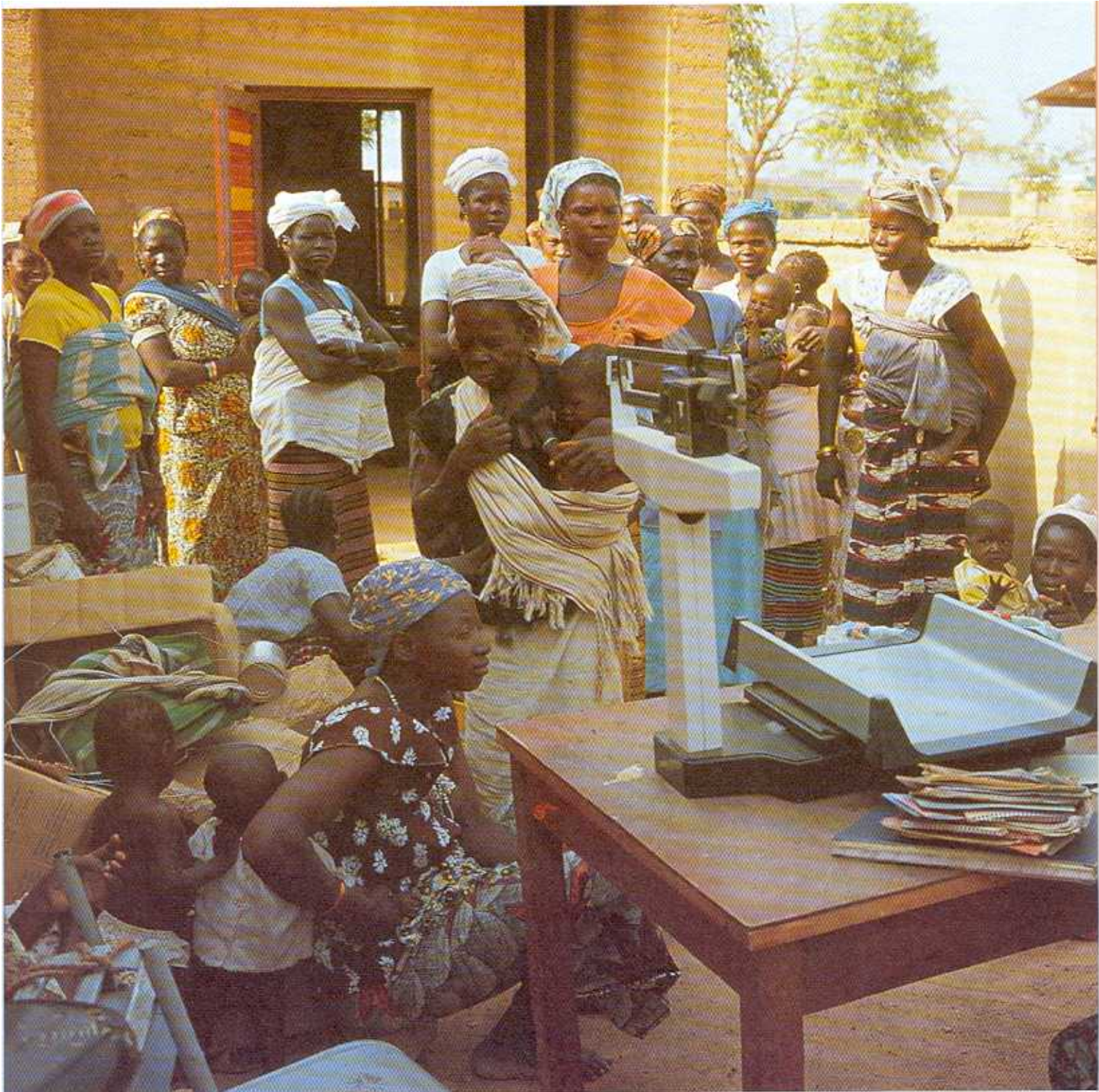


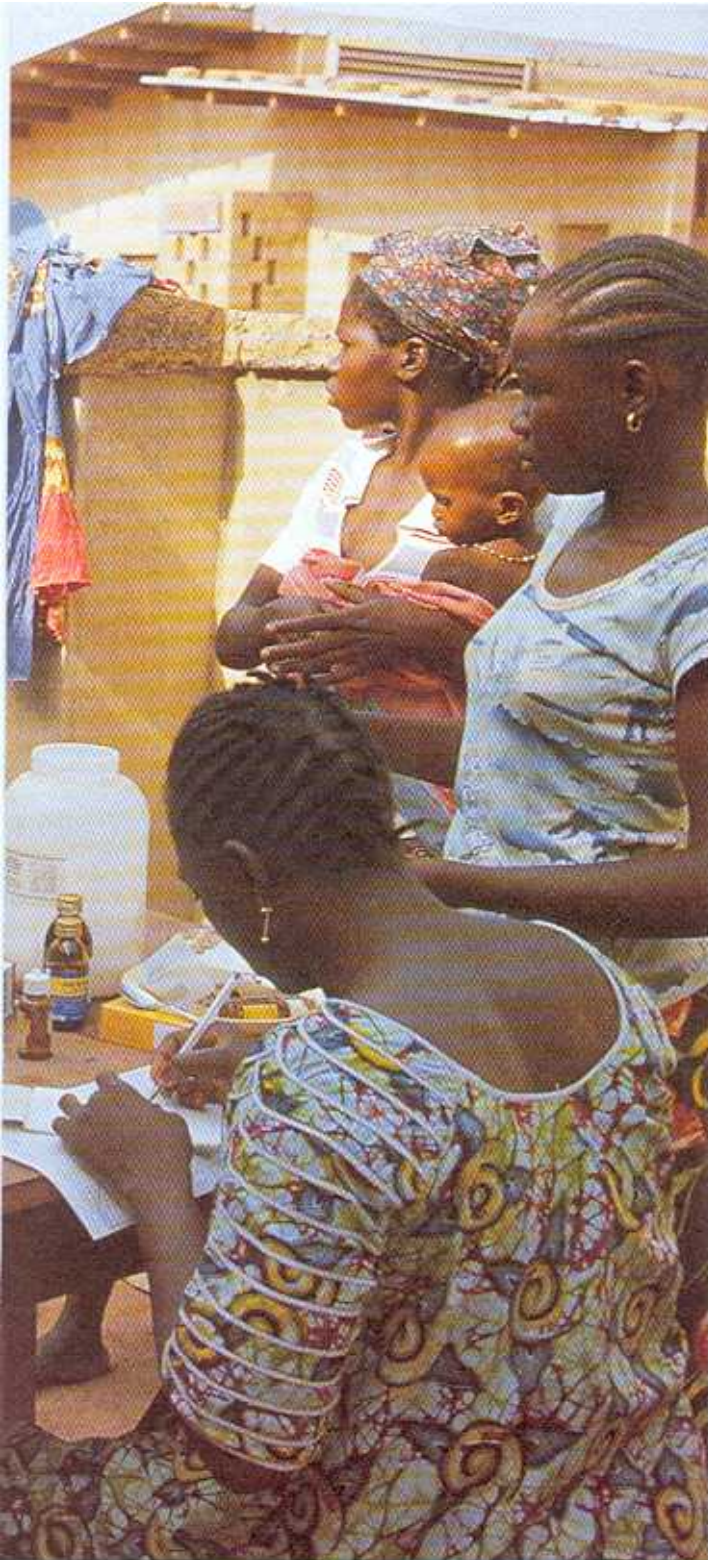
In Defence of Women and



A mother and child clinic in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

Children ~ a more unified command

- *The rights of children*
- *Women's empowerment*
- *Preventing abuses*
- *Global campaigns*



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The work United Nations agencies do on behalf of children is their most unassailable, almost by definition. Even critics of the UN have tended to perceive the successes, chiefly of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), but also of the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and others, as the most tangible signs that the world body can do good.

By contrast, the UN's work on behalf of women reflects the world body's more bureaucratic nature. The objectives of women's empowerment, elucidated in several UN General Assembly resolutions, are to be implemented by an alphabet soup of branches and agencies, including the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) and the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) – all in addition to a plethora of women's rights divisions in most wings of the UN. Thus far, the most vocal agency in the struggle for women's rights has been UNFPA, with its focus on women's empowerment as a prerequisite for population control. Perhaps it helps that UNFPA's focus on population presents the aspect of women's rights that is easiest to sell: the right of mothers to care for their children. UNICEF and the other agencies defending children's rights, of course, have the easier struggle, being able to focus wholeheartedly on society's most vulnerable – and yet still appreciated – subjects.

As with the UN's other lofty goals, the betterment of the lives of the world's women and children has often fallen prey to bureaucratization, inter-agency

bickering and North-South disputes. But at a time when the UN faces a growing clamour for change, the agencies working on behalf of women and children also offer an aura of competent idealism.

UNICEF and the rise of compassionate bureaucracies

The UN General Assembly created UNICEF – then the UN International Children's Emergency Fund – in 1946, to aid European children left sickly, malnourished, displaced, or injured in the aftermath of the Second World War. The organization sprang from a controversy over the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), set up in 1943 by more than 40 countries – led by the US-Soviet-British alliance then in place during the Second World War – to provide aid for war-racked Europe. So an alternative agency to concentrate on the war-uprooted European child was born with the founding of UNICEF, and US businessman Maurice Pate became its first Executive Director.

