Ann Veneman, USDA, UNICEF, SCN, Nestlé
Public-private partnerships personified

2005-2010. Ann Veneman as executive director of UNICEF. Speaking for children, and offering goodies from UNICEF. More treats are in store

Ann Veneman, UNICEF executive director 2005-2010, is to become a member of the main board of Nestlé, effective next month. This news, disclosed on 17 February in a Nestlé media release quoted in Box 1, below, has shocked some in our profession, and has confirmed the cynical opinion of others. Her appointment in 2005 to head UNICEF as its executive director was at the time welcomed by some senior UNICEF staff, who saw her as a political heavy-hitter, able to lever support on behalf of the world’s children at the highest level. Between 2006 and 2009 she was also chair of the UN System Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN), with which many Association members are or have been associated.

Box 1
Ann Veneman to become Nestlé Board member

Extract from a Nestle media release of 17 February: ‘At the Annual General Meeting of 14 April 2011, the Board of Directors will propose a dividend increase from CHF 1.60 to CHF 1.85 per share to shareholders, representing an increase of 15.6%.... ’

‘Furthermore, the Board of Directors will propose... the election of a new member: Ms. Ann Veneman, a US citizen and former Executive Director of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). She also served as Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and is a member of the Nestlé Creating Shared Value Advisory Board, with extensive experience in areas such as children’s health and education’.
2000-2005. Ann Veneman as US secretary of agriculture, speaking for Big Ag. Then for the rest of the decade at UNICEF, here evangelising in Rajasthan

In December 2009, when she was about to step down from the UNICEF post, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said: ‘She has fulfilled her mandate with immense dedication, and I have been impressed by her extraordinary energy and determination to improve children’s health, education and well-being around the world. Under her leadership, UNICEF has become a catalyst for global action to help children reach their full potential, promoting collaborations that deliver the best possible results for children based on expert knowledge, sound evidence and data... Her legacy is an organization that is financially and intellectually strong and well-equipped to meet the challenges children face in the twenty-first century’.

Dr Ban might not be quite as fulsome now, knowing that she will now be playing a leading part in the policies and strategies of the world’s biggest manufacturer of artificial baby formula. There again, as a fervent supporter of public-private partnerships, maybe he would not cool any of his warm words.

Heavy hitting

Mid 1990s. Ann Veneman was a board member of Calgene, inventors of the genetically engineered Flav’r Sav’r, ‘the tomato that ate Tokyo’

Ann Veneman has indeed been a political heavyweight. For most of her career she has been an appointed (not elected) US politician. Raised on a Californian fruit farm, trained as a lawyer, and always a staunch Republican, aged in her 30s she became a senior US Department of Agriculture official, serving in the Reagan and older Bush administrations. In the mid-1990s, during the Clinton administration, she took a break from government service and in this period joined the board of Calgene, the firm best known for inventing the genetically engineered Flavr Savr tomato (see above), satirised as ‘the tomato that ate Tokyo’.

**US Agriculture Secretary**

In 2000 she was appointed to the cabinet of the younger Bush administration as Agriculture Secretary. Throughout this time she earned a reputation as a resolute and energetic ‘free marketeer’, a champion of US corporations and of modern technology such as genetic engineering, and determined to open up international trade for US agribusiness. As such she was seen as a loyal enforcer of the policies of what proved to be in modern times a uniquely aggressive and ruthless government.

**2003. Ann Veneman as US Agriculture Secretary visiting Iraq, offering US aid, helping to reconstruct the country, and getting to know the children**

Her appointment as executive director of UNICEF as from 2005 shocked most people concerned with the health and welfare of children and their mothers. In terms of the power politics of the time, it was logical. The US government controls the appointment of the heads of two UN agencies, UNICEF and the World Food Programme, and also of the World Bank. The younger Bush administration of 2000-2008 was a period when Paul Wolfowitz and John Bolton respectively became head of the World Bank and US ambassador to the UN, and gained a reputation as hitmen hired to shoot the UN full of holes. In this period also the US invaded Iraq after cursory consultation with the UN.

Box 2
Ann Veneman at UNICEF: A public interest view

The most substantial protest in 2005 against the appointment of Ann Veneman as executive director of UNICEF came in the form of an open letter to the then UN secretary general Kofi Annan. Many now would say that the warnings in the letter have proved to be well founded. Extracts follow:

‘The People’s Health Movement (PHM) was disturbed to hear about the appointment of Ms. Ann Veneman, former US Secretary of Agriculture, to be the new Executive Director of UNICEF. Given the US practice of de-funding UN agencies whose direction it disapproves (UNESCO, UNFPA, etc), we can only imagine the pressures on the UN Secretary General to appoint Ms. Veneman. It would be unconscionable, however, for the international health community to idly stand by while such a poor steward for the health and well-being of people is appointed to care for the most vulnerable among us: children.

‘Ms. Veneman’s training and experience as a corporate lawyer for agribusiness is totally inadequate to the task of leading the agency most responsible for the rights of children. There is no evidence in her tenure as US Secretary of Agriculture, director of the California Department of Agriculture, or Secretary for Foreign Affairs of the US Department of Agriculture, that she has the least bit of interest in the world’s children or their health and well-being. Indeed, her performance in these positions has been characterized by the elevation of corporate profit above people’s right to food (UN Declaration of Human Rights, article 25). Put into practice at UNICEF, this philosophy and behavior will prove disastrous for the world’s children.

