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Children come first

UNICEF (UNITED NATIONS CHILDREN'S FUND) REPRESENTATIVE
TO MALAYSIA YOUSOUF OOMAR TALKS TO **ZAKIAH KOYA** AND
RAJESHWARY MENON ABOUT THE FUND'S ACTIVITIES.

How would you describe yourself?

A normal human being who has a special place for human beings – who looks at every person for the first time as a good human being. I want to be treated as a human being, so I need to treat people as such. That is where the emotions come in – you know where the heart comes in as opposed to just the brains doing what I am paid to do.

Do you think you fit in well as the Unicef head (in Malaysia)?

I moved from the Ministry of Planning in Mauritius to Unicef because I enjoyed the fact that I was going to be focused on a most vulnerable group – children. Every time you engage in an action and you see results, you feel you have made a difference.

I take risks sometimes. To see results, be ready to take risks.

What kind of risks?

For example, when you are voicing out children's issues, some quarters may not like it. Sometimes you could be critical, but if you are constructive, that is acceptable.

Sometimes, these sensitive issues could be in a country of conflict. For example, when I was working in Algeria, or more recently in Ivory Coast, there was a war. So you couldn't take sides, but you had to take your position, which is in favour of children but which may not be in favour of a militia or even the government – because for you, you would see the child first.

How do you ensure that Unicef makes a difference on the ground and is not just mouth-ing policies?

I believe we need to be where the action is. For example in the Ivory Coast, I used to go regularly to the fields to visit the projects because my objective was to lead by example, to make people understand that I am there. And if I could be there, then why couldn't the people or the community themselves be there?

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We assume we have the answers, but sometimes the answer lies with the problem-maker. Therefore to engage with the problem, we have to make people understand that we are all part of the problem, so we have to be part of the solution.

What is important is involve-

ment. Involvement with a big capital "I" because I can speak to you, you leave me, you forget, OK? I can share with you, you leave me, you forget. But when I sit with you and I involve you in a decision, in a discussion, in the doing of things, you will remember me forever.

Have you been to the interior of Malaysia to find out how children fare?

I have been to a place called Mukah in Sarawak and I have been to Pulau Merit which is further south. I discovered of course what is most important to me - the people.

I keep reminding everyone that everything we are doing, anywhere whether it's you, me, government, anywhere, it's all about people. Whether you are a business community, whether you are the government, the UN or whether you are the NGO, it is all about people. When you say it is all about people it is all about the lives of people in a given context, in a given cultural dimension and how you would therefore make sure that you are working with all those important facets around you without offending any of them. Some of the practices which we have seen over the years are harmful, but the people have been practising it for five, six, a thousand years.

How do you start engaging with these people and ensure it is not a confrontation?

We have to engage in a partnership, in a dialogue. Sit and listen, the more we listen the better we will understand and the more efficient we will be in terms of delivering support.

I always remember that in all these places there are leaders - whether they are formal, the opinion leaders or the informal leaders - these influential people will be able to explain to their followers, so they will make sense of what you should be saying - so engage the leaders.

How have Malaysians reacted to Unicef programmes?

In Malaysia, people are very responsive, not only because of the level of development, the level of education - but also I think, there is a way in which you present the problem. As somebody coming from the outside in support, Unicef must understand first the context, the people, the tradition, the culture. Get your facts correct, test them first before you propose.

Can you give examples of good practices that you have come across in Malaysia?

The community is directly involved - I can see for example how the community is engaged, where they have expressed concerns.

What about in *kampungs*?

Yes, yes, in fact it was in the village that I was very impressed - by the fact that people were being concerned citizens. In some other countries, people sometimes don't even know what is happening. But here when people knew, people were interested. Once you have a strong community involvement, 50% of Unicef's work is done and that is one excellent advantage.

Has Unicef in Malaysia found any problem working with the society and the community?

Not really. We do not propose things to people which go beyond their means and understanding. I think you should understand and be people-oriented. So focus on understanding people and then make them understand that they are not end-beneficiaries but partners.

Has there been any project that has not gone down well with the community?

Not that it hasn't gone down well - only it is a bit more tedious. Development is a tedious job, where you need to persevere. You will not see results immediately. That is why we always plan over a period when you set your objectives which you want to achieve say, in five years. So sometimes there are difficulties.

"We need to engage with the children, provide them with the necessary space and listen to them."



Let me give you an example. Take the case of HIV/AIDS, which is a major issue, because that is the only millennium development goal which Malaysia has not achieved so far. Hopefully by 2015, this will also be achieved by reversing the trend or reducing completely the number of reported infections. We need to do a lot in empowering people, in building their capacity, it could be training and sharing of information.

