

Special Feature on James P Grant's Visit to Bangladesh

Conversation with James P Grant

The UNICEF Chief James P. Grant talks to The Daily Star on his organisation's targets for the year 2000, the problems facing Bangladesh, the importance of primary education and the changing aid prospects for the developing world.

THERE is a saying that if the Guinness Book of Records should ever name any individual as the father of the largest number of children in the world, the distinction would go to James P. Grant, the head of the United Nations Children's Fund, still better known by its old acronym, UNICEF.

Yet, Jim Grant, as he is known around the world, is anything but a quiet gentle father figure. While he radiates warmth and smiles a lot, he has managed the affairs of one of the best-known UN specialised agencies with methodical, almost ruthless, efficiency for past 12 years, bringing into his work a combination of dedication, innovation and a kind of drive that would put many of his younger colleagues — he is now 70 — to shame.

All this is seen in the work of UNICEF, in the growth and success of the organisation. Here, one uses the term 'success' carefully. After all, with millions of children in the developing world still dying of malnutrition everyday and millions going without education, shelter and any kind of hope for the future, the success of UNICEF and of all other governmental and non-governmental agencies can be measured only in relative terms. What was the situation like 20 years ago and what is it now? Do we register progress year after year? Or are we going backward? Answers to these questions offer us optimism, even when it comes to the situation in Bangladesh. In effect, this is what The Daily Star's conversation with Jim Grant was all about — the progress made during the past two or three decades, the direction of the on-going programme and future targets and goals.

Thanks to the cooperation of the local UNICEF office, we were fortunate in getting nearly an hour of Grant's time during his recent visit to Bangladesh. The conversation took place soon after the press conference addressed by the UNICEF chief, which had dealt with the organisation's projects in Bangladesh in details. So, we thought it appropriate to focus on new areas and ask questions which had not been brought up at the press conference. However, none of the questions took Grant by surprise, as if he knew them all in advance — and their answers — and he dealt with them in details. Indeed, he could talk on for hours and forget all about the reception where a couple of hundred guests had gathered to see him and listen to him on what was undoubtedly Grant's favourite subject — children of the world.

The conversation was conducted by The Daily Star editor, S.M. Ali who was assisted by the paper's executive editor, Mahfuz Anam and feature writers, Aasha Mehreen Amin and S. Bari.

difference today is that the political will is much stronger. Secondly, we've had the experience of past failures and past successes from which people are learning and of course as the big demonstration of the change of political attention to this I would cite just two things. One was the Jomtien conference in Thailand on 'Education for All'. For the first time in history, all the countries were working together for this purpose to exchange knowledge — that in itself was a unique starting point. Second, the World Summit for Children in New York in September 1990. Achieving primary education for all was a major theme. So we have this commitment plus the fact that was indicated earlier. The countries have asked the UN to monitor and to report. So, beginning this summer we will be reporting to the General Assembly for each country. How is Bangladesh faring? How is India faring? And this is a very important forward step that we didn't have before.

DS: Just one supplementary question on that. Commensurate to this new consciousness and political will and also the effort of the international community, can we visualize a scenario where the World Bank or IMF, the UN system itself, for example UNDP, will allocate more funds for education? For example, I know that UNESCO, which is the principal organisation supposed to promote education, is being starved of funds. So how do you look at that situation?

JG: Well, I think at the time of Jomtien meeting in Thailand, the World Bank (WB) indicated that it was going to greatly increase its funds for primary education, and that we have already seen, since that meeting almost a four fold increase of money from the WB to these purposes. There's been a big loan here in Bangladesh. I think it was 350 million dollars, for general education programme of which primary education is the key. In the case of UNICEF, we were, in 1989, spending about 7-8 per cent of our money on basic education. We expect by 1995 to have doubled it to 15 per cent. And by the end of the decade to have increased it to 20 per cent. And we expect our money to keep on increasing. We are really looking forward to a four or five-fold increase in expenditure by UNICEF.