UNICEF – like UNFPA – is one of the UN's 'fund' organizations: it was set up around a special fund, donated by various UN member states to the UN, as an executing agency. Unlike WHO and other UN agencies that are governed by independent assemblies of its member states and funded by their membership fees, UNICEF is part of the UN and

funded by voluntary contributions from member states and, increasingly, the general public.

Within years of its founding, UNICEF had quickly established its reputation as the provider of essential food and medical aid for needy children. By 1950, with the 'emergency' in Europe drawing to a close and the agency cautiously expanding into China and elsewhere, UNICEF, like UNRRA before it, was deemed to be ready for shut-down. The Fund, however, had already garnered enough goodwill and support from developing nations and it was granted a stay of execution for three years. By 1953, the words 'international' and 'emergency' were dropped from UNICEF's formal name, ironically at the very moment that the agency began grappling more than ever with international emergencies.

In 1959, the UN General Assembly began its lengthy effort to formalize the concept of children's rights by adopting the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which proclaimed that children should have the opportunity to develop; that they should be entitled to a name, a nationality, social security and education; and that they should be protected from neglect, cruelty and exploitation. By 1990, many of those rights were codified in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a text which James Grant, former Executive Director of UNICEF, called a Magna Carta for children, and which by 1993 had been ratified by 154 countries. UNICEF is hopeful that all the world's countries will ratify the Convention by 1995, making it the first universally ratified human rights convention in history.¹

“at a time when the UN faces a growing clamour for change”

UNICEF's greatest successes, however, have had more to do with its nuts-and-bolts work to ensure better health and living conditions for children in the developing world – its work as a bureaucracy of compassion – than its loftier rights campaigns. Even UN critics marvel that the Fund can take credit for annually saving the lives of some 400,000 infants under the age of five.²

