
The Child's Soldier:

An interview with

UNICEF Executive Director

Carol Bellamy

As Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) for the last six years, Carol Bellamy has gained a reputation as a tireless and outspoken advocate for the world's children. Having begun her second five-year term at the helm of the UN agency last year, the former New York City Council president, investment banker, and Peace Corps director is now marshaling the organization's resources to help respond to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in and around Afghanistan. Imperiled by crushing poverty and the effects of two decades of war, the children of Afghanistan also suffer from a lack of health care, malnutrition, the denial of education, unsafe water, inadequate sanitation, and exposure. The humanitarian challenge is now even more daunting because of harsh winter weather and forbidding geography. "It is a very, very bad situation for children," Bellamy says, "And in the near term it does not look like it is getting any better." Bellamy spoke with The Fletcher Forum's Daniel Langenkamp in early November about UNICEF's efforts in the country, as well as a range of other issues relating to the world body's relationship to the United States, the effects of globalization, and the role of human rights in her agency's work.

FORUM: Let us begin with some questions about Afghanistan, where your organization is so active now. Many people are talking about a UN peacebuilding operation in Afghanistan and some worry that the organization is going to be put in charge of a terrible mess, which will be much more of a strain on its system than either of the peacebuilding tasks in Kosovo or East Timor. Do you fear this kind of outcome?

BELLAMY: It's really difficult to make analogies, and I think if you make any analogy here it should probably be to Somalia rather than to Kosovo and East Timor. I think it would be unfortunate if, when difficult circumstances come up around the world, it is assumed that the UN will somehow come in and just start running things. In the long run, the people of Afghanistan themselves have to be comfortable with whoever is running the government and running assistance in the country. I have no doubt that the UN would be willing to assist because we have done so

before. But if there is going to be a change, the approach will have to be based on Afghans running their own country. I think everybody wishes to see that.

FORUM: But given the circumstances, including the fractured opposition in the country, we might not see a situation in which that can happen.

BELLAMY: There is no question that the UN will be asked to assist and I think we will try to do so. And that assistance may be everything from ongoing humanitarian aid to support in strengthening financial or judicial systems. Our involvement is certainly still to be determined, and the Secretary-General has asked (his Special Representative for Afghanistan) Lakhdar Brahimi to head up this effort. But with the Afghanistan crisis, the UN has created the first really integrated task force on a humanitarian crisis. So I think the UN is looking not only at this crisis in terms of the short- and long-term, but is also saying that the lead will have to be taken by Afghans on behalf of Afghans.

FORUM: How about the UN relationship with the United States? Have you noticed a change since September 11? How would you characterize that change?

BELLAMY: I always used to say that even when it was pretty bad in terms of the assessed contributions, the U.S. is actually a very strong and consistent supporter of many UN activities. It is, by far, the biggest donor to the World Food Program, and not just in Afghanistan, but worldwide. I think it may be close to the biggest donor to the refugee program. And it is the largest donor to UNICEF. So, I suppose you could say there have been different phases of the U.S. relationship vis-à-vis the UN—but it would be wrong to say that the U.S. was not supportive of the UN's activities. That said, the U.S. did pretty quickly send a check for assessed contributions and that was a positive sign, I think. And with the recent statements by (US Secretary of State) Colin Powell and with President Bush's vocal support of the UN's efforts, one gets a sense that there is an improving relationship with the UN.

FORUM: Do you think that relationship can last?

BELLAMY: I sure hope so. I hope so.

FORUM: Some people are saying we are seeing the end to U.S. unilateralism. What's your take?

BELLAMY: As I said, I don't think the U.S. attitude has been unilateral, if you look at their support for a good deal of UN efforts. On the other hand there have been some difficult moments in the relationship over the last couple of years. I don't think I am being naïve about the situation. I hope it means that there is going to be a closer relationship, as I hope the UN would have generally with the member states, but certainly the U.S. is a very important UN member in terms of the global role that it plays.

FORUM: Your agency has gone further than any other except perhaps UNHCR (the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees) in adopting an explicitly

rights-based approach toward its operations. This approach, however, has led you to close education programs in countries like Afghanistan if the government says girls cannot participate. Some people have criticized that move because closing these programs as a consequence also denies boys of education. Should vital humanitarian aid be made conditional upon respecting human rights?

