

ROBIN: This is the Development Policy Centre podcast, and I'm Robin Davies. In this episode, as part of our Australian Aid Profiles series, I'm speaking with Gillian Mellsop. Gillian's currently heading UNICEF's country office in Ethiopia. She's a New Zealander by birth, and she began her career in the aid division of the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

She soon moved across to Australia's development agency and worked there for nearly two decades. She had several overseas postings, in Bangladesh, Laos and India. In 2003, she joined UNICEF as head of their office in Fiji. Since that time, she's had an uninterrupted run of field positions with UNICEF, heading their offices in Kathmandu, Beijing, and now Addis Ababa.

Gillian and I talk about some of the big achievements in which she's had a hand, and some disappointments too. We talk about what it's like working for the UN system at country level as opposed to working for a bilateral donor agency. We discuss some of the points in common and some of the differences between the various countries where Gillian has worked, in terms of the challenges facing children.

Gillian describes her time in China and the changing relationship between donor agencies and the government and private sector there. And, at the end, Gillian talks about managing some challenges—the challenge of always being so far from the center of her very large organization, and the challenge of being an effective leader when her teams contain very diverse expertise and cultural backgrounds.

So Gillian, I'd like to start with a question about the core of your work as a UNICEF country director over something like 13 years now. You've worked, I think, in four country offices and have been heading the Ethiopia office for the last 18 months or so. So as you look back over those 13-odd years, what are the major achievements that you actually had a hand in?

GILLIAN: That's a great question. It was lovely to sort of think back over the years I've had with UNICEF, and I think one of the programs that I'm very proud of being involved in in the Pacific was the establishment of a child protection program for UNICEF. I was stunned when I first went there that they didn't have a child protection program, given the enormous challenges for children throughout the Pacific, because we cover 14 small island states and obviously there's a lot of violence against children, a lot of abuse.

And so we established the child protection program, and I have to say I got enormous support from Australia through AusAID. They were our key funders. And then we had a number of Australian Youth Ambassadors, probably about five bright young lawyers who helped us set that program up.

So I feel very proud of that program, and the great part that Australia had to play in both funding and providing bright young staff that helped us design that program and set it up. I think one of the areas that I am really proud of being involved in, in Nepal, I went to Nepal just at the time of the peace agreement being signed with the Maoists.

And the Maoists had used a lot of child soldiers. And UNICEF set up a big program to reintegrate 10,000 children who had been part of the Maoist army, either fighting, cooks, spies. And that was a huge program, because a lot of the communities they'd come from had been very badly impacted by the conflict.

So just really working with communities to take these young people back, helping them either get back into school or do vocational training, helping with peace building in those communities, through those young people. And I think that was an extremely successful program, and it was incredibly extensive, right across the country, and an exciting program to be part of too, to see these young people, a lot of whom had been forced into the Maoist army because families had to give one member to fight for them, so they often gave their children.

And these young people had missed out on education, had been involved in terrible conflicts. So we also provided a lot of psychosocial support for those young people. And if I look at China, one of the programs that was really exciting, and just shows how UNICEF, with a very small amount of money, can as we say, put our muddy boots on the ground and bring the muddy boots to the policy table.

And this was in the area of early childhood development. Because after the end of the Maoist era and the work programs, and the work units broke up, there was no longer early childhood development provided for children and there'd been a great lack. So we started modeling in some of the poorest parts of the country how important was giving children aged three to six early childhood education.

They did much better at school, and of course all of the research shows that if you invest in children at that age, not only do they develop enormously, but in fact I think the World Bank has quantified it as giving a three per cent increase in GDP. So we modeled low-cost early childhood education.

We took the Chinese on study tours. We costed it. And the state council then made a major policy decision to provide every child aged three to six in China by 2020 with three years of early childhood education. So now UNICEF is very busy helping with curriculum, training teachers, even with the designs of the buildings for early childhood education.

So I think that was a very exciting program that really shows with a tiny amount of money, as a UN agency, because we do have that access to the policy table, you can really influence enormous change in a country like China. And then I was thinking about Ethiopia, and I think one of the programs I'm particularly proud of, over this last year of severe humanitarian drought, is that UNICEF has been the main partner around nutrition and treatment of severely acutely malnourished children.