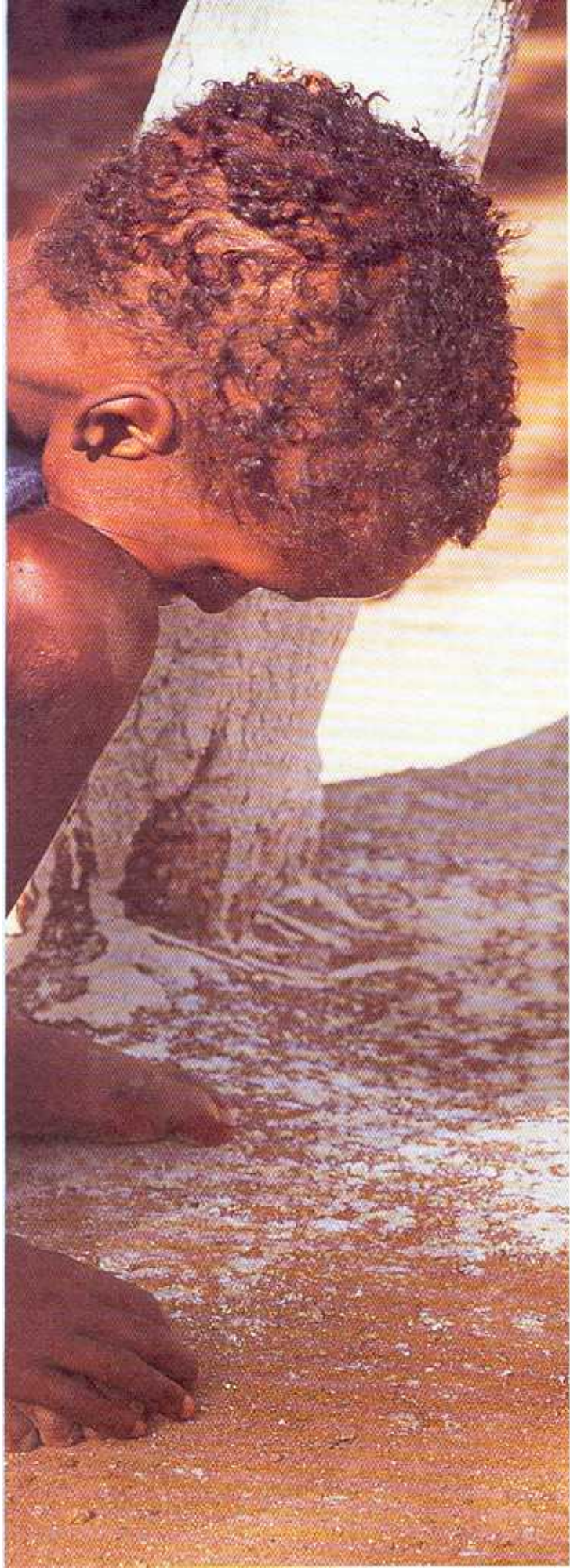
UNICEF's success in its goal of providing health and nutrition for the young has made such a good impression that the agency can also boast of a profitable direct-sales branch unique among all UN agencies. UNICEF established a Greeting Card Operation in 1951, which easily became a top money-maker with its appealing line of multi-lingual, non-sectarian cards. The venture was later followed by other enterprises, such as collection boxes for youngsters celebrating Halloween in the United States, which contributed both to UNICEF's funds and to its lustre as the leading pro-child organization. By 1993, the direct sales unit of UNICEF was netting some \$50 million annually while keeping UNICEF's name as a seal of good quality among UN branches.

UNICEF's appeal can also be traced to its community-based strategy, developed in 1976. In that approach, local workers are made to choose 'primary-level' workers in their communities to perform task-oriented techniques in health care, applied nutrition, provision of clean water, and sanitation and education.

That approach acquired more focus in 1982 when UNICEF, WHO, the World Bank and other officials developed a four-fold approach to grapple with child hunger and poor health called 'GOBI'. The GOBI approach stands for the four strategies to improve children's conditions that the agencies found most promising. 'G' stood for monitoring the growth of the youngest children; 'O' for practising oral rehydration therapy (ORT) to combat infant diarrhoea; 'B' for encouraging a return to breast-feeding; and 'I' for immunizing children from disease. The GOBI approach has become the centrepiece of UNICEF's efforts to pioneer a low-cost, primary-level approach to child health in the Third World.



Fourteen million children die every year before reaching the age of five.
A very sick child at an orphanage.



**“UNICEF’s
successes
have more
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bolts work
than its
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campaigns”**

Much of UNICEF's health work is and has been done in a sometimes uneasy collaboration with WHO, which has, perhaps inevitably, vied with UNICEF over which agency has the greater jurisdiction to ensure children's health. From the start, WHO and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) doubted whether UNICEF should operate projects or merely draw in funds. It was felt that there should be a separate mechanism for planning programmes for children and safeguarding their interests.

Formally founded in 1948, WHO is a highly decentralized, regionally-divided organization whose basic mandate is 'the attainment by all people of the highest possible level of health'.

To achieve that goal, WHO embarked almost from its inception on a series of campaigns to eradicate diseases, particularly through child immunization. In the 1940s, it kicked off a programme to combat malaria as part of a broader campaign against tropical diseases. The organization also sought to bring six other communicable diseases under control: smallpox – which was declared eradicated in 1977 after a global WHO campaign – poliomyelitis, tuberculosis, cholera, worm infection and tropical diseases.

In many of these campaigns, WHO and UNICEF worked together on child immunization. Buoyed by their successes, the two agencies, at the 1978 International Conference on Primary Health Care in Alma-Ata, in the Soviet Union, pledged themselves to a goal of 'Health for All by the Year 2000'. The two organizations in subsequent years expanded their joint immunization programmes against malaria, diphtheria, whooping cough, tetanus, poliomyelitis and tuberculosis – all of which strike particularly at infants and children under the age of five in the developing world.

WHO and UNICEF racked up an impressive set of victories throughout the 1970s, culminating in their campaign to establish an international code governing the marketing of breast-milk substitutes. That campaign was one of many that pitted the agencies – particularly WHO – against industrialized nations. The agency, under Director-General Halvdan Mahler, accused developed countries of deliberately promoting the sale of infant formula as breast-milk

substitutes in developing countries 'where they were likely to be misused and produce severe infant health problems'.³

Medical experts contended that children in poorer nations would suffer malnutrition and die as infant formula sales to the Third World increased. Finally, the World Health Assembly, WHO's governing body, recommended a marketing code for infant formula in 1981. WHO charged industrialized nations' drug companies with 'drug imperialism' through the dumping of outdated products on the Third World and the withholding of low-cost generic drugs from those nations.⁴

Such stand-offs with the North often compromised WHO's effectiveness in garnering funds for child-oriented programmes; and, in fact, the organization remains short of funds for the ambitious global projects it undertakes, particularly those directed at developing nations. The trust fund for WHO's Global Programme on AIDS – very much a key concern in the industrialized world – is some \$178 million at present, far outstripping the agency's resources for maternal-child health (MCH), the fight against river blindness or emergency aid.⁵ In fact, WHO must accomplish its task of 'Health for All' for the 1994-95 biennium mostly from 'extra-budgetary' contributions from the rest of the UN system. Although current WHO Director-General Hiroshi Nakajima proposes to spend \$1.84 billion during that period, the organization's assessed contributions of its members stands at only \$872 million, less than half of its stated needs.⁶