BELLAMY: Well, what we stopped—and we did stop it—was providing financial resources to the Taliban because at that point they only would support schooling for boys. We didn't stop our education work though—and, in fact, we've been supporting the informal schools that are run and supported by a variety of NGOs (non-governmental organizations), including one of the biggest, the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan. So we've continued very actively in education in Afghanistan. But, yes, we did stop providing financial assistance to the Taliban.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child says that all children have a right to an education. That includes girls. But we don't have a single model for how education should be implemented. In some countries, for

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example, there may be a preference to teach boys and girls separately. So while in different cultures children are being educated in different ways, at least the girls are getting an education. At UNICEF, we believe passionately in access to primary education of good quality for all children, both girls and boys. Study after study has shown that if a girl gets an education it really has a multiplier effect in terms of improving conditions in a community.

We work in countries with both state parties and non-state parties. In immunization campaigns we try to negotiate with all the different parties to ensure there is access to all children, irrespective of whether that party is the government or not. So, our mandate is children. Our mandate is not who you get along with. Our mandate is trying to reach all children.

FORUM: So is that a yes or a no? Should or should not aid be conditional upon respecting human rights?

BELLAMY: We don't condition our assistance, but we believe strongly that all children need to be respected. So our focus is on children. There are no enemy children.

FORUM: Some of the UN agencies have been lacking coordination in approach and UNICEF has always been fiercely protective of its independence. How do you think that emergency coordination can be improved in the UN System, and should greater resources be given to UN OCHA, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, to carry out those tasks?

BELLAMY: I think there has been a dramatic improvement in coordination among

UN agencies over the last couple of years, and I think you are just bringing out a bugaboo that I heard when I came to UNICEF six years ago, something that is just a faint shadow of its past. Within the first week after September 11, the four principals—UNHCR, UNICEF, the World Food Program, and OCHA—were in both phone and video-conference touch several times, and agreed upon a coordination mechanism, and upon a regional Afghanistan crisis coordinator, Mike Sackett, who was actually the OCHA person based in Islamabad. We all named our own regional people who would work with him.

That being said, I would never say that you cannot find somewhere in the world someone being uncooperative, and maybe it's UNICEF in a particular case. I do believe, though, that there has been a very significant movement to try to have better

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coordination, at least among the major humanitarian agencies within the UN and the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross). Although the ICRC is not part of the UN, it is a key player.

Now in terms of more money for OCHA, the answer is probably yes and no. It depends on the place. Right now I don't think they need any more

resources for Afghanistan. Maybe they need more for some other part of the world where they are really under-funded. It is important that they remain as a coordinator and not an operational entity and I believe that is what they are doing.

FORUM: How does this new coordinating mechanism work?

BELLAMY: We all have our Afghanistan country offices and we have our Pakistan country offices and we have our Uzbekistan country offices. At least among the three UN agencies, we each named an Afghanistan regional person. This is somebody that tries to cut across the boundary lines of the different country programs to be able to focus on the implications—when you are talking about a convoy coming in from Turkmenistan, for example. That person works with the overall coordinator (OCHA's Mike Sackett) who is recognized by all the agencies as the Afghanistan crisis coordinator. I call it the "Afghanistan crisis," though it's not just Afghanistan alone because it has implications for the surrounding countries. The point is that they all work together. It is not somebody ordering and marching and saluting.

FORUM: Continuing to look at Afghanistan, how successful do you think the Strategic Framework has been in getting UN agencies to coordinate and work along common principles?¹

BELLAMY: Remember that the Strategic Framework included NGOs, too. I think it was useful but we've had lots of frameworks now. We've had PRSPs (Poverty

Reduction Strategy Papers); we've had strategic frameworks; we've had UNDAFs (UN Development Assistance Frameworks); and we have CCAs (Common Country Assessments). Actually, the only country that had a Strategic Framework was Afghanistan and I think that was over taken by other things. The programs that are working the most effectively around the world are the poverty reduction strategy instrument, the Common Country Assessment, and UNDAF, and in a couple of places now, there is a DSRSG—a Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General, who is focusing on the humanitarian side. This seems to be working better. I actually think the Brahimi Report and some of its recommendations for things such as the Integrated Mission Task Force overtook the Strategic Framework.² It was useful pounding it out, however, because it got people to interrelate a little bit more and take into account NGOs.