‘Why the United States is allowed to choose the Director of UNICEF should in itself be a cause of major debate among all observers. As is well-known, the United States and Sudan are the only two countries who have refused to join the 189 other governments of the world as signatories of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. There is no evidence that Ms. Veneman has a negative view of this great failing on the part of her government or that she would work on behalf of the recognition, enforcement, or expansion of children’s rights as Director of UNICEF.

‘One of the greatest disasters for children over the last decade has been the US sanctions against Iraq, and the subsequent invasion and occupation. The previous Director of UNICEF, Carol Bellamy, called for an end to sanctions which were responsible for the deaths of an estimated 500,000 children. Ms. Veneman has made no similar expressions of concern; neither has she opposed the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq by the United States...

‘As one of the negotiators of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Ms. Veneman helped write the rules that have plunged millions of Mexican children into poverty. NAFTA codified the harsh neoliberal economic policies that have swept away laws and protections won by Mexican workers over decades...
When the US Department of Agriculture was founded in the mid-19th century, it was called the People’s Department, because about one half of the population was farmers. Over the subsequent century and a half, fewer and fewer people are engaging in farm work in the US, and the USDA has been taken over by corporate interests. The Veneman period in that government agency has served only to intensify that corporate control. In an agency like UNICEF, where the constituency of children has a limited ability to represent itself, it is urgent that those who speak for children, who claim to represent their interests, have a history that qualifies them to do so, not just an interest in profiting off of them.

In the coming period, UNICEF will be facing challenges in a number of areas which demand that an advocate for children be in charge of that agency. There are enormous differences between an approach that seeks to maximize corporate profit and one that maximizes child health and well being regarding (among many others):

- Children’s rights to food, housing, education, healthcare and childhood
- The marketing of breastmilk substitutes...
- The effects of neoliberal “free” trade policies on families and childhood
- Water privatization and access, and diarrheal disease
- Industrial contamination and birth defects and disabilities;

“We implore the Secretary General to reconsider the nomination of Ms. Ann Veneman as Executive Director of UNICEF.”

At UNICEF, Ann Veneman instructed UNICEF to give top priority to ready-to-use therapeutic foods to treat malnutrition: UNICEF purchase of RUTF increased from 100 tonnes in 2003 to 11,000 tonnes in 2008. She sharply increased UNICEF links with conflicted industry. Her policies ensured that UNICEF had less capacity to champion breastfeeding. She ignored UNICEF’s commitments to the rights of the child.

In 2006 she also became chair of the UN System Standing Committee on Nutrition, serving one term. She was openly irritated with and dismissive of the policies of the UN and other members of the SCN governing body towards industry. In 2008 she was party to a secret meeting held at Tufts University near Boston, attended by industry-friendly academics where the World Bank was also represented, whose purpose was to tear down the SCN and replace it by a body in which industry would co-determine UN nutrition and also food policy. This attempted coup, known as ‘the Boston Strangulation’, failed at the time, but may in effect be succeeding now.

While at UNICEF, she was on a long list drawn up by Barack Obama’s advisors as a possible bipartisan vice-presidential candidate. In 2009 Forbes magazine rated her as the 46th most powerful woman in the world. In this and other respects, her accession to the Nestlé board is also logical. How much has her personal market

value increased as a result of the knowledge and contacts she has gained within the UN system? At a guess, perhaps around $1 million Swiss francs a year. Probably at least as much as that gained as a result of her networks as a senior US politician. This all makes good sense from a personal career point of view.

As a US politician, she was already well qualified to move to industry at a time in life where the level of pension and share options as well as salary is very important. But in between these periods, was it appropriate that she be entrusted with a mission to protect the public interest, public goods, and in particular the health and welfare of the most vulnerable children, whose health and survival depends on a product – breastmilk – with no commercial value? Decisions made by the administration of the younger Bush cast a long dark shadow.

Box 3

**Double digit growth pillar strategic roadmap at Nestlé**

*Extract from a Nestle media release of 17 February, which reported annual sales of 110 billion and profits of 34.2 billion Swiss francs (about the same in $US). ‘Our performance was driven by continued investment in our growth pillars in line with our strategic roadmap. These include increasing distribution of Popularly Positioned Products (PPPs) and the continued roll-out of premium products in both emerging and developed countries; our focus on adding nutritional value to our products; expanding our reach in the out-of-home market; accelerating innovation and increasing our consumer-facing marketing spend...’

*Nestlé Nutrition. Sales of CHF 10.4 billion, 6.7% organic growth, 5.5% real internal growth.... Infant nutrition, the biggest division, had a very positive year, particularly in infant formula and infant cereals. There was growth in all three Zones, double digit in Asia, Oceania and Africa and market share was up on a global basis. The business performed well in the US and Canada, with high single-digit growth, as well as in Latin America, particularly Brazil. The trading environment was tough in Western Europe, but in the East, Russia again achieved double-digit growth. The division’s three biggest brands, Gerber, Cerelac and Nestlé Nan all grew double-digit, benefiting from increased brand support*