Resource shortfalls are not as much of a problem for UNICEF, which has resourcefully used its various commemorative days and years – such as the annual Day of the African Child and the International Children's Day of Broadcasting – to prod members to fund its plethora of programmes. Its total income for 1993 was \$866 million, including \$170 million for emergency relief. This figure is a slight drop from 1992 (when UNICEF gained \$938 million in contributions, \$204 million of it for the emergency fund), reflecting an overall decline in government contributions. But the Fund remains uniquely well-equipped to weather any wave of government tightfistedness; its greeting-card and related concessions alone netted \$107 million during the 1991-92 fiscal year.⁷

Risky business in the war zones

What is the money buying? Although UNICEF's focus remains on child health, improvements in sanitation and water and family-based services – spanning the gamut from advocacy of oral rehydration therapy to campaigns to promote breast-feeding at 'baby-friendly' hospitals – emergency relief takes a bigger chunk of UNICEF funds than ever. In 1993, \$223 million went to emergency relief, more than a fourfold increase from the 1989 figure.⁸

In part, this shift reflects the UN's own move towards larger emergency operations: the rise in UNICEF relief runs parallel with the growth of UN peacekeeping operations. UNICEF has been expanding its programmes into some of the most high risk – and controversial – ventures it can undertake, often running up against the geopolitical concerns of its main donors in the US and Europe.

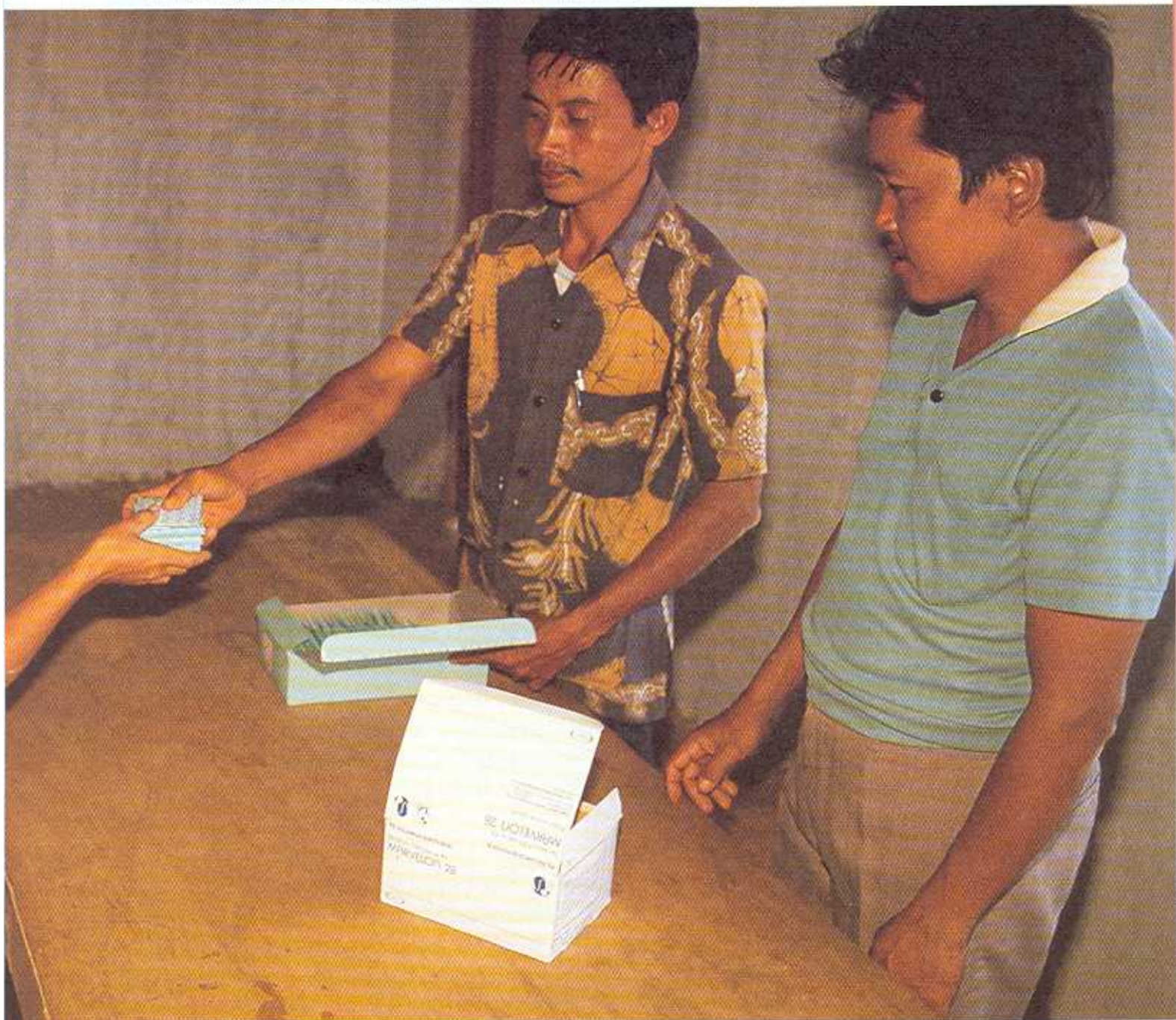
It is true that UNICEF remains in the public consciousness by maintaining a high profile in such recent conflicts as the wars in Somalia and Rwanda; but those successes followed years of soul-searching by the agency in which many donor countries worried about how much authority UNICEF ought to have in providing aid during wartime. The first major such operation – during the 1967-70 war in Biafra – sparked considerable debate over whether or not UNICEF's mandate to protect children in Biafra potentially interfered with Nigerian sovereignty. But UNICEF had more room to manoeuvre. Its founders had insisted that no child be seen as 'an enemy' and its original resolution stated that assistance be dispensed 'on the basis of need, without discrimination because of race, creed, nationality status or political belief'.⁹

Rather than shrink from the political challenge of defending children amid politically touchy crises, James Grant of the US took on an ever-expanding roster of civil conflicts. In the main countries assisted in 1993 – from Afghanistan to Angola, Sudan to Bosnia-Herzegovina – UNICEF pursued a wide range of tasks to protect children, including assisting mine-clearance projects and studying the effects of sanctions on Haitian and Iraqi children. That year, the agency also sponsored workshops on the concept of establishing 'zones of peace'



where fighting could cease so that children could be given essential supplies. In countries where conflicts were easing, such as Eritrea and Chad, UNICEF expanded its efforts to reunite families whose children had been abandoned in war. All this, of course, was in addition to its more traditional efforts to provide food and medicine to children in war zones.

