

WN *Appraisal*

World Nutrition **Volume 6, Number 9-10, September-October 2015**

Journal of the World Public Health Nutrition Association
Published monthly at www.wphna.org/worldnutrition/

Infant and young child nutrition. UNICEF
Faltering steps



Urban Jonsson
Executive director, The Owls
Former Chief of Nutrition, UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), New York, US
Email: Urban@urbanjonsson.com

Editor's note

In this occasional series, important or influential relevant work is appraised. Such reviews may be of the significance of current, recent, or historical work. In this appraisal, *WN* regular contributor Urban Jonsson assesses the recent UNICEF report on *Scaling Up Nutrition for Mothers and Children*, which is, in his view, seriously deficient in a number of major respects.

Based in Tanzania, with strong links to his native Sweden, Urban Jonsson is now executive Director of The Owls, the Sweden-based international consultancy company in the areas of human rights, democracy and development. He has worked with UNICEF for 25 years in different parts of the world, to prevent and alleviate child and maternal malnutrition. He is a former UNICEF senior executive in Africa and Asia, and was chief of its nutrition section at its New York headquarters from 1990-1994. He is the prime author of the 1990 UNICEF *Strategy for Improved Nutrition of Children and Women in Developing Countries*. Its conceptual framework of the immediate, underlying and structural basic causes of child malnutrition is now used and adapted to account for the personal, social, economic, political and environmental determinants of all states of public health



The most prominent picture in the 2015 UNICEF report on its approach to scaling up nutrition for mothers and their children, is strangely, as seen here, of a father feeding a small child from a cup

This critical appraisal is of the recent UNICEF report on its 'approach to scaling up nutrition for mothers and their children' (1).

The human rights-based approach

To begin with, it states that a rights-based approach and an equity-focus are two of the key principles that guide UNICEF's nutrition programming (1). Thus (page 21):

> UNICEF adopts a human rights-based approach to programming in nutrition. The right to food is included as a human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) reiterates the right to health and underlines the obligation of governments to combat malnutrition and disease in order to fully realize this right.

I would like to draw attention to the fact that the Convention on the Rights of the Child actually recognises children's right to nutrition, as a result of the fact that food, health and care are necessary conditions for good nutrition, and that all of these are recognised as human rights in the Convention (2).

UNICEF assures in many places in its report that it has adopted and is using a human rights-based approach to development. For example (on pages 2 and 21):

> UNICEF remains committed to upholding the rights of children… UNICEF's actions in nutrition are governed by the following overarching principles, which are fundamental to

> upholding our equity focus and promoting a rights-based approach to nutrition programming.

Importantly, in the first 'operational approach' presented it is stated (on page 23):

> Perform a rights-based, equity-focused situation analysis for nutrition and its determinants to inform policy development and programme design.

But not a single word is said about human rights or a human rights-based approach in the whole one-page text that follows, not even a word that one could say refers to some aspects of human rights; and there is only cursory reference to human rights or a human rights-based approach in the final summary of UNICEF's commitments (on pages 30 and 31).

In the second 'operational approach' (on page 24) 'Build commitment, strengthen leadership and strengthen governance for improved nutrition', it is stated

> Advocate that governments, as signatories to the CRC, should meet their obligations to realise the rights of children and develop their capacities as duty-bearers to meet their obligations.

Words like 'obligations' and 'capacities' are indeed very important in a human rights-based approach, but are given little meaning here. The conclusion must be that UNICEF does not seriously and professionally recommend the adoption and use of a human rights-based approach, human rights-based approach, as recommended and agreed upon at the Stamford Meeting in 2003 (3) and endorsed by the UN Development Group.

Equity focus

This new nutrition strategy repeatedly refers to a rights-based approach, and also to an equity focus. UNICEF has for some time adopted an 'equity agenda'. But it fails to define 'equity' and how equity and equality differ.

I have already explained the difference in *WN* (4). Equality' and 'equity' are different concepts, with different origins and different meanings. Equality is a key human rights principle. Equity is not a concept associated with human rights, and is not mentioned in the UN *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Equity is a value judgment reflecting fairness or a justice position. In a human rights perspective, equality is a condition for the realisation of human rights, often in combination with non-discrimination. Equity often is a useful attribute of the process used for realising the right. It is not either equality or equity – it is both.