We have brought into the country the largest purchase of what we call ready-to-use therapeutic food. We've strengthened the health system so that they've been able to deliver community management of acute malnutrition so that children can stay in their families and be treated, and instead of these terrible feeding centers that you used to see in the photographs of the 1984 famine.

So I think that those are some examples of programs I'm very proud of being involved in. And from the Australian angle, the Australian National Committee for UNICEF has been funding these mobile health and nutrition teams in Somalia and Alfa, we've been able to deliver treatment for severely acutely malnourished children. We, honestly together with the government, have saved thousands of children's lives during this drought. So that's a program I'm very proud of as well.

ROBIN: And over the same period, I guess you had some disappointments?

GILLIAN: Yeah, always. You can never, never completely achieve what you want. I think one of the big challenges is obviously as a UN agency, we get a lot of access to government and a lot of access to ministers to advocate for children. I think one of the big challenges is, I always remember in Nepal, they were just constantly changing the ministers in the government.

And you put so much effort into building that relationship to advocate for children, to advocate for policy change, and then the government completely changes and you've got to start again from scratch. And we're facing this currently in Ethiopia, because just last week they've completely changed the cabinet.

So I now need to reestablish our partnerships with ministers to advocate for a lot of the work that we've been really moving ahead on with the previous ministers. So I think that's always a big challenge in terms of the constant change of your key ministerial partners.

ROBIN: Just looking at your career up to now, there's been quite a good balance between your work for bilateral development agencies in both New Zealand and Australia, and a multilateral agency in UNICEF. I'm interested, given that experience, does the nature of the work and the

sort of working relationships you have, do those things differ markedly between the bilateral agencies and the UN?

GILLIAN: You know I was quite pleasantly surprised when I moved to UNICEF in the Pacific to find there wasn't a lot of difference, really, in the way we work, from my time with AusAID. But I think one of the big differences is that, working for UNICEF, we have a very clear policy direction.

Our strategic plan is very clear and consistent. But obviously when you work for a bilateral agency, policies change as governments change, and as ministers change. So that's something I really like with the UN, that we just—we have our plan and we can keep on track. But on the other side of course, when you work for a bilateral agency, you have your funding.

You know what you can fund and you can mainly fulfill the commitments that you make to your partner government. But of course, as a UN agency, one of the main jobs I have as a representative is fundraising, and often we want to do fabulous programs, and we talk to the government about it.

But then if we can't raise the funding, we're not able to follow through. So I think those are two quite big differences. And I think as a UN agency, we can often get better access to the government because we are seen as a neutral body, whereas as a bilateral agency you are seen, as you are, pursuing your country's foreign policy objectives as well as part of the aid program.

So I think that's the difference. And I think one of the great things about working for UNICEF is that we have a very strong convening role. As a UN agency, we can bring together partners and government to really move issues forward. And I think that trust that the government generally has in us as a partner to take a leadership role with other international development partners is, I think, something that is a plus in working for UNICEF.

ROBIN: That's interesting. So more policy certainty, less financial certainty.

GILLIAN: Yes.

ROBIN: Perhaps closer relationships—

GILLIAN: Relationships with the government, yes.

ROBIN: So really, over the course of your career, amazingly, you've spent some 20 years, by my count, in developing countries. So really, the last 13 years with UNICEF, continuously, and then

several postings with the Australian government. You've worked in Fiji, Laos, several countries in South Asia, China, and now Ethiopia.

So that gives you really almost a unique, certainly a very rare perspective on a range of countries and regions. So as you look across all those countries, have you found a lot of similarities in the challenges that they face, in terms of the challenges that children face in those countries, or are there some significant differences?

GILLIAN: This is a really interesting question to think about. And when I really thought about it, despite the different levels of economic development in the countries in which I've been privileged to work, both with AusAID and with UNICEF, I think from the UNICEF perspective, what we focus on is the most disadvantaged children.

And there are similarities, be it whether they're middle-income countries or least-developed countries. When you look at the levels of abuse of children across all of those countries, regrettably you find violence against children is really at quite unacceptably high levels in all of the countries which I've worked in.