Family planning has become a hot topic as the population of the developing world has doubled since 1960.



© Jeremy Hartley/Panos

*“an ever-expanding roster
of civil conflicts”*

Caring for mothers and other women

In marked contrast to the prospects for improving children's lives within the UN system, the efforts to promote women's rights still seem, to some, fledgling and diffuse. As with the ability of UN member states to unite behind the cause of children, some of the blame lies in the lack of political will of countries in the UN General Assembly to push for more effective women's agencies. But some lies with the organizations themselves, which have only recently found a common rallying point: the right of all women to exercise choice in family planning. That this focus revolves around the figure of the mother – only slightly less unimpeachable than that of the child – is probably no coincidence.

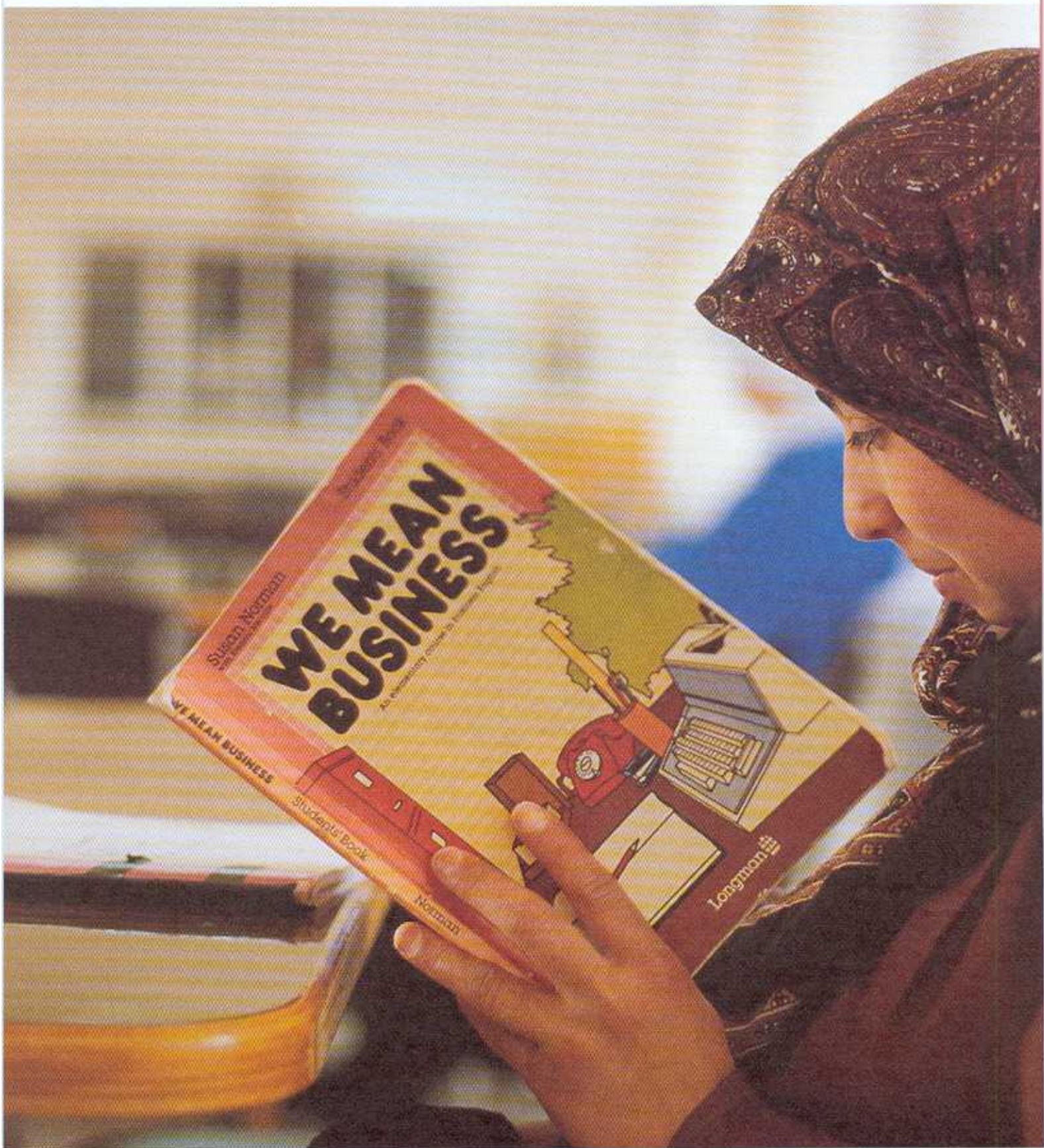
The role of women in family planning – which occupied the centre stage during the September 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo – was not even a marginal issue during the first UN-sponsored World Population Conference, staged in Bucharest in 1974, or the 1968 Tehran Conference on Human Rights, where 'birth spacing' was first adopted as a right. The main struggle during that era was to convince developing nations to implement national policies to control population growth to prevent future shortages of resources. Most of the newly independent nations countered that development, more than population control, was necessary to ensure that the world could support its entire population. The upshot of that dispute, along with the opposition of more traditional societies to the concept of family planning itself, was to make population planning more of a controversial

task than UNICEF or WHO were willing to handle. To take the pressure off UNICEF and WHO, which had included family planning programs in their work for decades, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) had been launched in 1967. The funding of UNFPA was voluntary and therefore governments who opposed family planning could simply refuse to contribute to it. UNFPA, for its part, could still coordinate activities with its predecessors and thus be in a

“efforts to promote women's rights still seem, to some, fledgling and diffuse”

position to take on more controversies in defending family planning. Even the United States, under the Reagan and Bush presidencies, denied funding for the agency, and US funding was not restored until 1993.