UNESCO is in financial difficulty in part because it is funded by assessed contributions and with the chaos in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, there is a big delay, a slowdown in payment of those assessed contributions. So that FAO, WHO and UNESCO all face a financial crisis created by these political changes whereas the World Bank and UNICEF, which get their money from contributions directly from governments, are getting increased funds for these purposes. The US Congress has just passed a bill as part of a continuing resolution. Everything was held the same except for two. The appropriation for UNICEF went up from 75 to 85 million dollars. And then there is a special Child Survival and Development Fund that covers education — and that went up from 200 million to 250 million dollars. This is a small indication that the money will be there as the countries move forward.

DS: Is there any difference in approach between your organisation and the World Bank? We get the impression, let's say from Bangladesh, that the World Bank insists on infrastructure building like schools, whereas you may wish to promote something else.

JG: Well, we tend to be complementary agencies. Our policies are largely the same. We have reached full agreement on basic principles. But the World Bank is more like a heavy 20 ton truck — we are more like a jeep, we move much more flexibly, faster, but frankly we carry less stuff. Whereas the bank carries a lot of stuff but it has to follow — there has to be a bridge for it to cross. It takes time to get there. So, in this sense we are quite complementary. And UNICEF is much stronger in working with citizens' groups and social mobilization. We are much closer to the people than is the Bank. It's quite appropriate that the Bank tends to work in what you called — 'the building' of schools. We work more with the radio and television and existing local teachers and imams to facilitate a more immediate use of the educational channels.

DS: Let us go back to the situation in Bangladesh. We seem to have three major problems. One is, our democratically elected government is still to find its feet in the ground. Maybe, it is still groping. Secondly, there is a feeling that we have a bloated bureaucracy

which doesn't move all that fast when it comes to action. And the third is corruption. Have any of your activities been affected by these problems? Or you do not see these problems as major obstacles in your work?

JG: I can generalize. There are some 50 new democracies all over the world, Eastern and Central Europe, in Africa, in Bangladesh. And with these kind of fundamental changes, there will be a certain amount of groping. It tends to be combined with more decentralized economic management as well. So the problems we face, say in Bangladesh, are how the new government tries to find its feet, exactly how to function. This is a common problem. But I think that we know that with time most of these problems will disappear.

Secondly, bureaucracy. Bureaucracy has always been slow. Even my own bureaucracy takes time to change. I calculate that in UNICEF when we issue a major new policy directive, it takes three or four years to bring about a shift in the way people act. I must confess in my 12 years as director, I have learnt how you can speed up this process. But when I first came, my experience was that it took five years to shift the UNICEF bureaucracy. This is a well-intentioned, dedicated group of people. I think that normally, if you want to change the educational bureaucracy of a country, one needs to think of 8, 10 or 12 years unless one can find some way of really convincing people that they should change — now in a sense this is what happened with the immunization effort. You have the health facilities available all over the country but many were not doing immunization. Or if they did immunization, they did it for one hour a week. And if they had a vial of ten measles shots, they would say to the people coming up once, "Well you must come back another time when there are five or six." There were all these inhibitions. But once we really took seriously the goal of universal child immunization, by Dec. 1990, the DCs here were convinced that the president of the country was monitoring their progress, that the media were watching what they were doing.

Then you've got the NGOs helping, and there was television, radio spots, three to four times, 10 times a day. There were newspaper editorials and cartoons. That really captured the lead too. There's the American story of President Truman. He used to tell about the mule-skinner, a man who used a mule to carry things. One night he was boasting at a bar of what a marvelous mule he had. That mule would go anywhere that he told it to go to. The next day one of the people who had been listening to him saw the mule skinner hitting the mule over the head with a pole, so he said, "Is this the wonderful mule you were telling me about? You said he would go anywhere you said." "Yes," said the mule skinner, "but I must get his attention first." In a sense, that's what happens when your prime minister goes for two hours to a seminar on education. She is giving out the message to the bureaucrats that this is important and when she does 10 other things like that the word gets through. How often do you know something that's good for you that you don't do? You may know that exercise is good for you but you don't do it. One may know that smoking is not good for one then it takes something like a heart attack or the heart attack of a good friend before that hit on the head happens. So I think that any innovator needs to take into account bureaucracies and corporate bureaucracies. IBM, General Motors have faced very similar problems and this is one of their problems today. They became great big organisations accustomed to doing things a certain way. Then the Japanese came up, they were innovative like the jeeps that moved creatively and GM, IBM, Rolls Royce were very slow to respond and are now faced with a challenge.