And I think some of the work we are trying to do on case management and social worker support, that we were doing in the Pacific, and we're also trying to do here in Ethiopia, is very similar in the approach that we take. And if I think back to the work we did with child laborers in Nepal, looking at support for working children, we're doing similar work now in Ethiopia, where again you're trying to enable those children to have some schooling and to slowly remove them from the work situation.

And then if you look at China, you have 60 million 'left-behind' children. These are children whose parents have moved to work in the cities and the factories. They're lucky if they come home once a year. And the issues for those children, of isolation, of feeling a lack of love. They might be looked after by their grandparents, but often those grandparents are not very well-educated.

There's not an emotional link with them in the same way that you would have with parents. And one of the really interesting programs we introduced in China was what we call the Barefoot Social Workers program, that works at the village level to support these children, to help them, to facilitate them having more contact with their parents by Skype or phone calls, providing centers where they can come to play, they can come and do their homework, they can have some social contact.

And this pilot now is being scaled up by the Chinese government across all of the provinces. Because they recognize what a challenge these left-behind children are in terms of just how

they then move into adulthood. And there's been some interesting studies done to just show how these children are often not very mentally healthy because they've just lacked that parental care and love.

And of course, that's got a long-term impact on their own health and their own ability to contribute to Chinese society. So you do see these similarities, I think, with the most disadvantaged children. And if I think of Ethiopia, where we've got incredibly high levels of children, of girls who are married early and who have experienced female genital mutilation—we've just had the latest demographic health survey in Ethiopia, with 65 percent of women aged between 15 and 49 circumcised.

It's the second largest number after Egypt. So how do you work to make changes? And so one of the interesting initiatives we have in Ethiopia is a partnership with leaders of faith-based organizations. So we've now had 5,000 Muslim Imams sign up to say that they will not circumcise their daughters, to change that social norm. So all of these issues for children, while they're different, they are the issues of the most disadvantaged, the most vulnerable children. So I do see similarities across the countries where I've worked.

ROBIN: And are there differences in terms of the impact of foreign assistance? I guess the assumption would be that as you go up the per capita income scale, the assistance is likely to have greater impact. For example, in China, we've talked about a couple of cases. Is that about right, or has that not been your experience?

GILLIAN: No, I think that's right. In a country that has resources, like China, that if you can model, pilot, make the case for policy change, then they will invest significant amounts of their own money, as they have particularly with the early childhood development example I gave you, and now more so with this Barefoot Social Worker approach.

Obviously in a very poor country, like Ethiopia, for instance, the Ethiopian government has made a commitment to end child marriage and female genital mutilation by 2025. But the amount of resourcing that they are able to put into it is relatively small. So in fact, the donor contribution is much bigger. So you do definitely see the differences, given the amount of resources that particular country has to invest in new programs and policies for children.

ROBIN: I guess that leads quite naturally to a question about China. There are plenty of bilateral donors who are exiting China, or who are now engaging with China as another donor rather than as a recipient. And many of those bilateral donors question the role of multilateral organizations in China, which is interesting, given what you've just said.

But during your time in China, you were there for over three years not that long ago, that was a period when China was really moving very fast to position itself as a donor. It would not use the term. It would talk about itself as a South-South cooperation partner, but it was moving very quickly in terms of setting strategies and scaling up financing to position itself as a donor country. So how did that affect your relationship with the Chinese government while you were there?

GILLIAN: It's such an interesting area, and we decided while I was there that we would do really a bit of an assessment to see where UNICEF, as an organization, would have some comparative advantage to work with the Chinese on their South-South cooperation programs. So out of that we decided that the area that we would put our efforts in was to try and influence the Chinese to put more of their money, of their South-South cooperation into maternal and child health in Africa.

And it's been quite an interesting journey of supporting China/Africa meetings around health. We now have a memorandum of understanding between the Chinese government and UNICEF on how we will support them on South-South cooperation. And now it's quite exciting to now be in Ethiopia and see the fruits of this work that we did, where now China is designing, for the first time, a mother and child healthcare program, where they will be working at the subnational level, providing support to the primary healthcare centres.

And not only in the supplies, but also in training. And they are now asking UNICEF to help facilitate that program. So I've been quite involved in that design with the Chinese designers that have come out to work with the health ministry. And this is going to be rolled out with UNICEF as the facilitator in seven African countries.