The advocacy of women's rights by UNFPA initially focused strictly on maternal-child health, which still possessed the aura of unimpeachability associated with children's concerns. WHO designated maternal-child health as a top priority from its



A woman attends a business course at a women's college.
Although women's education has increased, the female literacy rate in the developing world is three-quarters that of men.



inception in 1948, and it joined with UNICEF in building up projects throughout the developing world aimed primarily at providing supplies necessary for mothers to ensure the survival of their children. Over time – and with greater urgency following UNFPA's creation – the health of the mother herself became a cause of concern. Despite increasing objections from governments, the agency began to examine the dangers to the lives of mothers arising from unwanted or unintended pregnancies, publicizing, for example, estimates that half a million women die each year from pregnancy-related causes, and that some 60,000 die from unsafe abortions. Although UNFPA has never advocated abortion as a means of family planning – and indeed explicitly refused to do so at the International Conference on Population in Mexico City in 1984 – its efforts to ensure that any abortion is performed safely have rankled a wide range of critics. Likewise, the agency's focus on the health and well-being of mothers has been interpreted by some governments as a 'secularist' attempt to undermine traditionalist conceptions of the family.

As a consequence, UNFPA has become the unlikely standard-bearer for a variety of feminist concerns, and its recent emphasis that family planning cannot succeed without the empowerment of women seems a logical extension of its aims. The organization's image has been further cemented since Nafis Sadik, a female Pakistani doctor, replaced Rafael Salas of the Philippines to become one of the UN's few prominent Third World women in a top spot. Under Sadik, UNFPA has increasingly become associated with several

*“the health
of the
mother”*

women's rights goals: the education of girls in the developing world, a practice the agency contends is crucial to maintaining low birth rates; the provision of contraceptives and family planning information even to younger women, to discourage unwanted births; programmes to combat sexually-transmitted diseases and AIDS through education and the development of appropriate contraceptives; and a campaign against female genital mutilation, which

for women's empowerment – socially and economically as well as in the context of family planning choices – as the key to all future population policy.

For all the political importance of the Cairo process, UNFPA's nuts-and-bolts work still consists primarily of providing contraceptive services to developing countries. Other UN agencies – notably CSW, UNIFEM and INSTRAW – are entrusted with

“UNFPA's work consists primarily of providing contraceptive services to developing countries”

UNFPA claims puts between 85 and 114 million women at risk.¹⁰ The language the agency employs to defend these goals is often ground-breaking: in its most recent annual report on *The State of the World Population*, the agency argues in favour of women having access to their own line of credit and gaining security from domestic violence, genital mutilation and female infanticide.¹¹

UNFPA's many campaigns to strengthen the position of women culminated in the 1994 ICPD in Cairo, where the organization's traditional mandate to use population programmes to further development took a back seat – rhetorically, at least – to a battle between traditionalists and secularists over the impact of some of the women's empowerment issues UNFPA proposed. The Cairo Conference's final document, produced after months of often furious invective from critics, managed to skirt controversies over 'non-traditional' (non-male headed or homosexual) families and the legality of abortion. The document nevertheless maintained firm support

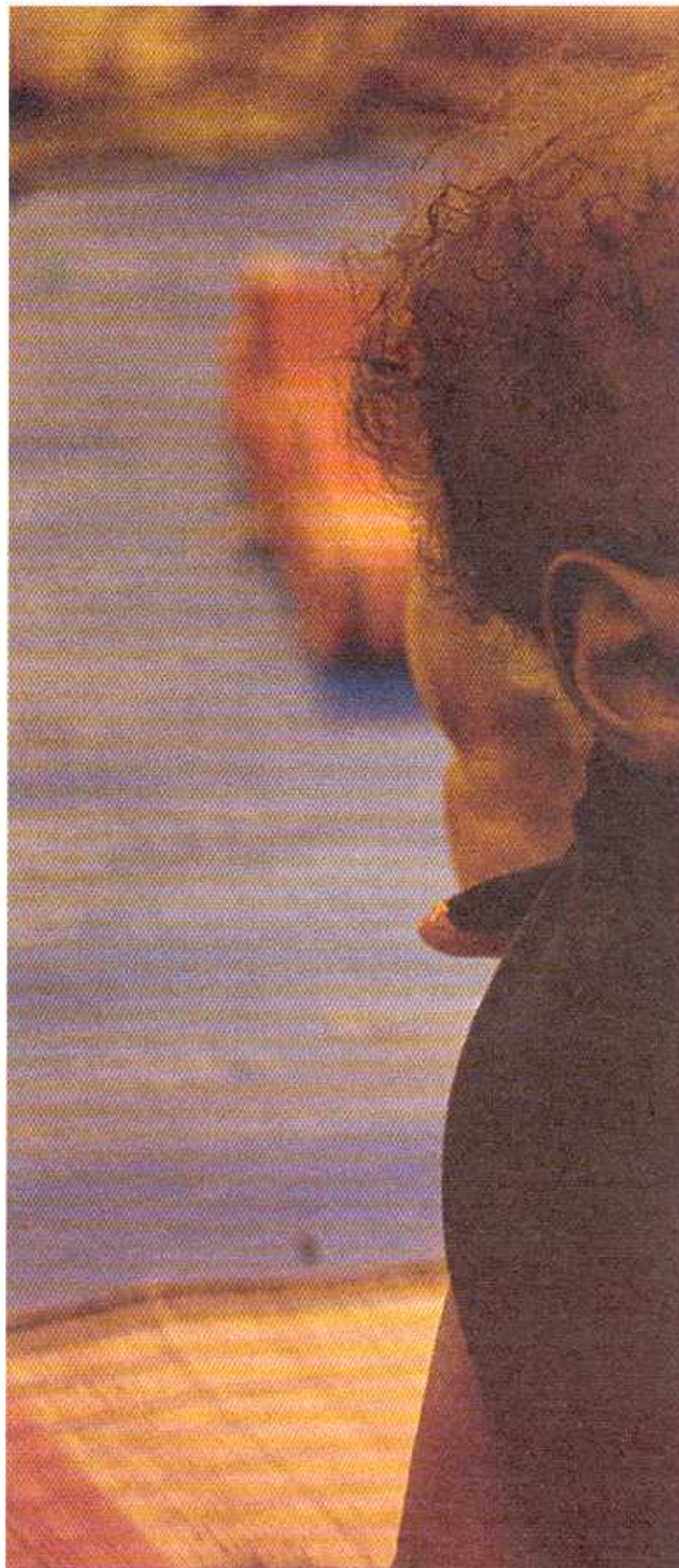
implementing policies to advance women outside their maternal roles. CSW, which was established in 1946, has had its greatest success with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979. The Convention affirmed that discrimination against women should be eliminated in all public and private spheres and that the exploitation of prostitution should be suppressed. It also paved the way for future working groups examining the slavery of women, prostitution, female genital mutilation and other abuses.