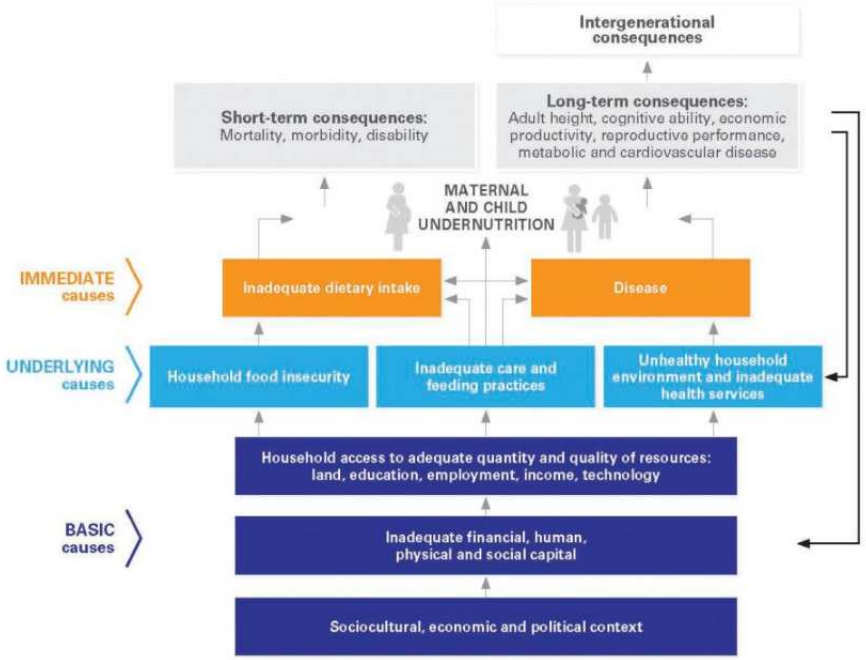
UNICEF is not alone in mixing up equality and equity. The International Women's Rights Action states (5):

> It is most disturbing that even UN agencies, who are obligated to use a human rights framework, and maintain that they are doing so, have made the substitution without thinking or analyzing what equality in human rights terms really means. After all, UN agencies have an obligation to know and understand that equity is not a term used in the human rights language, nor does it have a concrete meaning within the human rights terminology. At the most, equity is an illusive social goal, which allows governments to offer all types of justifications when they fall short, whereas equality is a human right and therefore a legal obligation.

The conceptual framework

Full reference, with Figure 1 of the report, shown here below, is made in the report to the *Conceptual Framework of Causality of Malnutrition,* originally presented in the UNICEF nutrition strategy of 1990 (6). This shows the immediate, underlying and structural basic causes of malnutrition, and has been adopted by almost all UN agencies, bilaterals and international NGOs over the years – but with 'adaptations'. Thus, in the original framework, 'inadequate dietary intake' and 'disease' are identified as immediate causes, and 'inadequate access to food' (food); 'inadequate health services and unhealthy environment' (health); and 'inadequate care for children and women' (care) are identified as underlying causes (as said on page 8 of the report).

However, in the main text of the strategy, the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) concepts of 'nutrition-specific causes', basically reflecting the immediate causes, and 'nutrition-sensitive causes', reflecting the underlying causes have been adopted and are very strongly promoted at present.



The black arrows show that the consequences of undernutrition can feed back to the underlying and basic causes of undernutrition, perpetuating the cycle of undernutrition, poverty and inequities.

Source: Adapted from UNICEF, 1990.

This has had a very damaging effect on the use of the conceptual framework. This is because each of the 'food', 'health' and 'care' aspects are necessary conditions for satisfying the two immediate causes and so result in good nutrition, but no one alone or any two together are sufficient. All three need to be met at the same time. Like the World Bank, UNICEF does not reflect this very important fact.

The most serious 'adaptation' is the omission of the basic or structural causes, other than a rather vague reference to 'economic and political context'. With the focus on nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive causes, very little attention is given to the structural causes. The emphasis and focus on immediate causes seems to be substituting for a correct analysis of the basic causes of malnutrition.

In Figure 2 of the report, which lists nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions, nothing is said about any of the many interventions required to address the structural basic causes. UNICEF is neglecting the need to address the historical, ideological, social, political and environmental causes of malnutrition.

