

## ANNUAL REPORT 2006

### **Rima Salah, Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF (Jan. 2005–Mar. 2007) discusses her visits to countries in the Horn of Africa in 2006**

**Q: You visited the Horn of Africa on several occasions in 2006. Can you tell us about your experience and about the crisis affecting the area?**

A: I visited the Horn of Africa several times last year. I visited Ethiopia twice, I visited also Kenya and discussed the problem of the drought in the whole Horn of Africa. I was also involved in launching an [Alert on the Horn of Africa](#) in Geneva. I also visited the northern part of Kenya, Garissa. I took a group of members of parliament with me from 10 different countries because the parliamentarians – from the International Parliamentary Union – were meeting in Kenya. We thought that it was very good to have a field trip for them. And it was the first initiative to take parliamentarians from the IPU to visit our programmes and to realize the problems in the field, particularly what was happening because of the drought. We visited Garissa and the centres where UNICEF is working with other agencies, what we call ‘recuperation centres.’

**Q: What was your experience of how the drought and the rain are affecting people?**

A: The most important thing is that we know that usually the drought affects mostly children and women. When I went to the recuperation centre I saw that children were suffering – I saw a child who was almost dying because of malnutrition and because of malaria. That reminded me of what I saw in Niger the previous year when I saw a child almost dying in front of me. When I saw the children also in Garissa it brought back memories and I was thinking ‘why can’t we do better’?

And, for example, in the Horn of Africa, we know that this is recurring all the time. Why can’t we do better? That’s why I believe that development is very important. The drought in the Horn of Africa affects mostly the nomadic population because they are moving and they have no access to services – to health services, to education. I saw also the heroic work of the people there. I met a doctor – a woman doctor who is doing her utmost to save the children of the region. But a doctor alone cannot do it – we all have to help her, and I think we can help by really planning and preventing the drought. Those regions – Garissa and others – are isolated. They are isolated from development, they are politically isolated. So, how can we have programmes? For nomadic populations we have to have mobile health centres, we need to empower families and communities, we need to go to the families themselves to guide them in the care of their children. Because of the drought the schools closed and children were not going to school any more. In UNICEF we have models where we organize schools for nomadic people. What I also saw which was really hopeful to me was that communities were involved. I saw many programmes that were community-based.

**Q: Some of the parts of the affected countries were also simultaneously affected by conflict. How can people provide care for their children in such extreme circumstances?**

A: We went, for example in Ethiopia, to a region that was also affected by conflict and this is where we started discussing with them education, and how education can become a way of building peace (because there are tribal rivalries in these regions). How can we use education and access to services – particularly health services? How to have peace education in schools? This will help in ending those rivalries.

I think development is the key to building peace. And particularly, as I always say, peace alone is not important, but justice. Those nomadic tribes should be treated [just the same] as any other citizen of these countries.

**Q: Share with us what are the major lessons learned for the international community in dealing with a crisis of this magnitude?**

A: The most important thing is not to be too late. Of course emergency activities and programmes are very important but [we need] also to look at the underlying causes. And I think all the UN agencies together can do it. We can really empower people; empower communities for sustainable development, even if they are roaming. We should not tell them to change their way of life, but we need to see how we can help them in their way of life and how we can empower them. When we all work together I think we can solve the problem. And not only to address the immediate problems, but really to address the structural problems, the underlying causes.

**Q: Can you talk about what was the most shocking or surprising thing that you saw? What was the most hopeful or positive thing?**

The shocking thing is to still see children dying, children really sick. As you know, it is not only malnutrition but there are other problems – for example, malaria. To see children trying to survive. They are trying their best but sometimes it's too late and sometimes we cannot save them. But also the most important thing I saw was those angels, the doctors, the nurses that work against all odds to save children. I [also] saw that communities themselves want to do something to improve the situation.

UNICEF's role is really important, because UNICEF is really there before, during and after the crisis. So we can help in the development part, but also we can be there during emergencies. We have offices there, we have sub-offices there, so we can reach the communities, we can reach the families, and at the same time we can also influence policies. We can also talk to governments, we have the credibility.

**Q: Tell us why you think working for UNICEF is unique.**

Because of our credibility with governments and at the same time our credibility with families and communities. And I think for the legitimacy of our mission, which is the realization of the rights of children everywhere. And to realize the rights of children this

means that you also have to be involved in development because you cannot achieve the [Millennium Development Goals](#) if you are not also involved in development, in policies. Our credibility will make us meet presidents of countries; the doors are open to us. In my career, in the 20 years, all doors were open to me. When you are working in countries in situations of war and conflict you also can meet the other groups – the non-state parties – and discuss with them, which I did in Liberia, in Côte d’Ivoire, in Sierra Leone.

The credibility of what we say is very important. At the same time we have the know-how. You cannot advocate if you don’t know how to do it.

I think my experience in the Horn of Africa last year and the year before, for example in Niger, really made me think about how we can review our approaches and how can we really address the problems [and] address all the underlying causes. And also always speak for justice. Because the nomadic tribes in those countries – they are suffering because development did not reach them. How to make development reach everybody is very important.