And it's moving a lot faster than we thought it would. And it's money—because one of the issues that we found in Ethiopia, because obviously the money the Chinese give for infrastructure is very, very important to the Chinese government. They said “Oh, there's too many other donors in the health sector. We don't want to kind of waste our Chinese money on supporting mother and child healthcare.”

But now the Chinese have actually allocated additional money, which we understand is coming out of the US\$60 billion that Xi Jinping announced at the FOCAC [Forum on China-Africa Cooperation] summit in South Africa last year. So that's been quite exciting to see that move, in a small way, but how we can influence how the Chinese are allocating some of their South-South cooperation money in Africa.

ROBIN: And what about China as a source of private funding? Can we expect a Chinese National Committee, or can we expect the UNICEF office in China to relate directly to private donors?

GILLIAN: Yes. In fact, we're already doing that. In fact, the UNICEF program in China is now mainly funded from funding we've raised in China, be it through the corporate sector. We have a very active national committee in Hong Kong, who raises a lot of money for the Chinese program. But if I can give you an example, a very good new partner is the biggest refrigeration company in the world, Haier.

And Haier got involved with UNICEF when we prequalified their solar fridges to use on our immunization program across the world. And they're such big suppliers, it's brought the cost of solar fridges down enormously. Now they're one of the key suppliers. So we built on that relationship.

And they are now funding our education programs in China, and they're looking at partnering with us internationally on education. So this is a very interesting field to be partnering with some of these big Chinese companies. For instance, COSCO, the China Ocean Shipping Company, we were able to raise funding from them for UNICEF to deliver during the 2011 Horn of Africa drought.

So we are definitely working very closely to build those relationships with Chinese corporates. And within China, the multinationals, the biggest funder of UNICEF's education program in China now is Porsche cars. And that started from a small humanitarian donation during the Szechuan earthquake, which has now built to a very big partnership across the country.

ROBIN: I wanted to go back to that point that you've managed sneakily to spend such a large amount of your career not in donor capitols but in developing countries, and in particular with your—during your time with UNICEF, you have worked exclusively in the field. You've headed a series of country offices.

So apart from congratulating you, I'm wondering how it is I guess always working so far from the centre of a large organization. Does that pose particular challenges? Are there pressures to go to the centre and be indoctrinated? How do you manage those?

GILLIAN: UNICEF is a little bit different from, say AusAID, when obviously after each posting you're expected to come back to Canberra and be re-educated. UNICEF, being such a field-based organization, there's not been such a push that you must go to headquarters. I've obviously had pressure to go to headquarters, which I've resisted.

And something I really like about working for UNICEF as a representative is that it is a very decentralized organization. So while you get your core funding and you design your program

in line with the strategic plan, we have a lot more autonomy than most other UN agencies to actually deliver our program, to raise our funds, and recruit our staff.

We have obviously good oversight from the regional office. So as a country representative, I probably deal more with the regional office. But with headquarters, obviously, on any political issues, legal issues, all of the arrangements that we have for our fundraising with partner governments are done through headquarters.

And then our headquarters is spread around the world. So Geneva is considered headquarters. So because we have a large humanitarian program in Ethiopia, and because UNICEF leads a number of the humanitarian clusters, I'm also very involved with Geneva on support in our cluster role.

And then the other key headquarters agency that I do have a lot of dealings with is our supply division in Copenhagen. Because obviously, in a country like Ethiopia, we're providing a lot of supplies still, particularly in the health sector, and we also procure particularly vaccines for the government.

So we're the procurement agency for the Ethiopian government. So I have a lot to do with Copenhagen because of that role. So while there are challenges not being as close to headquarters, I think there's quite a good structure set up with how we relate to different parts of our headquarters and the oversight and quality control that we have at the regional office level.

So for instance, in Ethiopia, our regional office is in Nairobi. It's an hour and a half away. We have a lot of interaction with the advisors there, and obviously regular meetings as well.

ROBIN: And I suppose, just to add one extra layer of complexity to your life, a lot more of UNICEF's income these days is coming from private donations, and some of that is earmarked and goes directly to country offices, or at least programs managed by country offices. So does that create an additional load? Not necessarily a difficult one. Is keeping your private donors informed and happy, is that a task?