On the question of corruption, I would say that corruption is a world-wide problem. One needs to find ways to offset corruptive tendencies, that one finds in the US, UK and Bangladesh and you saw it illustrated today when we talked of the iodization of salt. We want to get the salt iodized but how are the people to know that the salt is really iodized or that it has not lost its potency. So that was where this little 'test device' where you could put this drop on the salt helped out. It means that the plant is going to be much less likely to cheat and not put in iodine or to put in so little that it loses its strength. If he knows that all over the countryside there are school teachers, local government people, newsmen who can test whether his brand is

properly iodized or not. So one can build or offset corruption that can be very useful. This is where the media comes in. If corrupt officials or people who think they may want to be tempted by corruption know that there is a danger that the media will see them, they will be more careful. And this is one of the roles of the free press. And with a free press I think, virtually every country can keep corruption under a considerable degree of control just because of the fear of people of disclosure by a vigorous press. I think we've learned that one can move ahead against this problem which represents, to some degree, a problem for every society in this world.

DS: You are one of the most distinguished figures of the UN system. The system is coming under tremendous pressure because of new demands being made by the newly emerging democracies of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Do you at the back of your mind, feel reasonably optimistic or pessimistic about meeting these demands, with McNamara solution of diverting savings from defense budgets to development?

JG: Clearly the CIS, former Soviet Union and East and Central Europe, are going to need external assistance. The question is, where does it come from? Does it come from traditional Official Development



Mr Grant making his point clear.

— Star Photo

Assistance (ODA) earmarked for developing countries or does it come from dramatic reductions in defense budgets? And I could argue that this is where it should come from, because virtually every industrial country now is moving towards vast savings in defense. But the long term ability to keep those expenditures down depends on the CIS not degenerating into chaos, into new dictatorships, new arms threats, so that it's a very appropriate use of savings for this purpose. But at the same time I would argue that some of the reductions from defense expenditures go to increase ODA for developing countries as well. Clearly the security of the industrial countries, now that the military threat has been dramatically reduced, depends not only on the CIS republics not becoming major trouble makers but it also means that the least developed countries in particular Africa South of the Sahara, need help. And if this help does not come, the new democracies will fail. We've seen terrorism. Look what's come out of the Middle East. Relatively small populations have been able to inspire terrorism. The Lokerbie Pan Am disaster and the others that we've seen, so that I would argue and I think we will see an increase in expenditure, not only for CIS countries but increases for the developing countries. I think the marvels are being done by countries such as the Danes and the Swedes. The Danes for example, have reached 10 per cent of GNP a year for ODA for developing countries. Then, they have decided to, on top of that, have a quarter of one per cent of GNP for the next several years for East and Central Europe and CIS, recognising that's an additional problem. At the same time, their defence expenditures are coming down sharply. So there are other resources available. It's just a question of where they're coming from.

DS: While we share your optimism about the saving from defence budgets being diverted into development, we still see a growing arms race in our region, in South Asia. Have you any comment on this phenomenon?