But women had to wait for more than three decades before the UN member states actually developed agencies which both focused solely on women and possessed significant funding. In 1976, INSTRAW was set up to enhance women's role in development. Almost two decades later, the voluntarily funded agency, based in Santo Domingo, The Dominican Republic, still has to justify the reasons for its independent existence. Also

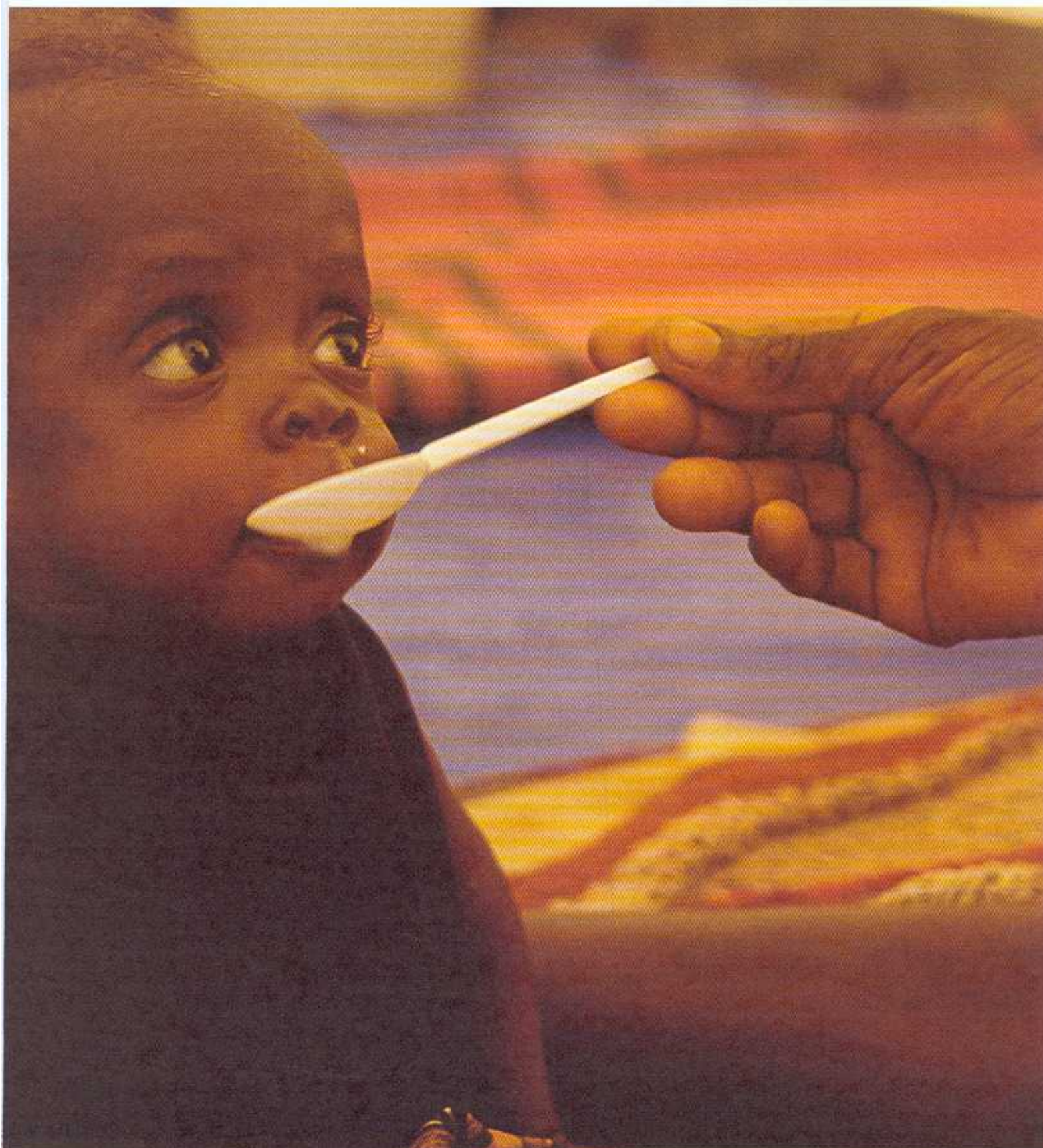
established in 1976 was the UN Decade for Women, Equality, Development and Peace, one of the UN's many commemorative events, which actually succeeded in giving birth to a new organization. The beginning of the decade in 1976 provided an opportunity to set up a Voluntary Fund for the Decade for Women; by the end of the decade, in 1985, that fund had metamorphosed into UNIFEM, which works in tandem with the UN Development Programme (UNDP). UNIFEM continues to be relatively small compared with other agencies, relying on its trust fund and a largely government-supported income of some \$11.9 million by 1993. But the agency, under former Director Sharon Capeling-Alakija, at least gained a toehold in the bureaucratic domain where funds are to be won, and has been able to start up several projects to empower women in the developing world.

“women’s causes”

Beyond its work campaigning for women's social and economic rights, UNIFEM has joined various UN agencies and non-governmental organizations in opening ambitious programmes to provide credit for women in developing countries. The Fund has provided lines of credit to some 40 women's groups in Tanzania, more than 3,000 women in Colombia and nearly 2,000 in Bolivia.¹² It has also sought to promote technologies that take account of women's special needs, devising technical guidelines for sustainable development programmes that incorporate women-friendly approaches. However, UNIFEM remains similar to other UN bureaucracies in requiring a substantial budget and public interest before it can truly make an impact. As a result, the women's agencies are expending considerable energy gearing up for the 1995 Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women. The Beijing Conference, to be chaired by Gertrude Mongella of Tanzania, has already been preceded by UNIFEM-sponsored workshops. Indeed many staff at UNIFEM clearly hope that the atmosphere of the Cairo and Beijing conferences can revitalize women's causes in time to begin the UN's second half-century.



Forty million newborn children are still not properly immunized. Medical care for a sick child in Liberia.



