



The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development

ATTENTION BY INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND DEVELOPMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF UNITED NATIONS WORLD REPORTS, 1993

Coordinators' Notebook No. 13, 1993

Robert Myers

| | |
|--|---|
| A PROMISING START IN THE 1990'S... | 2 |
| FULFILLING THE PROMISE... | 3 |
| AN ANALYSIS OF UNITED NATIONS WORLD REPORTS... | 4 |
| TRENDS IN INSTITUTIONAL THINKING... | 4 |
| EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND DEVELOPMENT... | 7 |
| ENDNOTES... | 9 |

International organizations are paying more attention to young children in the 1990s than they were earlier. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (approved November 1989), the Summit for Children (September, 1990) and the World Conference on Education for All (March 1990), all with their follow-up mechanisms, have helped to place the young child on the international agenda and to provide additional impetus to national initiatives.

But even though there are promising new departures in both rhetoric and action, international organizations are just beginning to recognize the importance of the integrated development of children during their preschool years and its relationship to larger social and economic development questions.¹ The weakest piece in programming intended to benefit young children continues to be attention to their mental, social and emotional development, which has not yet found its rightful place alongside physical development and survival.

In this brief essay, I will examine critically the place of integrated child development on the current international agenda, and analyse the latest World Reports issued by specialized agencies of the United Nations family.

A Promising Start in the 1990s

New attention in the 1990s to the plight of young children is evident in hiring patterns and programming within some international organizations. In addition new organizations, networks and publications have appeared, which focus particularly on children under the age of six. The following examples of changes made during the last three years suggest increased attention to early childhood care and development issues. They reflect some awareness of the multidimensional needs of children and their families.

- In August 1991, UNICEF hired a programme officer, located within its "Education Cluster," who devotes full time to early childhood development. During the last year, UNICEF's Nutrition Cluster has given attention to *care* as an important dimension in conceptualizing its programmes.
- Since 1990, The World Bank has approved loans to (at least) Colombia, Venezuela, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Brazil, Bolivia and India that either focus on early childhood development or contain a pre-school or integrated early childhood component within a broader loan. Discussions are now being held in South Africa, Vietnam and the Philippines that could lead to additional loans in this area. In 1993, the World Bank assigned a person to work specifically on early childhood development.
- In 1990, the international non-governmental organization (NGO), Save-the-Children/USA hired a person to create an early childhood development programme. This has resulted in a June 1992 programme statement titled, "Strong Beginnings: An International Initiative in Early Childhood Development."
- A programme officer in early childhood development was added to the staff of The Christian Children's Fund in 1992.
- The organization, Childwatch, was formed in 1992.
- During the past two years, an international network of non-governmental organizations has formed, under the auspices of Redd Barna, to balance and/or work with governments on the task of monitoring progress toward fulfilling conditions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

- The first issue of **Childhood, A Global Journal of Child Research** appeared in February 1993.
- The International Forum, held in New Delhi in September 1993 as part of the follow-up to the World Conference on Education for All, devoted a session explicitly to "Early Childhood Care and Development." (The next issue of the **Coordinators' Notebook** will be devoted to the EFA initiative and to early childhood development seen within the context of the WCEFA.)

Certainly, there are additional examples of new initiatives by organizations or networks with an international outreach, all of which adds up to considerable promise for the improved condition of children as we approach the twenty-first century.

Fulfilling the Promise

These examples of new efforts by international organizations do offer promise, particularly when put together with national initiatives. There are, however, other signals that suggest the need for broader vision, for greater collaboration, for more solid funding, and for continuing vigilance if the promise is to be fulfilled. It is still more the exception than the rule to view young children and their families in a holistic, integrated way. The strong research which supports this view has yet to influence the majority of health, education, or care efforts aimed at improving young children's lives. (see J. Evans article on Health Care)

The need for greater integration and continued efforts to promote early childhood development (ECD) is evident as we revisit several of the examples given above. In the case of UNICEF, for instance, while noting the new appointment, one must also note that the budget provided for mobilizing actions (and for improving institutional capacities) in ECD is not only relatively small, but was cut drastically during 1993 as ever greater priority was given to bolstering primary school education. In terms of budget and action, it is not evident that the admirable attention to *care* within the nutrition programme rhetoric in UNICEF will result in greater integration of the educational and psychosocial dimensions of care into food-related actions.

The budget provided for the early childhood programme officer within the World Bank for backstopping early child development initiatives is extremely small, despite the increasing attention given in loans to this area. This requires her to spend much of her time and energy looking beyond the Bank for funding.

