**Obituary in Memory of Dr. URBAN JONSSON**

Dr. Urban Jonsson passed away on March 8th, just a few days after his 72nd birthday.

Urban Jonsson, a national of Sweden and resident of Tanzania, held a Ph.D. in Food Science with focus on Nutrition. He pursued advanced training on nutrition at Cornell University and lifelong studies in philosophy, mathematics and a series of other disciplines in order to build his impressive competence within the broad areas of development and human rights, often with the problems of nutrition and hunger as the point of reference.

Following academic and research work at Chalmers University in Sweden, the Tanzania Food and Nutrition Center and the United Nations University in Tokyo, he started his long and successful career in UNICEF as the country representative to Tanzania in 1981. He went on to become the chief of nutrition for UNICEF globally, and then regional director, first in South Asia, based in Kathmandu, and then in Eastern and Southern Africa based in Nairobi. He completed his career in UNICEF as senior advisor on human rights, and then went on to work on a series of significant assignments and publications in this area.

Dr. Jonsson will be remembered for leading the ground-breaking work to develop the ‘UNICEF conceptual framework for nutrition causal analysis’ which has become universally adopted and used as a tool to understand and find solutions to nutrition problems. He will also be remembered for introducing the principles of ‘duty-bearers and claim-holders’ in human rights based development programming.
For those who were privileged to know and work with Urban, there is a wide range of issues related to development, nutrition, HIV and AIDS, human rights and social justice where his phenomenal capacity for systematic research and analytical clarity helped to open new insights and, indeed, amazing opportunities for enhancing human dignity and respect. He was tireless in his commitment to children, and to all of humanity.

Urban leaves behind his wife, Dr. Olivia Yambi, his two daughters Asa and Anna, his grand-daughter and family in Sweden. He will be greatly missed by his many friends and colleagues, and by countless other persons in all parts of the world – from ordinary mothers and fathers to leaders in the highest positions – whose lives he touched. The world will surely be diminished, and less lively, without him.

Urban Jonsson with strength and determination stood up against oppression, indifference and pure nonsense and created meaningful ways to realize children’s right to health, nutrition, education and a life free from all forms of violence.

Author: Bjorn Ljungqvist

UNSCN thanks Urban Jonsson for his important support to UNSCN, especially his dedicated chairmanship of the UNSCN working group on nutrition, ethics and human rights.



I was born and grew up in a very poor village in the mining and forest area of northern Sweden. Poverty never threatened our dignity, because all in the area were equally poor. The new Swedish social democratic government elected in the early 1950s enabled me to continue my studies past the secondary level. At the Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg I studied food science and technology up to my PhD. During the same time I also studied economics, mathematics and philosophy.

My interest of nutrition came from one of my mentors, Olof Melander, a guru in the area of applied nutrition. He was one of the founders of the Swedish-supported Ethiopian Nutrition Institute in the 1960s. His course on ‘nutrition in developing countries’ for PhD students inspired many of us to work in that area. The Swedish government’s International Development Co-operation Agency (Sida) invited me for a study tour to Tanzania in 1973, and so I left my promising research career for a two year Sida job at the Tanzania Food and Nutrition Centre. I worked there for five years and really never left Tanzania after that. Tanzania has become my second, or maybe my first, home country.

After then I worked for two years at the UN University world hunger programme in Tokyo. My supervisor Nevin Scrimshaw taught me nutrition and also how to work non-stop at a 200 per cent level. During this period I developed a conceptual framework on the causes of malnutrition, which identifies immediate, underlying and basic causes of nutritional status, and also identifies ‘food’, health’ and ‘care’ as the key underlying conditions for good child nutrition. Later on this was adopted by UNICEF and is now used by most organisations and agencies in the field. This work opened the door for me to join UNICEF, first as country representative in Tanzania for eight years, then chief of nutrition in UNICEF headquarters in New York for five years, then regional director for South Asia for five years, and then for East and Southern Africa for five years.