Programme strategy

UNICEF's programmatic work in nutrition, as shown in Figure 3, reveals a weakness in the new strategy. Instead of first focusing on a proper causality analysis, using the conceptual framework to identify the context-specific causes of the problem, and after that constructing, defining and using context-relevant and specific interventions, the new strategy basically suggests the reverse. This means that a set of predetermined interventions are seeking to be used to solve any nutrition problem. At the end of the document six pages are full of such suggested interventions. An important and correct statement is made in the Operational Approach 5:

> UNICEF country offices work with communities, and tailor communication strategies and participatory approaches to the context. Understanding who engages with communities (community health workers, rural extension agents, community leaders and others) and how they engage or could engage, will be important to better understand how behaviour modifications can be addressed.

This describes a typical situation where the 'Triple A' approach of assessment, analysis and action, one of the most important and innovative aspects of the 1990 UNICEF nutrition strategy, would be appropriate. Triple A also involves reviewed, revised and repeated assessment, analysis and action. This approach is not even mentioned at a time when its strengths are increasingly recognised and understood as necessary when solving problems in society – for most societies and communities are complex systems (7-9). The use of the Triple A Approach in such complex systems was presented and discussed at the recent FANUS Conference in Arusha, Tanzania (10).

UNICEF's 'operational approach' is set out in Figure 4. The logic of the sequence of approaches is not easy to understand. It is now increasingly advised to reconstruct

'development problems' into outcome and process**.** When the desirable outcome has been defined and agreed upon, the process required to achieve this outcome is designed and implemented. This is useful in all development work, and becomes obligatory in a human rights-based approach. Almost all desirable outcomes reflect human rights standards, reflecting the right for example to health, care, food, nutrition, education, housing and water. In a human rights-based approach these outcomes should often meet the criteria of equality. However, the processes to achieve these equal outcomes very often must use a process of equity. The UNICEF report misses all this out! Further, nothing is said about any human rights-based monitoring system in 'operational approach' 6, nor is Triple A mentioned.

Health and nutrition

The idea of merging the health section and the nutrition section in UNICEF's New York headquarters was proposed in 1990, but was then rejected as a result of the agreement on the conceptual framework that requires always a simultaneous assessment of 'food', 'health' and 'care'. However, now (page 5):

> Guided by the joint Health and Nutrition Strategy 2006–2015, UNICEF's programmatic direction in nutrition is intrinsically linked with the health sector.

This is a very unfortunate change. It limits UNICEF's scope to address malnutrition multidisciplinarity, in accordance with the conceptual framework from 1990, and also the promises made in the new strategy about multidisciplinary actions. In the same vein, in the chapter on 'Working with partners and working across sectors' a large number of United Nations partners and collaborators are mentioned, including the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) and Renewed Efforts Against Child Hunger (REACH) initiatives. But no reference is made to the UN Sub-Committee on Nutrition (SCN), once established with strong support from UNICEF, which often facilitated multisectoral approaches to nutrition, but is now increasingly being replaced by SUN.

A number of different approaches to integrate, mainstream or apply human rights in development have been proposed. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Overseas Development Agency (ODI) have defined a set of categories reflecting the degree of correct adoption and use of a human rights-based approach to development (11,12). In a report to UN-Habitat, five categories were defined, with a full and correct approach defined as category 5 (13). Based on this, the level or degree of adoption of a human rights approach by UNICEF, judged from the report appraised here, is into category 2, defined as (14):

> Reflecting an explicit and strong desire to refer to human rights in the introduction and in the conclusions, without any effort to 'integrate' human rights or taking any serious 'human rights perspective' in the actual main text. The reason for this is often a desire to show a 'high moral ground' by referring to human rights, and the incorporation of human rights terminology into traditional development discourse, without any significant discussion of its operationalisation.

Ignoring equality

Throughout the new UNICEF strategy, reference is made (as on pages 5, 14) to the need to pay special attention to

> Especially the most disadvantaged, to survival and development [or] to adequately meet the needs of mothers and their children, especially the most disadvantaged.

These statements reflect the philosophical position known as prioritarianism.(15), favoured by all those critical of any type of egalitarianism. It is based on a humanitarian concern, to help to improve the situation of people living in extreme poverty – but without any reference to the need to reduce disparity. According to prioritarianism, it is morally most important to help people who are worse off, independent of the degree of inequality; thus (16):

> What is important from the moral point of view is not that everyone should have *the same* but that each should have *enough*. If everyone had enough, it would be of no moral consequence whether some had more than others.

