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ScienceDirect
International Journal of Educational Development 26 (2006) 591–604
International Journal of EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedudev

Elusive mandate: UNICEF and educational development

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Abstract

The United Nations Children's Fund has rapidly gained prominence as a UN agency promoting educational development. Detailed analysis is presented of UNICEF's transition from being a supplier of emergency goods and services, to a humanitarian role that has diversified to embrace development assistance and promoting the rights of children and women. How these have impacted on the development of UNICEF education is examined. Despite many institutional strengths, it is argued that the need for increased policy clarity in UNICEF education and for greater operational effectiveness remain central to any contemporary understanding of UNICEF's contribution to educational development.

Keywords: International education; Development; Educational policy; United Nations; UNICEF; UNESCO

1. Introduction

There are four key United Nations (UN) bodies that historically have had major normative, policy and program commitments to educational development—the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the World Bank, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The four were, for example, the principal co-sponsors of the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) in 1990. Of them, it is the two Specialised Agencies that have received detailed attention in the education literature, including special issues of IJED: UNESCO (see IJED vol 16, 1996 and IJED vol 19, 1999; also Jones, 1988) and the World Bank (see IJED vol 22, 2002; also Heyneman, 2003; Mundy, 2002; Jones, 1992).

The other two agencies are part of the central UN structures based mainly in New York, part of a group of 'Funds and Programmes' that function under the direct authority of the General Assembly. As such, they differ markedly in governance and structure from the autonomous Specialised Agencies. The best known of these is UNICEF, the subject of this article. The following associated article in this issue of IJED addresses UNDP, of deep historical significance in post-war educational development. Despite their importance, neither UNICEF nor UNDP have been the subject of detailed scrutiny in the education research literature (but see Jones, 2005).

UNICEF is arguably the best-known component of the UN system, at least as far as the general public is concerned. Unlike most UN bodies, UNICEF's budget is met in full through voluntary

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doi:10.1016/j.ijedudev.2006.02.003

contributions—from governments, private organisations and the general public. Much flows from this, not least the permanent need for UNICEF to be demonstrating and advertising its worth, especially in places and times of crisis. It has also given non-governmental organisations (NGOs) a significant place in UNICEF's history, to a far greater extent than is common in the UN. In education, many seasoned observers seemed a little surprised to see the prominence UNICEF enjoyed at the WCEFA in 1990, especially when it was realised that it had been the primary political driver behind the EFA initiative. Since then, UNICEF has continued to enjoy a prominent place among the education multilaterals, keeping its views on educational priorities high on global agenda and promoting them vigorously through practical operations at country level. In general terms, the research literature shows how the UN's education agencies have not been able to avoid the disputation that swirls around the UN system as a whole. UNICEF has been no exception.

The positive imagery that surrounds public perceptions of UNICEF is, in large measure, deserved. With its highly practical operations, its strong in-country presence and its rapid response times in emergencies, UNICEF has clearly demonstrated its worth, even if its operational effectiveness can easily be overstated. For education, however, the story of UNICEF commitments is far from straightforward: UNICEF has struggled over the past four decades to resolve questions about its role in educational development. Its failure to achieve policy clarity constitutes a major structural threat to the Fund's educational legitimacy, throwing open to question UNICEF's choice of options and priorities for its practical education operations. These constitute major challenges to Executive Director Ann Veneman, who in 2005 succeeded Carol Bellamy (1995–2005), bringing a far different orientation to programming, one that brings into contention UNICEF's emphasis on human rights as a program driver.

2. The search for identity

What is interesting about the history of UNICEF is that a set of characteristics, there from the very beginning, helped in large measure to ensure its survival and prominence. At the outset, UNICEF was meant to be only temporary, the politics of which was bound up with its dedication to highly practical field operations and its reliance on voluntary funding. The result has been UNICEF's high profile at country level, both in the 'program' countries it serves and in the 'donor' countries where it needs to raise the lion's share of its funds. From a political and public relations standpoint, meeting the needs of children has a certain irresistible quality, and even before its foundation the backers of UNICEF understood the potency of the politics of child survival and welfare (key sources on the general history of UNICEF are Black, 1996, 1987; Beigbeder, 2001; on the origins of UNICEF education see Phillips, 1987).

United States grand designs for the post-war multilateral system reflected a complex set of motives and strategies, many reflecting an authentic idealism and internationalism, some reflecting narrow self-interest, and with others looking for US global leadership in the looming Cold War (see Hoopes and Brinkley, 1997; Schlesinger, 2003). US State Department tolerance for multilateralism was highly conditional, despite the idealistic rhetoric and rationale associated with the grand designer himself, Franklin D. Roosevelt. From 1943, the US was content to provide its substantial support for emergency war relief through the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), adopting a needs-based approach to the distribution of supplies, especially food, clothing and medicines, through an elaborate military-like distribution network in both Eastern and Western Europe. By August 1946, however, the US was determined to divert the bulk of its post-war relief and reconstruction efforts in Europe to bilateral programs, UNRRA becoming in the process an early casualty of Cold War politics.

Through the first half of 1946, former US President Herbert Hoover had conducted a far-reaching assessment of the world food situation, intended to shape and guide the Truman administration's bilateral aid efforts. In an influential series of radio broadcasts in mid-1946, Hoover showed himself to be at odds with at least one major plank of State Department thinking, insisting that the US address the substantial needs of children in the post-war period through the United Nations, and not bilaterally. Hoover's influence with several major US allies was enough to win the day. Of critical political importance were understandings that a temporary International Children's Emergency Fund (ICEF) would help compensate for the controversial dismantling of UNRRA (Charnow,