FORUM: On child labor, many families in developing countries now depend on child labor simply to survive. Is it fair to demand that countries in this situation immediately end child labor?

BELLAMY: We have never demanded that countries immediately stop child labor. The aim is the progressive reduction of the most hazardous and exploitative forms of child labor. But there is no simple way to do that. Child labor is a very complex issue. You can't just have a boycott. The boycott just makes the boycotters feel better about themselves. One of the best ways to tackle child labor is to try and make sure that the kids get an education. There's no question that the economic conditions do create an environment where many children go out to work. On the other hand, very often the employers would much rather have children because they are much more exploitable than their parents. So if the parents got the jobs maybe the children wouldn't have to work.

We approach child labor as a protection issue. We realize that you can't just make it disappear overnight. This would only end up hurting the children more. But the more that conditions change and improve, the more children can at least get some education. We focus our efforts on trying to get the youngest of children an education. We see creating this environment change as both an immediate and long-term challenge.

FORUM: On the Convention on the Rights of the Child, one of the innovations that your agency has made is to provide funding for the CRC (Committee on the Rights of the Child—the body created by the treaty) in light of its financial difficulties. Is this a form of cooperation that should be more prevalent in the UN System?

BELLAMY: UNICEF helped the Committee on the Rights of the Child in the beginning, with computers and some other things, because they had nothing. To my knowledge, though, we don't give them major direct funding at this point. When we do try and help, it is often when countries themselves ask UNICEF for input and review of their country reports, which go to the committee. The committee sometimes will ask for UNICEF's help in following up with the countries in terms of the

recommendations. Some of the people interested in treaty bodies have asked why, if UNICEF can help in some of the lead-up and follow-up work to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, why don't CEDAW (the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women) and others have something similar. Well, I think it would be good if they did. To some extent, treaty bodies have been created without being given the sort of resources they needed. But at this point in time, in terms of direct resources, I don't believe we provide direct resources to the committee anymore, but we continue to be supportive of their efforts. To the extent that governments are submitting their reports to the CRC and to the extent that the outcome from some of these reports will shape the activity on behalf of children, this cooperation is quite consistent with our mandate.

FORUM: The UN General Assembly Special Session on Children, originally scheduled to convene for three days beginning September 19, was postponed because of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. When do you think the Special Session will happen and how do you think the agenda has changed?

BELLAMY: It is all but certain that it will be held May 8 to 10, 2002, with the Young Peoples' Forum held on the 6th and 7th. As for the agenda, I don't think it will change so much. We already had about 80 percent of the draft outcome document agreed upon and—unlike 10 years ago at the World Summit for Children, which was quite focused on child survival, health interventions, some education interventions, and to a limited degree protection issues—this outcome document has already taken much more into account the impact of violence, the amount of conflict in the world, and the implications for HIV/AIDS. It already makes reference to everything from terrorism to occupied territories. It had everybody's issue in it. I'm not criticizing that. The outcome document is not ours to decide—the content is up to the member states. I'm not sure there will be a significant difference in the actual outcome document that will lead to a future agenda, because there are so many issues taken into account. Undoubtedly, there will be some workshops or discussions around the impact of terrorism on children and other related issues.

FORUM: What countries have made the greatest strides since the passage of the CRC?

BELLAMY: That's a really hard one. We don't do those kinds of measurements. We can tell you more about which ones have made the greatest strides in terms of better health care or kids in school. The reason we don't have a list saying, "this is the best country or this is the worst country" is because it might be harder for a country to have a 10 percent improvement than another country to have a 30 percent improvement. We do provide the information, though.

Malawi, for example, is a very poor country, but Malawi has been able to make a real improvement in girls going to school. So that puts to bed this idea that the poorer you are the less you can do. If you make a choice, you can make differences.