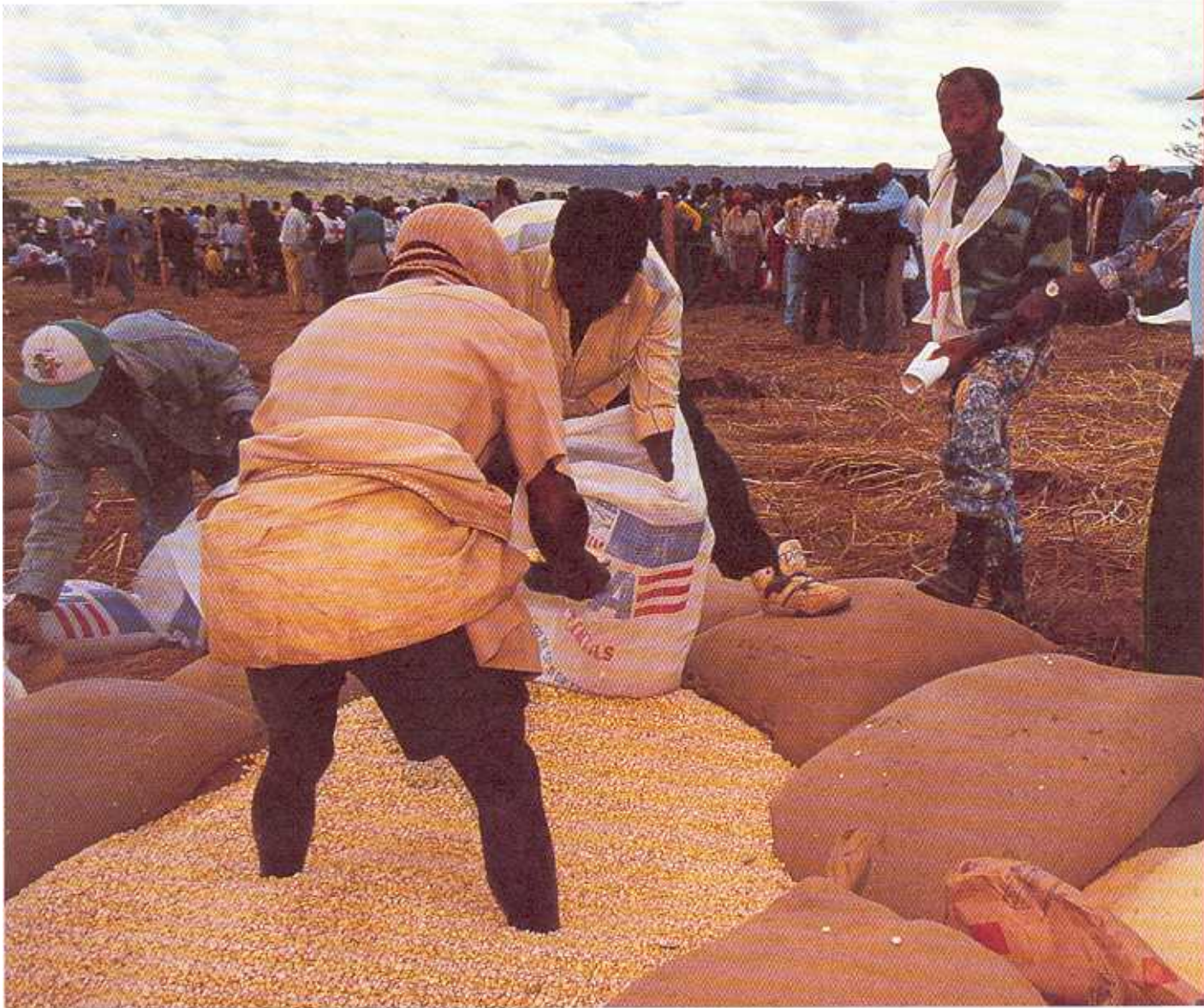
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What next for women and children?

While the women's agencies prepare for Beijing, the UN as a whole can expect to receive all kinds of suggestions about how to reform itself. The cries for reform probably will do little to tamper with the perceived successes of UNICEF, UNFPA and WHO. Still, certain basic reforms affecting those organizations seem to be picking up momentum. Perhaps the main one is to make UN field offices more efficient by combining the various agencies' field work to allow for more joint programming. In recent years, agencies like UNICEF, FAO and UNDP have begun to share the same housing in the field. The

next logical step, in the view of some, is to place all the branches under a more unified command, perhaps by each nation's Resident Representative of UNDP.¹³

Related to that reform is the growing demand for better division of labour among agencies in development activities and emergency operations. Particularly as crises take up more of the UN agenda, there is a need to avoid overlapping responsibilities. Such cases include Somalia or Angola, where famine and war require the assistance of all the refugee-



As a rash of internal conflicts spreads across the globe, emergency relief is often replacing development assistance.
Food aid for Rwandan refugees in Tanzania.

© Betty Press/Panos



For too long the role of women in the world's workforce has been undervalued and unprotected.

© Ron Gilling/Panos

related, humanitarian, children's and women's rights, food and health branches of the UN.

In general, UNICEF and WHO will need to take on new challenges, ranging from new health hazards like AIDS to the consequences of modern structural adjustment policies. Agencies have yet to study the effects that AIDS is having in producing a generation of orphans in particularly hard-hit countries. The dislocation and potential collapse of national authority that has followed the implementation of structural adjustment, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, may prove just as damaging in the long run to providing sufficient care for children. However, both agencies seem well-equipped to tackle such topics in their efforts to defend children; after all, UNICEF was the first UN branch to point out the social drawbacks of structural adjustment.¹⁴

Although Beijing remains the largest matter on the agenda for women's agencies, UNFPA will also need to direct its post-Cairo authority towards generating projects that can empower women beyond its standard family planning paradigm. Having staked considerable energy on arguing that women's education and socio-economic advancement are crucial to effective population planning, UNFPA may now be uniquely positioned to propose programmes for women's credit, women's education and the broad range of related needs. It remains too early to see how ambitious an agenda for women the member governments of the UN will allow. Yet it is not inconceivable that, particularly if the built-in appeal of mothers can serve as a spark plug for the advancement of all women, projects to help women will one day be as unassailable as those for children.

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- 6 Gordenker, p.175.
- 7 UNICEF *Annual Report 1994*, p.99 and p.103.
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- 14 Childers, p.75.