JG: Well, yes, the one area in the world where really the arms race continues and is added up at a fairly high level, remains in the subcontinent, with India and Pakistan. It is the hope of everybody that in the next two or three years, there can be a resolution about this. So that there can be disarmament for development in South Asia, as well. It is worth noting that to achieve the goals of the Earth Summit, it is estimated that \$20 billion will be required by 1995, two thirds of which must come from developing countries and one third from the industrial countries. Now the two thirds from the developing countries would be met if there were a 10 per cent reduction in military expenditures. In the developing world, this is what it would take on your side to save 50 million children's lives, to reduce birth by 100 to 150 million, bring universal primary education, water to virtually every hamlet, so that 10 per cent reduction on the developing countries side, a one per cent reduction in industrial countries' expenditure, would make this possible. So this is clearly again a question for the public opinion of the developing world to make itself felt.

DS: Mr. Grant, Thank you for your time



UNICEF Executive Director Mr James P Grant.

— Photo: Joe Ruhino/UNICEF

Below are extracts from the conversation:

The Daily Star (DS): As you move through the decade of the nineties and approach a new century, you have probably set your targets, targets for UNICEF, which you would like to reach by the year 2000. May we start by asking you to tell us something about these targets?

James Grant (JG): Our main concern still remains the death rate among children. For those countries where the reduction by one-third would not get it down to a child death rate of 70, it must come down further. So in the case of Bangladesh, it really would be for you to cut your child death rate in half, whereas for the United States, France, Sri Lanka, it would be to reduce by a third. Second, it is to reduce maternal deaths in every country by one-half. It is to reduce malnutrition by one-half, to achieve at least 80 per cent level of primary education by young people. So that at least 80 per cent of the children will have a certain basic knowledge at reading, writing, arithmetic and life knowledge. These are the main goals. Plus, there should be special attention to children in especially difficult circumstances, trapped in war, victims of the AIDS endemic in places. Then, under these broad headings there are some more specific goals such as the eradication of polio from the face of the earth by the year 2000; eradication of the guinea-worm, which used to affect tens of millions of people, also by the year 2000. All told there are some 27 goals that have been quantified to be achieved by the year 2000.

DS: To reach these goals, a country like Bangladesh would need massive assistance from outside. This brings up a related question. There is a strong feeling that as time goes on, the dependence of this country on external assistance also goes on increasing, when it should be really going down. For instance, only recently, we had the largest commitment in its category, some \$600 million, made by the aid agencies for our population programme. After your talks with leaders



Mr James P Grant observes sinking of a tubewell under slinger method of tubewell construction at Savar near Dhaka in July 1980.

— Photo: UNICEF Bangladesh.

here, do you see any hope of this dependence being reduced over a period of time or that efforts are being made to promote sustainable development in this country?

JG: I am confident that barring political chaos, barring political difficulties, Bangladesh will move quite rapidly towards sustainable growth. The real question is, the use to which aid is put. If, more and more goes into basic education, basic health, yes, it strengthens the capacity of the country, because you're basically moving the people. I was involved in the late forties and early fifties with the early stages of development in South Korea and Taiwan. And in those days, people used to raise the same question. At that time, the income in South Korea and Taiwan was roughly the same or less than what it is in Bangladesh today. They very effectively placed a lot of emphasis on universal primary education, on health, on social programmes such as land reform to make sure that people could get jobs, and it turned out that this was the best investment of all, because those countries had less natural resources than does Bangladesh. They were in the northern climates with short growing seasons, mostly mountains, no natural resources, the only thing they had were people. But they invested in their people. What has Switzerland done? What does England have? It's basically people that count. So that the attention, the increased attention, now in Bangladesh on educating everybody is a very wise investment indeed as well as being morally sound.

DS: The goal for universal primary education has been with us for quite some time, at least in Bangladesh, and I think to some extent with India and Pakistan. Success has really not been forecast and of course we are talking about political will — we know all that. But it's not really coming about. What is your comment on that?

JG: It's a very appropriate scepticism because in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan over the last 20-30 years there have been repeated statements of adult literacy campaigns for universal primary education. The big



Mr Grant holding a baby during his visit at the Immunization Centre in Dhaka on September 9, 1985.

— Photo: UNICEF