During my time as country representative in Tanzania I led the work of the WHO/UNICEF joint nutrition support programme in the Iringa region. This was one of the great successes in community-based nutrition in the 1980s. As UNICEF chief of nutrition later, I developed the nutrition strategy that was applied in all country programmes in the 1990s. When appointed by James Grant, then Executive Director of UNICEF, as regional director for South Asia, I was asked to spend most of my time on the serious problem of malnutrition. The consequent nutrition initiative for South Asia served for many years as the ‘think tank’ for nutrition in the region.

From all this experience, I am convinced that people who are poor should be recognised as the key actors in their own development, and not as passive beneficiaries or targets of transfers of commodities and services. I genuinely hate the notion of ‘packages’ which for me represent the antithesis of development. I also firmly believe in the constructivist approach, that we all construct and re-construct what we see as ‘reality’.

The 1990 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child started UNICEF’s work with human rights. A new explicitly human rights-based mission statement was adopted in 1996, and then the UN Secretary-General asked for all relevant UN agencies to apply a human rights-based approach to development. UNICEF moved fastest, largely as a result of the work we had done in East and Southern Africa.

I was appointed senior advisor on human rights to the Executive Director during my last year at UNICEF. This enabled me to link with many other organisations involved in the struggle for the realisation of human rights. Currently my own priority research interest is about the complex relationships among development, democracy, justice and human rights, which I do in cooperation with the Raoul Wallenberg Institute at the University of Lund, Sweden.

Having working outside that country for the last 35 years. I regard myself as a member of Tanzanian society. PhD in food science and technology, University of Gothenberg. From 1976-1980 worked at the Tanzania Food and Nutrition Centre, as chief of planning and then from 1980-1981 at the United Nations University in Tokyo, working for its world hunger programme. Then worked for UNICEF for 24 years, first as representative in Tanzania 1981-1990, then Chief of Nutrition in New York between 1990 and 1994, then regional director for South Asia 1994-1999, then regional director for East and Southern Africa 1999-2003, then finally in my last year with UNICEF as senior advisor to the Executive Director.

I have been an active member of the UN Standing Committee on Nutrition for many years, initiated the SCN working group on nutrition as a human right, and am an alternate chair of the SCN civil society group. Currently am executive director of The Owls, an international consultancy company in the area of human rights, democracy and development. During the last few years I have provided support to a number of organizations, including the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, UNAIDS, Sida, and the African Child Policy Forum.

We learnt yesterday that one of the giants of nutrition and of human rights, Urban Jonsson, had passed away.

If ever there was a better proponent of Neil Young's famous line "it's better to burn out than to fade away" I can't think of one.  Urban went down swinging, for nutrition, for rights, for humanity.

Why was he so great?

Well, for starters, he was a conceptual thinker.  Want to know where the UNICEF framework came from?  What the Lancet framework was inspired by?  Answer: Urban Jonsson.

He understood the importance of politics in nutrition. He had a stint as a politician in Sweden.  He was a master communicator and he understood how to do deals for nutrition.

He was practical yet idealistic.  He popularised the triple A cycle within UNICEF (assessment, analysis, action) and he popularised (with others) the importance of rights in nutrition and in development more broadly--he was eloquent in explaining how people had to have support to claim rights and how duty bearers often needed support to deliver on those claims.

He was fearless.  He basically said whatever he thought, no matter the consequences for himself (and sometimes for others).  This got him into trouble quite often.  Sometimes it made him unnecessarily controversial.  And while he often sucked the oxygen from a room, he usually substituted that with boundless energy and passion.  Read about him [here](http://wphna.org/our-members/urban-jonsson/), in his own words.

The first time I ever spoke to him was on the phone in 1994 while I was working in South Africa.  He called me up out of the blue to "summon" me to give a presentation at the UNSCN meetings that year.  It took me about 20 minutes to convince him I would not attend -- because I would be on honeymoon!

He was that kind of a person--he wouldn't take no for an answer when it came to nutrition.  We need more people like that.

I will miss him, as will thousands of others.