Getting early childhood care and development on the agenda of the New Delhi meeting required a strong lobbying effort. The topic was not initially regarded as part of the normal discussion of basic learning and education, despite its prominent inclusion in the Declaration and Framework for Action that resulted from the WCEFA. A small contribution pledged by the United Nations Development Fund (UNDP) to support the preparation of case studies and other background documents for the New Delhi meeting had to be withdrawn, a victim of budget cuts within the Fund.

We do not wish to minimize advances made by the organizations cited. However, in order for "small beginnings" in the international community to turn into "strong beginnings," much more needs to be done. This is evident also if one examines recent documents of the United Nations. These reflect to some degree how international institutions are thinking and acting.

An Analysis of United Nations World Reports

In different parts of the United Nations, periodic reports are published that review how well we are faring in the world at large. Each report takes a different perspective consistent with the particular charge of the specialized UN agency publishing the review. These documents provide a weather vane, pointing to the extent and manner in which different UN institutions incorporate an early childhood development perspective into their thinking and their analysis. The summary that follows is based on a review of four reports. These are:

1. UNICEF. **The State of the World's Children, 1993**. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Published yearly for UNICEF.
2. The World Bank. **World Development Report, 1993. Investing in Health**. New York: Oxford University Press. Published yearly for the World Bank.
3. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). **Human Development Report, 1993**. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Published yearly for UNDP.
4. The United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Development. **Report on the World Social Situation, 1993**. New York: The United Nations, 1993, Document ST/ESA/235, E/1993/50/Rev.1. Published every four years.

A fifth report, from UNESCO, titled the **World Education Report**, is published every two years and is due out before the end of the year but has not yet appeared as of the time of this writing. Here, comment will be based on the 1991 report and on a first draft of the 1993 version.

Obviously, these reports are much broader than our specific focus on child development. However, the broad trends affect child development actions in important ways. Accordingly, I will comment first on what seem to represent trends framing our particular interest in the early childhood topic. I will then comment specifically on the place of early childhood care and development within the reviews.

Trends in Institutional Thinking

The following trends appear in the several reports. We must note however, that although we have tried to give a flavor of the reports, we can not do justice within this limited context to the rich, thoughtful and well-documented presentations made in each report.

■ TOWARD A BROADER VIEW OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Although there is still a great deal of attention in the set of reviews to the development of nations in terms of economic productivity, this focus has been modified considerably. UNDP, for instance, focusses on "human development" defined in terms of longevity, knowledge and well-

being derived from income. UNICEF classifies countries in terms of child mortality and juxtaposes this indicator with the annual rate of growth in per capita GNP to show that there is little relationship. The annual rate of reduction of fertility is also taken as an indicator of development.

The World Bank report focusses its attention in its 1993 report on health indicators and on "the burden of disease" borne by countries. While using GNP per capita as its main criterion for classifying countries, and emphasizing economic data in its statistical section, indicators are also provided of social and natural resource development.

The extraordinary report of the UN's Department of Economic and Social Development includes a wide variety of "objective" indicators of social conditions and responses that contribute to the "quality of life." These include per capita GNP, life expectancy, average schooling completed per worker, adult literacy, daily caloric intake, micro-nutrient deficiencies and nutritionally-related diseases, child mortality, water availability and quality, the number of persons per dwelling, homicides and suicides per 100,000 people, hours worked yearly per worker, the incidence of longterm unemployment, the social security share of GNP and many others. The Report also includes a subjective indicator (for 12 countries only): "The level of personal happiness among lower and higher income groups."

One result of a broader definition of what constitutes national development—of defining development in terms of human development and quality of life—is that the earlier divisions set between "developing" and "developed" countries tend to blur much more. For instance, if the number of homicides or *intact* families are taken as indicators, the classification of countries bears little relationship to economic development indicators.

The broader definitions of national development help to frame child development in terms of human development, rather than treating it as a subcategory under education. This broader definition seems both logical and appropriate.

■ TOWARD GREATER PARTICIPATION AND PARTNERSHIP

The UNDP report states in its introduction that "We have to weave development around people, not people around development." People's participation is discussed first in relation to the household and then to economic, social, cultural and political participation. The review stresses that greater democracy and decentralization are essential to promoting participation. A special chapter is devoted to the role of people's organizations and of non-governmental organizations in the development process.

