

Book Reviews

The State of Pacific Children 1993

Prepared by the United Nations Children's Fund in co-operation with the South Pacific Commission

REVIEWED BY STEPHEN G. KAREL MPH, DR PH
World Health Organisation, Papua New Guinea.

"The State of Pacific Children 1993" is a report prepared by the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) in co-operation with the South Pacific Commission. This report is a revised and expanded version of the 1992 edition. Revisions have been incorporated to reflect a wider information base drawing from all twenty-three Pacific nations and territories that are members of the South Pacific Commission (SPC). It documents achievements since 1992 on priority goals for children.

The report is organised around three central questions:

- *In view of the current situation of Pacific children, is enough being done to address their needs?*
- *The World Summit for Children and the Pacific Forum have endorsed the concept of "First Call" for children; are Pacific children receiving "First Call" on resources?*
- *In view of the rapid social and economic changes transforming the Pacific Islands, what are the prospects for Pacific children tomorrow?*

The report has six chapters and numerous panels, figures, and annexes which focus the reader's attention on the answers to these questions.

The first chapter sets the global framework for the report by detailing the various meetings and agreements which have recently taken place concerning the welfare of children. Examples cited are the 1989 International Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 1990 World Summit for Children, and the Pacific Forum meetings of 1991 and 1992. This chapter provides the broad context for the growing interest in the well-being of children, not only in the Pacific, but around the world.

The second chapter goes into detail in describing the current conditions of Pacific Island children. This is a well-documented chapter that reveals some disturbing and perhaps little known facts about children living in the Pacific. For example, about fifty percent of the Pacific population is under eighteen years of age, 50 Pacific Island children under 5 years of age die each day, nearly 19,000 each year. Approximately 800,000 Pacific children are malnourished,

while 40% never complete basic education. This situation is made worse by the fact that 80% of mental development in children takes place during the first five years of life. The statistics provided clearly show that the conditions of many Pacific children in terms of health, nutrition and education are poor indeed and that much more clearly needs to be done to change these conditions.

Chapter three deals with the resources available for Pacific children from the family, the community, and the nation. The report points out that traditionally, families and communities of the Pacific place a high value on children and their well-being. Unfortunately, families and communities are facing great challenges amidst financial constraints and social change. It is noted that Pacific governments have historically given high priority to health and education but in real terms, allocations have fallen in the past ten years. The problems caused by declining resources are compounded by inefficiencies and inequities in resource distribution. Chapter three makes good use of resource figures for health and education expenditures and the information is shown in useful comparative bar charts for the Pacific nations.

Chapter four points out the tremendous strengths already existing in Pacific countries for children. Chief among these strengths are: the traditional love islanders have for their children; the tradition of the extended family based on caring and sharing; the relative peace and tranquillity in the region; access to the best of modern knowledge available to an ever widening circle of islanders through the communications revolution; and finally, the relatively high per capita national income levels in comparison to other developing regions of the world.

The chapter also points out that these strengths are being severely challenged by rapid population growth, environmental degradation, urbanisation and rapid social change, declining food production, underdeveloped marketing systems for local foods, and the spectre of AIDS. Whether the Pacific nations can meet these challenges successfully will, to a large extent, be a matter of political will and the ability of the governments to re-prioritise and accelerate efficient and effective service delivery to the people.

Chapter five outlines the ten specific opportunities for improving the well-being of Pacific children as stated in the 1992 State of Pacific Children Report. It also attempts to measure progress in the development of these opportunities. While some measurement of progress can be made, the report notes that a great deal of information needed for monitoring progress is not routinely available, or if available, is of questionable quality. This may be true but there is also a lot of data and information that is available which is not currently being utilised. The enhanced use of data and the development of improved health information systems in the Pacific nations could certainly be an area for both Unicef and SPC to focus more attention upon.

Chapter six gives suggestions on responses that can be taken to improve the conditions of Pacific children. The strengthening of immunisation services and supporting Pacific families in meeting these challenges are specifically noted. Also noted is the need for a policy framework that is supportive of children and that actions be taken to correct the inequities and inefficiencies in the distribution of resources.

