



Editorial

This month Ann Veneman, the new Executive Director of UNICEF, will be in post. This follows the appointment by the US President of Paul Wolfowitz as President of the World Bank. These decisions and their implications have crucial public health nutrition significance. The World Bank is a global public institution that has a hugely important role in economic development and poverty eradication. UNICEF is the leading UN organisation engaged in promoting the rights and health of children.

Leaders set the tone and direction of their organisations. It is therefore important to consider how such persons are appointed. Before any appointment it would be reasonable to expect a job description with a person specification against which to judge the qualifications of applicants. It is also normal and proper to expect an open and transparent appointment process, such as a job advertisement, with closing dates, and so forth. The UNICEF web page has job advertisements that follow this format, but I could see no such process for the post of its executive director; in fact, I could not find an advertisement for the post anywhere.

At its beginning 60 years ago, after pressure from the US government, it was agreed that a US citizen would lead the World Bank, and that a European would lead the International Monetary Fund (IMF). It was also agreed that the US President would choose the World Bank's head, and that Europe would collectively decide on the IMF leader. UNICEF has always had a US Executive Director; the Secretary-General of the UN formally makes the appointment, but it is an open secret that the nominee of the US government is accepted. Hence no job advertisements, and a closed and secret appointment process.

Joseph Stiglitz, former World Bank chief economist and a Nobel prize winner, recently noted: 'The entire process of choosing these international institutions' leaders is an anachronism that undermines their effectiveness and makes a mockery of the G7 commitment to democracy'¹. He continued: 'How can advice on democratic reforms [such as from the World Bank] be taken seriously when the institutions that offer it do not subscribe to the standards of openness, transparency and participation that they advocate? ... The lives and wellbeing of billions in developing countries depend on a global war on poverty. Choosing the right general in that war will not assure victory, but choosing the wrong one surely increases the chances of failure'.

There has already been a great deal of discussion and comment about the UNICEF appointment (see editorial² and letters to the editor³ in *The Lancet*, and an open letter to the UN Secretary-General from the People's Health Movement⁴). *Lancet* editor Richard Horton states:

'Nominations need to be placed on the public record. Each nominee should appear and be questioned before a specially appointed UN intergovernmental committee, with balanced representation between high, middle, and low income countries. ... In this way, the selection process would be transparent, fair, meritocratic, and based on the needs of children, not on clandestine forces aimed at the secretary-general'². It is evident that the US Government is now using its influence in the appointment process; but all country representatives at the UN share collective responsibility for this improper process.

After its own consultative process, *The Lancet* assessed what skills and experience the new executive director of UNICEF should have. They identified four key points: a clear vision for UNICEF, with proof that s/he has previously been able to translate vision into action; a strategy for UNICEF which encompasses child well-being and survival as key priorities; relevant international experience; and finally, demonstrable commitment to health, equity, best use of technical knowledge and achievement of the UN Millennium Development Goals.

Irrespective of the inappropriate process, is it possible that the best candidate has been appointed? All we know is Ms Veneman's record to date. Her immediate past post was head of the US Department of Agriculture. Her previous training and experience was as an agrochemical and food industry lawyer and lobbyist. Ms Veneman's accomplishments as US Secretary of Agriculture, for example, her handling of mad cow disease in the US beef supply and her work in conservation and land management, have been praised by the agriculture industry but condemned by environmental and consumer groups⁵.

It is not obvious what international experience she has in relation to child well-being, health and nutrition. Some sense of her views can be gained from a speech she gave at the award ceremony for the World Food Prize in Iowa in October 2003 (<http://www.worldfoodprize.org/Symposium/03presentations/veneman.htm>): 'While our collective goal is to reduce by half the 800 million hungry around the world, even one hungry person is unacceptable. Behind our efforts, there are statistics, but there is also a human face. As we search for solutions, as we work to apply technology to its fullest potential, we must remember that human face'. A specific interest in nutrition as a priority should be promising. But my reading of her speech is that she sees the solution of global hunger as being about how developing and new technology can change food production systems. In neither her speech nor her previous work has she shown awareness of the UNICEF conceptual model of the underlying and basic

UNICEF's mission statement

UNICEF is mandated by the United Nations General Assembly to advocate for the protection of children's rights, to help meet their basic needs and to expand their opportunities to reach their full potential.

UNICEF is guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and strives to establish children's rights as enduring ethical principles and international standards of behaviour towards children.

UNICEF insists that the survival, protection and development of children are universal development imperatives that are integral to human progress.

UNICEF mobilises political will and material resources to help countries, particularly developing countries, ensure a 'first call for children' and to build their capacity to form appropriate policies and deliver services for children and their families.

UNICEF is committed to ensuring special protection for the most disadvantaged children – victims of war, disasters, extreme poverty, all forms of violence and exploitation and those with disabilities.

UNICEF responds in emergencies to protect the rights of children. In co-ordination with United Nations partners and humanitarian agencies, UNICEF makes its unique facilities for rapid response available to its partners to relieve the suffering of children and those who provide their care.

UNICEF is non-partisan and its co-operation is free of discrimination. In everything it does, the most disadvantaged children and the countries in greatest need have priority.

UNICEF aims, through its country programmes, to promote the equal rights of women and girls and to support their full participation in the political, social and economic development of their communities.

UNICEF works with all its partners towards the attainment of the sustainable human development goals adopted by the world community and the realisation of the vision of peace and social progress enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations.

causes of nutritional deficiencies and infectious diseases: these identify economic and political factors like inequity, dislocation and wars as fundamental reasons why populations stay impoverished, deprived and vulnerable to disease. Will a leader of UNICEF appointed as a result of pressure from this US government become sensitive to such issues? It seems unlikely.

True, Ms Veneman's appointment has the potential of improving US–UN relations⁶. But will this mean greater US support of – rather than just influence over – UN goals and activities? This, sorry to say, seems unlikely, following the nomination of John Bolton, a virulent opponent of the UN system, as US ambassador to the UN (the Senate panel is set to hold a hearing on Bolton's nomination when Congress returns from its Easter recess in early April). What Ms Veneman also brings to her post is very high level connections. If these can be used wisely she may make a real difference.

We will be watching and we will write a progress report in this journal in 2006. We will also be watching Paul Wolfowitz's record in action at the World Bank.

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Editor-in-Chief

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- 4 Naryayan R (on behalf of People's Health Movement). A letter of concern from the People's Health Movement regarding the appointment of Ms. Ann Veneman as Executive Director of UNICEF [online]. Available at www.saveunicef.org/. Accessed 15 March 2005.
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