The UNICEF report calls for "common cause" in mobilizing action to form a "people's movement" focussing on basic needs for children—similar to the movements directed toward improving the status of women and the environment. The report notes the important roles being played by voluntary and non-governmental organizations, the media, health professionals and educators.

■ TOWARD A GREATER CONCERN WITH GENDER ISSUES

In all reviews, attention is given to gender issues. This is evident in the statistics presented and the examples used as well as in the issues treated directly in the main text. In all reports, for instance, educational data include separate tabulations by gender. UNDP's treatment in its text of the household focusses on gender disparities and its statistics tables include data on the status of women and on female-male gaps. UNICEF uses the women's movement as an example of the kind of people's movement that might be applied to meeting basic needs for children and suggests that much more could be done to liberate women from daily chores, including greater attention to family planning. "At stake here is not only the quantity of women's deaths but the quality of women's lives." Maternal mortality is discussed in the text. One of the 10 basic statistical tables is titled "Women."

Inserts in the World Bank report are devoted to violence against women as a health issue and to women's nutrition. A statistical table is called "Women in Development." Unfortunately in both the UNICEF and World Bank cases, the statistics presented about women relate only to women in their maternal role (or to their education). Information about the employment status of women is not included in their publications. The Department of Economic and Social Development's report presents figures on female unemployment and female-to-male unemployment ratios in selected countries. It pays special attention also to women's access to science education.

In general, the discussion of women's issues are not linked to a need to provide quality child care.

■ TOWARD RESTRUCTURING INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

The UNDP report suggests that development assistance should be allocated to people, not countries, should favor countries in which military spending is low or being reduced, should be readjusted more in line with population and with levels of poverty, should be used increasingly to build national capacities, and should increase beyond the 7% now earmarked for human priority concerns. UNICEF and UNDP urge a restructuring so that 20% of all technical assistance would go to directly help people to meet their most basic needs for food, water, health care, family planning and primary education. Aid should target the poorest quarter of recipient countries' populations. The UNICEF report echoes the UNDP suggestion that reduced arms spending should become an important criteria for aid.

The World Bank indicates that the percentage all aid going toward health should be increased to its pre-1980 level of 7% at once and should increase over the next few years. More assistance should go to such areas as immunization, AIDS, and primary health care and less to hospitals. Donor coordination should be improved. The Department of Economic and Social Development calls for a Summit which, among other things, would consider the relative strengths of international voluntary organizations and intergovernmental organizations and seek means of pooling their strengths.

The above gives a flavor of the approaches recommended in the 1993 World Reports. Let us turn now to the place of early childhood development within them.

Early Childhood Care and Development

UNDP. Although the UNDP document is titled a "Human Development" Report, and although it deals in a sensitive way with issues of people-centered development, it does not include an explicit treatment of early childhood development. Child survival is dealt with explicitly, as are issues of morbidity and malnutrition—taken as indicators of human development. Education enters through the traditional indicators of literacy or years of schooling. At a very rough level, these indicators may be adequate for the purpose of classifying countries. However, they minimize, once again, the importance of physical, mental, social and emotional development during the early years, from birth until entry into school.

Among the 52 statistical tables presenting different developmentally-related indicators (27 for developing countries; 25 for industrial countries), are tables dealing with "child survival and development," "health profile," "education flows," and "education imbalances." All of the "child survival and development" indicators are health and nutrition indicators, as are the indicators for the "health profile." There are no mental, social or emotional developmental indicators. The table on "education flows" includes a percentage figure representing the "intake rate" into first grade of primary school. Although there are enrollment ratios for primary, secondary and tertiary levels, there is no enrollment ratio for pre-school programs. Nor is early education included in the table on educational imbalances.

In brief, human development during the early years is treated narrowly as a matter of good health and nutrition. Moreover, although gender issues are prominent in the report and attention is given to women's employment, these are not linked to child care issues.

The World Bank In the World Bank Report, health continues to be treated as absence of disease and measured in terms of mortality reduction. Health is not defined as progression along the road to good health defined broadly to include psychological and social health. With its emphasis on survival, defined negatively, it is not surprising to find that a broader discussion of healthy child development is missing from the report. The simultaneous nature of child survival and child development and the two-way relationship between these two is missed.

When a link is made in the report between health and education, that link is limited to the influence of years of formal education on the incidence of disease.

Again, human development during the early years (child development) is treated in a very narrow way, defined by health and nutrition variables. Countries are classified in the discussion in terms of the "burden of disease" that they bear as a result of sickness and premature death.