It is important to establish a policy framework supportive of children. The details of how public policy, particularly social policy, can reinforce and back up health and education programs were not included in the report. It would have been helpful if some practical examples of public policy support for specific health and education interventions had been included in the text. This could have been done as an illustrative panel similar to others in the report.

The report concludes with annexes of basic indicators, immunisation and child monitoring. These annexes are useful for cross-national comparisons of progress in health, social, and education sectors.

The report makes good use of references and its statements are supported by relevant facts and figures. Basic health, education and social statistics are shown for each country and important comparisons can be made. Sometimes, statistics are given not only for each country, but also for different years. This allows for comparisons across time as well as across countries. This will help in identifying trends or patterns if and when they do emerge.

While the data, figures and indicators are quite valuable, some improvements can be made. For example, figures 1, 2, and 7 could have been enlarged to use the whole page. This would have made them easier to read. Likewise, figures 5 and 6 are difficult to interpret because they show too much information in too tight a space, and the lettering is too small. Spreading the information out across the entire page would make them easier to understand.

The use of illustrative panels to highlight the narrative text is well-done. The panels provide insight into specific examples of matters discussed in the text. The panels have been well-chosen. Panel 8, on one woman's story about AIDS, is particularly well-selected and poignant. The report provides a good descriptive analysis of the conditions of Pacific children in 1993. It gives information which indicates some of the causes for shortcomings in achieving all that has been planned for the well-being of children.

However, the report could have explored why certain strategies have not been successful and what changes could have been implemented. For example, the report says that ten specific strategies have been encouraged to improve the well-being of children. But how have these strategies worked? In which countries have they been successful? Why or why not? What lessons could be learned and shared

with others? Suggestions on the actual how to improve the implementation of the ten strategies in the Pacific countries would certainly be useful to government departments and agencies.

Another example is the call for supporting community groups and families. This is very important and should be pursued but the report could have given more details on specific ways and means to actually be supportive. What strategies and activities could be implemented now, in five years, to support community groups and families? How can governments be supported to undertake these activities?

In summary, the 1993 State of the Pacific Children report is a very valuable document that describes the current well-being of children living in the Pacific Island nations. It explains the reasons for some of the positive achievements and for some of the gaps. It encourages known and proven intervention strategies and advocates for strong political, community and family support for children. It is an excellent reference document and should be continued every year.

Those responsible for producing this document, including Unicef and SPC, are to be commended for their fine efforts in pulling together a wide array of diverse and scattered information into a useful and insightful document. It is hoped that future reports will include more analytical focus in addition to the substantial descriptive narrative. It is also suggested to enhance some of the graphics and figures to make comparisons and monitoring of progress easier in future editions.

This book can be obtained from the Assistant Representative, Unicef, C/-UNDP, Private Mail Bag, Suva, Fiji. Fax: (+679) 301 667, Telephone: (+679) 300 439. □

Facts for Life: A Communication Challenge

Prepared by Peter Adamson in consultation with Unicef, WHO, UNESCO, UNFPA and a team of expert advisors. 2nd edition, 1993. 102pp.

Produced and co-published by Unicef, WHO, UNESCO and UNFPA in partnership with 165 leading NGOs.

REVIEWED BY KENT BUSE MSc.

Assistant Programme Officer, Unicef, Fiji.

This small and simple book is intended to change millions of lives. It is about life and what can be done to save and improve it. If the simple messages of the book could reach all families in the world it would indeed do just that, save millions of women's and children's lives.

• **Facts for Life** appeared on the scene in 1989, and since then almost ten million copies have been published in over

100 countries and in at least 180 languages. It has been suggested that it is second only to the Bible as the most translated book in the world.