GILLIAN: Yes. Obviously it was a huge task when I was in China, where we were just really funded through the corporates. And for instance, the Ikea Foundation was a major donor in China. So managing those relationships with foundations, yes, adds another level of complexity. And Ethiopia, we have very generous funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

So obviously we want to keep that relationship going well. We get some private philanthropic organizations funding us as well that require quite a lot of management. Yes, so the more

funding we get from foundations, I think the transaction costs on managing those relationships are quite high.

Because they're not like a bilateral donor that really understands how development works, and you have to be kind of educating them as you go along, and they can be very demanding as well. A lot of them now are insisting on matching funds, and that puts a lot of extra strain and stress on our teams to come up with the matching funds for what we get from foundations.

ROBIN: So, a mixed blessing.

GILLIAN: Mixed blessing, yes.

ROBIN: And just my last question, I want to ask you about I guess the challenges of leadership when you are leading teams that are so diverse in terms of their expertise and also in terms of their cultural backgrounds. I had a discussion not long ago with Helen Evans, who you may know was deputy at GAVI, and also deputy at The Global Fund.

And she was quite direct about some of the challenges that she faced as a senior woman in the multilateral system. And I'm wondering, have you encountered some challenges of that nature, and how did you manage those?

GILLIAN: That's a good question. And if I look back over my career with UNICEF, I think I've learned so much about leading multicultural teams, and I hope my leadership skills have grown over the 13 years from UNICEF. And I think I've learned so much from the teams I've led, and from peers I've worked with, who've modeled good leadership in these big multinational offices.

So I think I've been able to develop a leadership style that is my own, and I was very lucky when I first joined UNICEF, I was sent to a leadership program for senior women that was run specifically for UNICEF women, and it really allowed us time to review our leadership styles, what made us that particular type of leader.

And I think it gave me the confidence just to be myself and to be authentic to who I was, and to play to my strengths, and I think that gave me a lot of confidence. So my leadership style is definitely to build an enabling environment where all the staff, no matter where they come from, can perform at their best.

And so that's really been my philosophy in leading. And I think particularly in a multicultural environment, particularly with a large national staff, to be very respectful, to be very accessible to staff, whether it be the driver who wants to come and tell you about a medical

issue his wife has that he needs help with, or to your senior staff who are wanting to have a career discussion about where they go next.

I think I've really learned that if you show care and that you help staff grow, and that you're concerned about their safety and security particularly in some of the countries where I've worked, I've found that that 'not rocket science' approach has been I think for me a successful leadership approach to big multicultural teams.

I've had regular 360s, which have always been very useful, and had coaching throughout my career with UNICEF. I've been offered that and I think I've learned greatly from that. So while it's always challenging and there's constant human resource issues that you're having to deal with, overall I've really loved this opportunity to lead big multicultural teams.

Obviously there are always challenges, and particularly when you're dealing with different cultures and you're a female leader. And I think some of the most challenging times I have are dealing particularly with male colleagues from patriarchal societies, dealing with performance issues.

I always think about it a lot. I'll often talk to a peer or talk to a coach on how best to approach that person. And I think the world over, if you're prepared to listen and put the time into active listening with your staff, particularly when you've got performance issues, it's not going to solve the issue but at least staff feel they're heard before you decide what you're going to do. So I haven't, I have to say, found too many challenges. I have to say I've loved being a leader of UNICEF in this big multicultural environment that we work in.

ROBIN: And at about that point, Gillian was whisked away for dinner with some UNICEF colleagues. I braced myself to pay for our two drinks, because we'd been talking in the lobby of a Geneva hotel, and Geneva hotels are not known for their economical drink prices. That accounts, by the way, for a lot of the background noise, the chair-scraping, chuckling, and nattering that you could hear.

Gillian's now back in Ethiopia. She expects to complete a full term as country director there. What happens after that? Who knows. But perhaps her hometown, Auckland in New Zealand, beckons. You can find my written aid profile on Gillian on the Development Policy Centre website. Just go to Devpolicy.org/aidprofiles. Thanks for listening.

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