Also worth mentioning is the fact that the World Bank's Report emphasizes household capacity for health prevention and care, setting it apart from reports that continue to emphasize institutional care. It does not, however, discuss community organization or the capacity of

communities (or organized groups of individuals) to make just demands on the health delivery system. Nor does it consider the positive and negative effects on child health of the increasingly prevalent substitute systems of child care—whether at home or in institutional settings.

UNICEF. In *The State of the World's Children*, UNICEF continues to place almost exclusive emphasis on child health and nutrition issues. The report speaks in passing of "mental growth."² A one-way link is made in the discussion in which malnutrition and disease are seen to lead to poor mental and physical growth, leading to poor performance at school and at work, and so on. The reverse effects of poor mental and physical (and social and emotional) growth on malnutrition and disease in the early months and years are not considered.

The UNICEF report also speaks of "protection" which, from the point of view of the parents, is said to include the special protection of "love and common sense". This affirmation is left at the general level, however, and no mention is made in the report of how "love" is manifested, or of the importance of interaction, communication and stimulation for instance. This is like mentioning health without mentioning immunization or other concrete actions taken to fortify health. When protection is put into a broader social framework and when "outreach" by a community worker is discussed as a main way to help build protection, all references are to health or nutritional actions.

No direct discussion of education programmes occurs in the UNICEF Report. One figure is provided showing primary school enrollments, but there is no discussion of learning during the pre-school years or of pre-school education. When speaking of educators as an important occupational group, a plea is made for imparting basic knowledge children will need as parents. However, the basic knowledge is defined to include nutrition, health, fertility, environmental issues and gender. Early learning and mental development are not included.

Again we see that it is difficult to take an integrated view of child development and that almost exclusive emphasis is given to health and nutrition during the early years. A vision of child development that includes mental, social and emotional dimensions is just beginning to penetrate the institutional thinking as expressed in the 1993 report.

The Economic and Social Development Department. The chapter of this report devoted to education and literacy does not include any mention of pre-school education or of learning in the pre-school years. The WCEFA extension of the definition of basic education to include the early years has not been absorbed. Adult education and literacy are linked in the discussion to community development, productivity and employment but not to childrearing or even to health.

The World Education Report. In its first edition, which appeared in 1991, UNESCO's World Education Report included a discussion of "pre-primary education." The dramatic growth of pre-school education in developing countries was noted (from one in fifteen children in 1975 to one in five in 1988). Probable reasons for this increase are discussed. In a major section of the report on "continuing challenges" no mention is made of the pre-primary period.

The UNESCO report treats early learning as equivalent to formal pre-schooling, in large part because the available statistics are for formal pre-schools. No analysis is made of the financing of early pre-primary learning or schooling.

In brief, the report treats early learning in a narrow and formal way and in passing, without giving serious attention to the topic. It is to be hoped that the 1993 report will incorporate early childhood learning and development more directly into the mainstream of its thinking.³

Early childhood mental, social and emotional development and early learning have not found their way into the thinking and reporting of specialized agencies of the United Nations system. This is so even though there are a number of indications within the same institutions that new attention will be given to the early years.

An integral treatment of early childhood development and a holistic view of learning and development during the early years remains difficult to achieve. This is due in part to sectoral and disciplinary boundaries both within and between organization. The health community continues to exert an enormous influence over the way in which the welfare of children is viewed and addressed during the earliest years. The two-way interaction of mental, social and emotional development with physical development and survival is only beginning to be recognized and incorporated into programme thinking.

Endnotes

¹ This essay is not intended to provide yet another justification for investing in early childhood care and development. For those who would like to review these arguments, see "Meeting Early Learning Needs", produced by the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development. See also, by Robert Myers, *The Twelve Who Survive* (London: Routledge, 1993, Chapter I) or *Toward A Fair Start for Children* (Paris: UNESCO, 1993, 4th edition).

² Apparently, the phrase "mental growth" is used rather than development so as to avoid the confusion between national development and child development. The term, "development" is restricted to the broad process of social and economic development.

³ An early draft of the report provides little attention to early learning and development. Suggestions have been made to increase and improve the treatment in the 1993 report, but whether or not the report will afford pre-primary education a reasonable place in the document remains to be seen.

Copyright © 1993 Robert Myers

Early Childhood Counts: Programming Resources for Early Childhood Care and Development.
CD-ROM. The Consultative Group on ECCD. Washington D.C. : World Bank, 1999.