The publication is a joint effort of Unicef, WHO, UNESCO and UNFPA together with 165 leading medical and children's organisations. **Facts for Life** expresses in plain language the latest scientific consensus on practical, low-cost, family-based means of protecting the health and development of children and mothers. The book is organised around ten short chapters. Each chapter consists of three sections. The first entitled, "A Note To Communicators," details why the chapter's messages have the potential to exert a powerful leverage on maternal and child health. The second section of each chapter lists the "Prime Messages" that every care-giver has the right and ought to know. Each chapter typically has 4-7 prime messages. The final section of each chapter provides "Supporting Information" for each of the messages. This information, the latest scientific consensus, is written in simple languages.

The simple messages in **Facts for Life** are universally relevant - addressing the most important causes of child morbidity and mortality in most developing countries. The ten chapters of the second edition of **Facts for Life**, published in 1993, present primary health care messages under the following headings: Timing Births; Safe Motherhood; Breastfeeding; Child Growth; Immunization; Diarrhoea; Coughs and Colds; Hygiene; Malaria; AIDS; and Child Development. To take the example of the chapter of Timing Births, the Note to Communicators states, inter alia, that "It is not yet widely known that family planning is one of the most powerful ways of improving the health of women and children.

Births which are 'too many or too close' or to women who are 'too old or too young' account for approximately one third of all infant deaths worldwide." The chapter contains only four Prime Messages, one of which states that "Becoming pregnant before the age of 18, or after the age of 35, increases the health risks for both mother and child." Clearly, this is a simple to understand message which everyone has the right to know. Supporting information is subsequently presented which outlines the scientific evidence for this edict. To those who work in the social sectors, none of the information presented should be new.

What is, however, unique about the publication is that it distills a large body of scientific evidence into sixty four messages. Messages which the producers hope to communicate to the world.

In spite of the fantastic number of copies of the book in circulation, the initiative's sponsors realise that if the messages are to be disseminated as broadly as intended, efforts beyond mere printing are required. As such, the target groups of the **Facts for Life** are communicators, be they political, religious, business, or trade union leaders; educa-

tors; members of the mass media and medical/health establishment; community development or health workers; and artists, writers and entertainers. It is recognised that in practice, successful communication of these universal messages will require national and sub-national initiatives to adapt the messages to local priorities, based on local attitudes and practices and channels of communication. Thus the success of **Facts for Life** rests on developing well-informed approaches to communicating messages to the great variety of care-givers world-wide.

A number of communicators in Pacific Island countries have taken up the challenge inherent in communicating **Facts for Life**. Local versions have been produced in Papua New Guinea (English and Pidgin), Fiji (Fijian and Hindi), and Vanuatu (Bislama). Kiribati is in the process of undertaking a translation. Posters have been developed and the messages are starting to be integrated in a variety of media throughout the Pacific.

Communicators have resoundingly acknowledged the contribution of **Facts for Life** to their work. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that information is a necessary but insufficient condition for behavioural change leading to well-being. Enabling care givers to make responsible choices goes beyond the provision of messages, and is influenced by a range of factors including poverty, gender, educational level, social pressure, cultural norms and patterns of service delivery. In short, economic and social development are as critically needed as health information. This truism, however, does not detract from the right of everyone to access these basic messages to protect the well-being of themselves, their families and communities, by methods which they can adopt, and at a price that they can afford.

Having said that, the messages of the book could be expanded beyond the current focus on survival and development to encompass the larger agenda envisioned in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. As such, simple messages in the area of participation and protection should be developed for the next edition. This will undoubtedly be more demanding, as it will be difficult to get experts to agree on how to develop equally, simple and factual messages aimed at respecting children's rights to freedom of thought, conscience, association and expression.

Nevertheless, this publication is a must for all those interested in advancing the health and well-being of women and children in the Pacific.

*The second edition of **Facts for Life** can be obtained from Unicef, Facts for Life Unit, 3 UN Plaza, NY 10017, USA (Fax 212-326-7768) or Unicef c/o UNDP, Private Mail Bag, Suva, Fiji (Fax: 679 - 301667). Cost US\$1.00.* □