to his experiences from post-war Europe and from the developing countries. In fact, we both forgot about the theatre tickets! I had tremendous respect for him because of his experience and because of his engagement and devotion.

Vittachi: Was he a genial person?

Theodin: Yes, he was.

Vittachi: Was he a fun person to be with?

Theodin: Not exactly fun. No, I wouldn't say that, but you enjoyed being together with him. First of all, he was gentle and so friendly. He had a kind of personal warmth that affected me profoundly. And then he had this feeling for the children.

Yes, he was a very kind-hearted person who was, at the same time, a man who could raise money and could organize. And he had a great ability to attach the right people to the work of UNICEF. It was during his time that Dick Heyward came, and Charles Egger and Jack Charnow, and many others. He was surrounded by very good collaborators.

Labouisse

With Labouisse came another type of Executive Director. He inherited the leadership of an organization which already had impact, and he wanted to find out ways and means of stretching each dollar a little further. You know how gradually there began a development, including strategy for children, country programming, and so on. Here Labouisse and the Secretariat took a very, very active part. We were always very much impressed by the type of work that was being done and the way in which it was presented to the Board was high quality.

Vittachi: I would like to ask you the same question about Harry Labouisse. What was your personal impression, your impression of him as a person, rather? Something to document rather, he could say something to the Board.

Theodin: Oh, yes. I think we became friends in another way than Maurice Pate and I. I mean, Pate was to me, so to say, an uncle. But Harry Labouisse and Eve Labouisse, because they always were together; they were a really fascinating couple. Labouisse was a man of ideas. To discuss with him was always very fascinating. It is obvious from the way that UNICEF has developed that he had a vision which was wider than Maurice Pate's. Maurice Pate had more of a humanitarian vision whereas Harry Labouisse saw the potentiality of children.

Vittachi: I would like to ask you about Harry Labouisse and his rapport with the Board.

Theodin: You see, the way in which Harry Labouisse drafted his Director's Report and presented it to the Board really stimulated policy discussions. The Board became much more interesting because of Labouisse's approach. Labouisse had a manner of inspiring the

policy discussions which was really admirable. Maurice Pate laid the ground, so to say. Labouisse was much more of an architect of that building which is not only an organization giving humanitarian aid, but a development organization. It places the future into focus as to what the children of today can do for the world of tomorrow.

Vittachi: He had a sense of empathy with developing countries?

Thedin: Oh yes.

Vittachi: Did he know the developing countries? Or he got to know the developing countries as he continued to be the director?

Thedin: He had a knowledge of the developing countries, but I forget his background.

Vittachi: He was Ambassador in Greece.

Thedin: That's right. He worked on the Marshall Plan, and there he was working with something which was not a humanitarian aid to Europe, but which was a way of trying to assist Europe in getting on its feet and starting a new development. That background was very important for UNICEF. So it was a good choice when the Secretary-General appointed him Director.

I would like to say one or two things about Harry Labouisse in addition to what I said. First: he listened to the Board. It was obvious that remarks, suggestions, even hints from the Board members were studied thoroughly, and they were translated into constructive action. Second: he cultivated personal relationships with the Board members. At the Board meetings Harry Labouisse invited the Board members. They came to dinner in his home with several of the UNICEF staff. Of course, all of them couldn't come at the same time. He often had two or three dinners. To him it was very important to have this personal relationship with Board members, and to foster personal relationships between staff members and Board members.

Also, from that point of view, he had an impact on the kind of "family spirit" that we had in UNICEF. I realize that it must be difficult to retain this when the Board grows and gets bigger and the time when we are assembled is shorter. We had longer meetings in those days, we had more opportunities to relate with one another, to be together, to have discussions outside the Board meetings.

Heyward

Vittachi: I have two questions arising out of this. One is, my impression from what I have read and from what I have heard from all the members of staff as well as Board members is, that while Maurice Pate and Harry Labouisse were heads of UNICEF they were concerned with the broad picture, the big canvas, and not the petit pois of day-to-day administration. Inevitably, it seemed to me, it was inevitable that Dick Heyward should arise, because they were presidential and therefore they had to have a prime minister. This meticulous quality of reporting - the Board, whose work was this thing? Was it Dick Heyward's largely? Or principally?

Thedin: I would say that Dick Heyward had a tremendous capacity for work. He was the type of man who could sit working for not only twelve hours, but much longer, night hours. My impression is that the high quality of the UNICEF documentation was, to a very large extent, due to Dick Heyward. He was very careful. He had tremendous knowledge, and I think he had a brain that contained everything. He seemed to remember everything that he read. He was a living encyclopedia and I don't think there was anything within UNICEF that he didn't know. But he did not have the capacity to present things in a way that was engaging. He was able to prepare the documents so that they had the highest quality, but to have Dick Heyward presenting UNICEF policy at a press conference could be somewhat disturbing.

Vittachi: In my opinion also, he was the world's champion back-room boy, the best back-room person I have ever known in the world.

Thedin relationship with staff

Vittachi: Nils, I would like to ask you: how is it that people like yourself, and many other Board members, have a personal relationship with UNICEF staff? This is again very unusual within the UN system.

Thedin: I used to travel for the Swedish Co-operative Centre, the development agency in Sweden, and also for SIDA (I was a member of the Board of SIDA). When I came to India, Charles Egger was the Regional Director. Of course I had met Charles Egger in New York. I had met him in Harry's home. It was quite natural for me to get in contact with him. In that way I came to know his family and know his collaborators. This is something that spread. I have made it a habit of visiting the UNICEF Representatives, wherever they are, wherever I go. On some occasions I hadn't met them before and didn't know them, but an acquaintance is well worth making. On certain occasions, I have had tremendous joy and satisfaction from these contacts because I have learned so much about UNICEF, but I have had personal advantages from it.

I remember once I came on the mission that I had in Asia for ILO to Kathmandu and I wanted to see the UNDP Director. I always wanted to see the highest chap in the organization when I came in order to get the assistance I thought was necessary (laughter). He was obviously not in a position to see me. I was asked to see a person on the middle level which was not very satisfactory because he was not in a position to help me with contacts, with governments and so on. After that I went up to the UNICEF office and saw Maria Diamanti and told her about this and she said 'It's the 24 October today, it is United Nations Day. There is going to be a big celebration tonight and the UNDP Director is going to be the host. Let us go there together and I will introduce you to him'. And so we did, and she introduced me as the former President of the Executive Board of UNICEF and we had a conversation; he invited me to come and see him the following morning. That was through UNICEF. It was so much easier to get certain contacts. I could always rely on the assistance of UNICEF.

Vittachi: Thank you, Nils, for this evening, and we will resume this conversation at a later time.

Theidin: I hope next time I will be better prepared.

End of interview