An International Initiative Against Avoidable Disability
Une Initiative internationale contre les incapacités évitables
Iniciativa Internacional contra los impedimentos evitables

Chairman: Sir John Wilson CBE, DCL

July 8th., 1996

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Dear Melissa,

On Monday, returning late after an evening at the theatre to celebrate our 52nd. wedding anniversary, Jean and I read with delight your fax. The prospect that, on retirement at the end of next year, you may again join us in IMPACT is the best news we have had since you moved on up those perilous stairs to the pinnacles of distinction you have subsequently rattled in the UN system and the Diplomatic Service. Will you then be living in Geneva, in that house with Voltaire's well, in New York, or in one of your Hideaway Homes ? Wherever, it will be a joy to work with you again.

The foundations are doing well, as you may see from the papers I am sending to you separately. They include a report which Claire is making to our United Kingdom Council this week and the printed annual report. Last week Zelma began her two-year assignment as leader of the new initiative we are beginning in the Asia Pacific Region. This week she begins her first visit to Singapore, Hong Kong, Manila and probably later Tokyo. She will be developing new foundations and raising funds from within the "tiger economies" of Eastern Asia.

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, Prince Abdul Aziz, with whom Jean and I recently did a tour of the Gulf States, has invited representatives of governments and non-governmental organisations from 22 countries to meet in Cyprus to plan the priorities of a five-year programme for the prevention of disability in that region. Last month, in Annecy, 40 specialists and research workers from 20 European and Eastern European countries met to review what action is being taken within national health systems to prevent or mitigate the disabilities which cluster with increasing severity amongst the elderly population. Already in Europe one person in five over sixty has a disability and one person in three over seventy. The estimate is that the number of old people in

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the world, now about 600 million, will increase to 1.2 billion by the year 2025. That must mean a massive increase in age-related disability but much of which, with modern technology, could be prevented or at least postponed to the last segment of life. I am sending you the press release.

Salyaveth, and his teams of ear surgeons who tested the hearing of over a million children in Thailand last year, is now sending surgical teams to Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Burma. In Nepal and Northern Philippines, one of IMPACT's priorities is an attack on the iodine deficiency which in some areas causes one child to be born brain damaged. In one area of the Nepal/Indian border, simply by adding iodine to domestic salt, the number of children born brain damaged has been reduced over five years from 92 per thousand to 11 per thousand.

I wish I could report a similar advance in the activity of the Geneva office. At least in the past two years I'm afraid its influence has been negligible and in some respects counter-productive. I feel particularly sorry for Cheryle who will doubtless have described to Al the difficulties she has been encountering. I will enclose with the papers a copy of a letter I wrote in October to Tim Rothermel who, as always, has been an invaluable support but whose own position is now, unfortunately, weakened to the point where I understand he will soon be leaving UNDP.

You almost certainly know more than I do about the current situation in UNDP. In common with the UN system generally it is struggling with scandalously diminished resources and with misleading publicity to maintain its priorities. In this turmoil I have the greatest regard for Gustave Speth. When Jean and I were last in New York, being briefed for our participation in the disarmament conference over the question of laser weapons, he arranged for us to meet the Secretary-General.

I was so impressed that, at a time when he was so busy, Boutros Boutros-Ghali spent almost an hour with us talking about his concept of a new relationship between UN and what he calls "civil society." I will enclose with the other papers a copy of a letter I subsequently wrote on this subject to Rosario Green who has been commissioned by the Secretary-General to produce a report on this subject.

In many ways IMPACT, as you and I conceived it and as it has subsequently developed, has provided a model very much on the lines the Secretary-General is now proposing. IMPACT's strength is in its double identity: as a United Nations mechanism and as a consortium of non-governmental organisations. When Dr. Nabulsi joined us two years ago I thought that, with his successful leadership of the UN Volunteers organisation, he should be in an excellent position to maintain and expand that inter-relationship.

Unfortunately, he brought to it a new set of ideas in which he sees himself not as facilitator but as "Co-ordinator of the Global Programme" with an elaborate bureaucratic ritual of who reports to who. That, together with some very sharp exchanges, has not gone down well with the foundations. To give you the flavour of that I enclose - though please treat it in confidence, I do not want it to go further - a letter I had from Zelma following Dr. Nabulsi's first visit to India.

It is of course a great advantage to have the office within the headquarters structure of WHO with which we have the most cordial relationships both centrally and in the regions. I understand, though I have not yet had this officially confirmed, that some funding will be provided by UNDP for the Geneva office at which, of course, Nabulsi gives voluntary service on rather complicated UN retirement terms.

In relation to the real work of IMPACT with governments and in our field projects, the problem is not primarily a financial one. In the last two years alone, the non-governmental income generated by the foundations has more than doubled with every prospect of further improvement as the regional programmes develop. We immensely value our relationship with the UN system as you may see from a statement I made to the Global Summit last year, we work closely within agreed priorities and targets. For that reason, I am determined not to "rock the boat" over what is, after all, a fairly trivial question of relationships.

I am intrigued to think of you on the platform with Dorena. It would be splendid if, between you, you could get some sort of IMPACT group established in Brazil. So far, despite the very useful contacts you made initially and a few projects we have supported, IMPACT has not made an effective entry into Latin America.

You may have heard of IMPACT's "Lifeline Express" hospital train in India. It takes basic surgery for the prevention of disability along India's 50,000 kilometres of railtrack. You will see pictures of it in our annual report. It has been suggested, on a number of occasions, that such a train might do equally well in Brazil or Argentina, but it would need Government support and track facilities. In Hong Kong later this month, Zelma will be discussing with the Chinese authorities the possibility of establishing such a hospital train in Mainland China.

The only one of our foundations which has conspicuously failed is that in the United States. It made a good start but, probably through lack of effective leadership, got bogged down in a number of local projects and has been inoperative for the past five years.

You always said my letters were too long. Forgive this one but it is such a joy to be in touch with you again and we are all so excited at the prospect that you might be willing to join the show again when you retire.

With affectionate regards to you, Al and the family.

John

JOHN WILSON