

Days of Tranquility in El Salvador

Personal narrative by Agop Kayayan

We have to be frank and honest in telling the stories of children, armed conflicts, and UNICEF. I want to say a few words about the Days of Tranquility. Jim Grant said and I am quoting him “For the first time in the history of humanity a war stopped because of children”. To honor his memory, and that of Nils Thedin, as well as the extraordinary dedication of Hernan Jaramillo, as also with the purpose of training young people interested in working in favor of the poor in situations of violence, we developed a proposal for a documentary. We were lucky in El Salvador to have an organization like the Catholic Church. By the way, I do not believe in any religion in particular. There were saints and devils on both sides.¹

Some lessons learnt

1. Detailed internal discussions should precede decision making and the UNICEF person responsible should be fully briefed. Negotiations call for cautious approaches and a slight mistake could lead to interruptions, delays, or simply the end.
2. We as “honest intermediaries” should be very frank. Before the Archbishop of San Salvador accepted to be the intermediary with the guerrilla, I was thoroughly “interrogated” by his deputy, Monsignor Rosa y Chavez, recently elevated to cardinal. Literally and rightly interrogated without gloves.
3. We had to be prepared and often risked “breaks”. They fortunately did not materialize. I recollect an evening in a well known hotel in San Salvador where all the foreign correspondents and local journalists had gathered. We were told that the guerrilla had not answered but it was not certain that they would agree to the truce. I had to, half embarrassed, announce to our guests that we were still waiting for a word from one of the sides. The journalists were disappointed but very kind. A few came to me and said “just do not worry, it will be positive”. Then it happened. Against my advice, and intelligently, Hernan Jaramillo drove to the Archbishop’s residence. He came back, with an unforgettable smile, announcing the good news.
4. We had to deal constantly and delicately balance the two equally important major aspects in such initiatives: the technical and the political.

¹The “Days of tranquility” are described in exemplary quality in Adam Fifield’s book “A Mighty Purpose”. For those interested, the cases described should actually, if UNICEF were fair, be documented in a documentary film to honor our beloved Jim Grant.

5. One should be extremely conscious and careful about being “even handed”. Both sides, in spite of assurances to the contrary, always suspect that the mediator may have a favorite. In fact, one of the two sides, at the very end, accused us of taking sides. Teresa Albanez, with her extraordinary sense of responsibility, participated at a meeting in New York residence of a Latin American diplomat. A person from the guerrilla group accused us of taking the side of the government. Teresa was at her best and responded that UNICEF has not and will not take sides. She clarified the reasons for their misunderstanding. This leads me to mention that the country office should count on effective support at the regional and headquarters levels.

6. The country office should have absolute confidence in the actual existence of financial and technical support. In this case, both sides had very limited experience in vaccination campaigns technically. Financially neither side had the human resources or funding.

7. One of the key reasons for acceptance of a truce on both sides, was political advantage. Neither side could afford to drop out of such a highly visible event. Jim Grant, wonderful Jim Grant, did his best to demonstrate how both sides were engaged in a monumental initiative of peace for children. He visited El Salvador almost at each occasion. In one case it was physically impossible for him to be in San Salvador and to be the main speaker at the international meeting of pediatricians. But when two very stubborn persons meet, airline schedules cannot be a deterrent. We had to arrange a night flight (forbidden) on a single engine WW2 time plane for him to fly from Guatemala city to a remote “peace” town. The pilot and owner of the plane was Thierry Delrue. And Jim knew beforehand in detail about this arrangement.

8. We should document experiences like the “Days of Tranquility” mostly to train younger generations (Not only of UNICEF). Jim often asked if I was taking notes of what was happening. He repeatedly advised me. I repeatedly did not take notes, until 15 years later. When documenting, success and failure should be included. In the proposed documentary I will illustrate some of the errors we committed along with the success of the Days of Tranquility.

9. UNICEF undertook, to its great credit, many such initiatives. But we do not know how to effectively use these experiences to realize the dreams and bolster up the courage of similar brilliant initiatives. Nils Thedin imagined the safety of children in war, Grant put those thoughts into concrete initiatives, people like Hernan Jaramillo worked hard to make them become a reality. UNICEF should do more to recognize the work and dedication of such staff members, especially younger junior colleagues.

10. I have prepared a proposal for a documentary film on the Days of Tranquility and request UNICEF to support its production and wide dissemination.

Let me conclude by saying that I have decided to spend much of my remaining time in transmitting to young people some of the hard lessons that I learnt in UNICEF. I become so enthusiastic when I see young people who truly want to help the most vulnerable. I observed that also among many young UNICEF staff members coming from diverse backgrounds had the same desire. Youth sometimes take high risks in very complex and dangerous situations. I saw this among the youth in Brazil , where, after my “early retirement”, I started a NGO with a group of friends.