How does Unicef empower people? Are there any problems?

We at Unicef try to understand the resilience in the community. People have faced difficulties over generations, but they have survived - whether it is after a tsunami, a storm, an earthquake or after a flood, the people have taken courage. We must build on that and make them feel dignified.

Nuclear families are replacing traditional extended families where children were provided with a protected environment with grandparents and all. And rapid urbanisation, huge apartments which we have seen elsewhere, is part of the natural process and the success lies in how you cope with it.

We increasingly hear about child abuse, but that is because the network works better. Information is more readily available and people are more concerned.

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That is why people are saying we cannot accept children being abused. Now people are more conscious about issues relating to child protection.

What issues are you concerned about in the education of children in Malaysia?

Look at Malaysia, 40% of the population are children, right? But they are the present population and will be 100% the future population. So investing in those children now, in that 40% below eighteen years of age, means that you will reap the fruits of your investment when they reach adult-

hood. On education, primary, secondary and even university, Malaysia is on the right track.

On issues of disparity, 97% of children are in school, right? But still there is the 3% who are not. Who are these children? Where are they? And why are they not in school? Sometimes you will see they are not because there is no school. Is it because the schooling system doesn't meet the aspirations? I don't know, I mean we have to understand better, that is why we need to go back to them. So know where they are, sit together, understand the problem together, and then look for the solutions together.

What are the major challenges?

These are linked to child protection. In terms of policy issues, it is looking at which categories of children are the most vulnerable - whether they are the children on the streets, children who are being marginalised, children who are not in school, or whether they are the *orang asli*, Penan, or some other group.

Second, is the focus on HIV/AIDS as the major cause of concern, because when you look at the 84,000 infected people here, you will find they are mostly young people and 73,000 of them are drug addicts. The latest

figures also show that more young females are abusing drugs.

We started on the basis of supplementary reading for the *orang asli*. As a result, the children and their parents are getting more interested in learning and reading. This is a project led by the Education Ministry with our support and Universiti Malaysia Sabah. It's proving to be successful.

Where is this happening?

This is in Sabah. Now we are also trying to work here. We started a project in Tasik Cini with the *orang asli* and it is about telling stories - their stories, their own stories. So the more you identify education with their own culture,

the more interested they become. And we are using education as an entry point to do more.

What about education of the non-documented children?

We are proposing that these children - migrants and locals - be given temporary IDs to allow them access to education. It is work in progress. The government has been sensitive and has kept an open ear to our pleas because people understand.

In some ways Malaysia suffers also because of its own hospitality - it is such a hospitable place, anybody is welcome. So once people are welcome here, they stick around and you start suffering from your own good heart because people start exploiting you - to the extent of even doing nonsense, whether robbing or attacking or whatever. I think what we need to do therefore is to deal with issues linked to migration - we need to tackle it as a broader issue of migration.

But coming back to the issue of the ID - for us at Unicef, every child, any child, anywhere, anytime. And it is important for the child to have birth

registration, which has nothing to do with nationality, but to have a paper saying I am so and so, born on such a date, from parents so and so, and even if I don't have both parents, at least

I have one, I have a witness. Every child is legitimate, because the words legitimate and illegitimate are legal terms, but every child is a child, born out of human existence.

Has any ministry or person said you are meddling in their affairs?

My view is that I am not going out there criticising the country. What I am saying is a reality - an accepted reality that there are these categories of children in this country.

So your work is making it seen?

I think my work is, because they see it, they know it, let's be honest - they see, they know it. But how do you engage with the country to find the right kind of solution - you have your own laws and you have your sovereignty. So as a sovereign country, how do you make sure that whatever you do is compatible with your law, the culture, etc. I think we have to find an intelligent way of

presenting a problem and a solution. All problems won't have immediate solutions, but there is a solution which will take a while.

Treat them as if they are your own children, because they are children, they did not choose.

What do you intend to accomplish before you leave Malaysia?

I want the children of Malaysia to be better than what their parents are. In other words, to do better, to accomplish more, and to also be the First World country they are aiming for. We need to engage with the children, provide them with the necessary space and listen to them. Let's encourage them, let's promote their right to participation, but let's do some listening. Let them understand what is happening, we need to do slightly more to protect our children, make sure when they are out there they don't become victims of kidnappers or abusers.

A child is just a child, the child has no political frontier, no religious frontier. Let the child therefore be the centre of our focus, be in the back of our minds for everything we do and every step we take.