There are very poor countries out there that have made significant gains only to see them being lost to HIV/AIDS. On the other hand, there were a lot of promises made at the World Summit for Children and frankly—and we've said this publicly—we think that there have been very mixed results. We think that leadership has not been fully demonstrated on the part of many political and government leaders around the world because we think there should have been more advances over these 10 years.

FORUM: Perhaps these advances have been thwarted by globalization. According to many studies, globalization is serving to increase, rather than decrease, inequalities around the world, with devastating impacts in some countries. Do you think UNICEF can do anything to dampen these negative impacts?

BELLAMY: We think globalization is a mixed bag. In many cases, in the short run, it seems that it can hurt kids, especially when local economies are destabilized. Globalization means change, and change can sometimes uproot and create insecurities.

On the other hand, in the long run you could argue that globalization provides an opportunity for opening markets and boosting economies. So we approach globalization neither to glorify nor to demonize. It really depends on how we manage and mold the globalization process and it is not up to UNICEF to manage and mold it. As you in essence said in your question, though, we can advocate about the importance of understanding the disparities that can be created—and try to be proactive in dealing with those disparities. Simple generalities won't work when it comes

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to globalization—it really does require digging down and going through and trying to deal with the disparities. That is our focus, guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, whose principles direct us to try and reach the most difficult to reach.

FORUM: Does this mean greater engagement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO), or other players in the world trade game?

BELLAMY: Well there has been greater engagement in the last couple of years with the World Bank because the World Bank itself is engaging more in development-related issues. The IMF to some extent is also doing this, though that is a more recent phenomenon. We haven't had that much engagement with the WTO, not because we wouldn't like to, but because the "soft" issues such as social services aren't always remembered. But I would point out that at the last two G-8 meetings in Japan and Italy, these issues were raised by a number of finance ministers. Gordon Brown (Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer) certainly has been very much an advocate for

development-related issues and Larry Summers and Paul O'Neil (Treasury Secretaries for former U.S. President Bill Clinton and President George W. Bush, respectively) have also been vocal on the issue of education, I must say. The issues of health and education have come onto the agenda. You know, historically, just the "tough issues" have gotten there. Well, sorry, but these are tough issues. So it seems that at least there's an increasing understanding that you are not going to have a healthy economy unless you have a healthy society, and by that I mean both an edu-

So it seems that at least there's an increasing understanding that you are not going to have a healthy economy unless you have a healthy society, and by that I mean both an educated and a healthy populace.

cated and a healthy populace. And we are talking about basic education and basic health here, not five-star, but basic health and education.

FORUM: What's the relationship between advances in information technology and the kind of work that you do? Can it make a strong impact on helping children in emergencies and the developing world?

BELLAMY: Yes, I think it can, but let's be realistic again. The majority of the world is not sitting there looking at computers. That

being said, the ability even within UNICEF to share information more quickly is useful to us in just doing our work. The extent to which a response can be quicker in a natural disaster or a conflict, and the extent to which technology is assistance, that helps. Technology tomorrow is not going to solve the problems of 130 million kids being out of school, but I don't see it as a negative factor. I see it as a positive factor and I actually think that in the long run, the revolution in information technology will probably move faster in developing countries due to the fact that it doesn't require as enormous an infrastructure as some of the investments that have to take place in basic health and basic education.

FORUM: Thank you very much. ■

NOTES

- 1 The Strategic Framework, adopted in 1998, was intended to help improve coordination among NGOs and UN agencies in their various political, humanitarian and human rights programming. The Principled Common Programming was a statement within the Strategic Framework which explicitly stated the principles along which UN bodies and NGOs pledged themselves to operate.
 - 2 The Brahimi Report, named after its author, who is now also the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, is the unofficial title for The Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations, published in 2000. It is often described as the most comprehensive review of the UN's peacekeeping operations to date. The Integrated Mission Taskforce is a proposal for a body that will integrate planning and support within the UN Department for Peacekeeping Operations for UN activities such as political analysis, military operations, civilian police, electoral assistance, human rights, development, humanitarian assistance, refugees and displaced persons, public information, logistics, finance, and personnel recruitment.
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