Many of the new 'equity agendas' are based on a non-egalitarian prioritarianism. An important implication of this approach is the focus on 'poverty reduction' rather than on 'disparity reduction'. The first does not necessarily imply the second, while disparity reduction implies poverty reduction.

The key issue of whether the redistribution of resources above the poverty level is or is not a question of justice is not a scientific question. One true answer cannot be found. It is an ideological and political issue that has to be discussed and agreed upon in a democracy. However, in the United Nations context, equality in the realisation of human rights does not need any further discussion.

The lack of training of staff has emerged as a key finding in all evaluations about how and to what degree agencies and governments have adopted a human rights-based approach, in accordance with the UN Stamford meeting agreement (3). Yet the chapter on 'Delivering on UNICEF's commitment to nutrition' (page 30) listing nine key actors (technical leader, policy advisor, and so on.) says nothing about the need for training to increase human rights knowledge and skills among staff.

Finally**,** it is rather remarkable that UNICEF has agreed on the title, *UNICEF's Approach to Scaling Up Nutrition for Mothers and Their Children.* Such a title may easily be taken to mean that those children without any mothers can be excluded.

References

1 UN Children's Fund. *Scaling Up Nutrition for Mothers and their Children.* New York: UNICEF, June 2015. *Access pdf here*

2 Jonsson U. An approach to assess and analyse the health and nutrition situation of children in the perspective of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 1997, **5**; 367-381.

3 United Nations. *The Human Rights Based Approach to Development: Towards a Common Understanding Among the United Nations Agencies*. Second Inter-Agency Workshop. Stamford, 2003

4 Jonsson U. Rights, Justice. Equality #2. *Feedback. World Nutrition* 2014, **5**, 7, 695-698. *Access pdf here*

5 Facio A, Morgan M. International Women's Rights Action. *Equity or Equality for Women? Understanding CEDAW's Equality Principles. Alabama Law Review* 2009, **60,** 5, 1133-1170

6 United Nations Children's Fund. *Strategy for Improved Nutrition of Children and Women in Developing Countries*. New York: UNICEF, 1990

7 Hummelbrunner R, Jones H. *A Guide for Planning and Strategy Development in the Face of Complexity*. Overseas Development Institute working paper 285, London: ODI, 2013.

8 Ramalingam B *et al. Exploring science of complexity: Ideas and implications for development efforts.* London: Overseas Development Institute, 2008.

9 Kelly T. Five simple rules for evaluating complex community initiatives. *Community Investments* 2010, **22**, 1, 19-22, 36

10 Ljungqvist B, Jonsson U. *Nutrition information systems in complex societies.* FANUS 3rd African Nutrition Conference, Arusha, Tanzania, May 2015

11 Piron L-H, O'Neil T. *A Synthesis and Analysis of Donor Experiences with Human Rights-Based Approaches to Development and Integrating Human Rights into Development Programming*. London: Overseas Development Institute, 2005.

12 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.. *Integrating Human Rights into Development; Donor Approaches, Experiences and Challenges.* Paris: OECD, 2006.

13 Jonsson U. *A Human Rights-Based Approach to Sustainable Urbanisation and the Realization of Rights in the City,* UN-Habitat, Nairobi, June 2015.

14 Uvin P. On high moral ground: the incorporation of human rights by the development enterprise. *The Fletcher Journal of Development Studies* 2002, **17**. *Access pdf here*

15 Parfit D. Equality and priority. *Ratio* 1997, **10**, 3, 202–221

16 Frankfurt H. Equality as a moral ideal. *Ethics* 1987, **98**, 21-42.

Status

Cite as: Jonsson U. Faltering steps. UNICEF. *[Infant and young child nutrition] World Nutrition* September-October 2015, **6,** 9-10, 711-718. All *WN* contributions are obtainable at www.wphna.org. *World Nutrition* commentaries are reviewed internally or by invitation. All contributions to *World Nutrition* are the responsibility of their authors.

How to respond

Please address letters for publication to wn.letters@gmail.com. Letters should usually respond to or comment on contributions to *World Nutrition*. Usual length for main text of letters is between 350 and 1,200 words. Letters are edited for length and style, may also be developed, and once edited are sent to the author for approval.