

Each Individual Makes A Difference

Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF

Carol Bellamy is the executive director of UNICEF. Yoshi Nagaoka, a Seikyo Shimbun staff writer, talked with her in New York on Jan. 6 about her life, UNICEF and what can be done to protect children.

YN: I'd like to ask about your background. We all know you are well-respected and very successful in your career.

CB: I'm actually by training a lawyer; that is my educational background. I've spent about half of my adult career in government or the public sector, both as an appointed and an elected government official. I've spent the other half in the private sector, as both a corporate lawyer and an investment banker.

If I had to pick the most important thing I've done in my life, it would be my Peace Corps experience. Immediately after college, many, many years ago, when the Peace Corps was very young, I was an American Peace Corps volunteer. That was my first introduction to development work in developing countries. And it was a good experience, because it was on the ground, doing what people typically thought Peace Corps volunteers did, way off in the middle of far removed jungle-like areas.

And then 30 years later I was lucky enough to be appointed by the president of the United States as the director of the Peace Corps — the first return volunteer to be appointed. It was probably the most important thing I've done.

YN: You are one of those rare people who knows the front-line situation. Also, you understand the whole picture now of UNICEF. From your perspective, how can we, as ordinary citizens, contribute to the goals of UNICEF?

CB: I think there is clearly an important role that UNICEF plays within the overall framework of the United Nations, as both a doer and a conscience for children worldwide, just as I think non-governmental organizations and other organizations that are focused not only on children do, too. But the reality is that no matter how many organizations you have, no matter how much institutional money you have, ultimately you can only reach a small number of children.

As an organization, UNICEF can at least improve our impact on reaching children, but realistically it is ultimately each individual who can make a difference. And that's what I think is very important to realize. Government, or quasi-government or even NGOs can't do everything.

I think no single person should ever think that they don't have something to contribute, because I think that every person can make a difference. So, whatever one chooses to do — if you volunteer in your community, in a community program, or local church, temple, or mosque, or if you are an occasional volunteer in your local school system or even with sports teams — you can make a difference.

At the same time, I think from our perspective at UNICEF, we take NGOs very seriously. And I actually see it being an area of activity in UNICEF that will increase over time.

In recent years, there's been a growth of NGOs and the roles they can play. We now know there are good ones and ones that aren't that effective, just the way there are good

organizations, reasonably effective organizations and not so effective ones. But I see us working more with NGOs to the extent to which there is a recognition that it isn't government that can do everything and that there are a variety of kinds of organizations out there that can help.

I also see UNICEF working more and more with NGOs as we realize that this is one of the very effective ways, I believe, to do capacity-building. In other words, the role of UNICEF or any organization in development is not to just continue to do for others but to help others to do for themselves; to assist them, then, in building their capacity.

And I think that one of the really important areas for UNICEF to be looking at — working in the variety of countries that we're in and because we're so heavily decentralized — is supporting the growth and the flourishing of NGOs in the different countries in which we are working. In the long run, advocates for children within their own countries can be their strongest advocates. It's not that we from UNICEF or from NGOs coming from outside don't have a role to play, but really if people advocate and fight for their children, that's where the greatest strength will come from.

YN: The SGI's strength is as a grass-roots movement. Our activities to promote peace, culture and education are based on our small-scale discussion meetings held every month throughout the world. Based on your experience, how can such a movement be effective toward global issues?

CB: I'll use what could be an inappropriate analogy, but when I was an elected official and people would come in my office and pound on my table and say, "We can get 10,000 people to vote against you," I always thought they had no idea what they were talking about. But when someone would come into my office and say, "We can change the votes of a hundred people in our community," then I thought that these people probably could have a much greater impact because they understood how they could actually make a difference — rather than just talking about huge numbers.

So I think it's not a matter of big and small. It's a matter like that pebble in the puddle, just that one little stone that creates all those waves. I think that's the way you go.

It's not a matter necessarily of size, but a matter of influence. I believe that every single human being can in some way make a difference.

Unfortunately, we live in a time where we're all so media-conscious, or television-conscious, or big-screen-conscious or something like that, that people think that only if they have some kind of public pizzazz, public persona or something like that, only then can they make a difference. But that isn't so. Teachers make a difference on more people every day than some fancy person who appears on television.

YN: The people who can make a difference should have hope, otherwise they can get discouraged, sometimes too discouraged to even take action. So what is your message to our readers about being hopeful and optimistic concerning the challenges facing the world's children?

CB: Well, I think you have to be realistic to begin with. There are enormous challenges out there for children.

There have been tremendous advances in children's health just in the last 50 years — UNICEF is 50 years old. More children go to school today than ever before, but still it's estimated that there are more than 100 million children who do not.

UNICEF is 50, and we were born out of World War II. Yet we look at the world today

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and we find probably as many children caught in war as 50 years ago.

And you ask, “What’s going wrong?”

On the other hand, I think it’s best to be optimistic, and generally I’m optimistic. People ask, “Well, you see all these problems, don’t you get pessimistic?” And I do occasionally. But the way I stay optimistic — and I think that other people can — is to talk with a child.

Listen to a child. Just see the optimism that exists in a child. Like the little girl I ran into in Liberia in the middle of this terrible, sprawling camp for displaced people, who was so proud of her essay in her essay book.

Recently I was in Indonesia, and we were visiting some schools and a health clinic. They introduced us to some boys who were called the Little Doctors. All of a sudden I had a little tug behind me and there were little girl doctors, too. They wanted to make sure somebody spoke to them.

I think sometimes if you start losing some of your optimism, the important thing is just to go out and talk to some children. And not just always talk to, but also listen to, the children. First of all, you’ll find enormous honesty, which is very helpful, very terrific; they will just tell you what they think. Second, you’ll realize the enormous resiliency of children to overcome even the worst adversity.

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