

A WORLDWIDE MISSION

As legal adviser and senior adviser to the executive director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), former Sydney lawyer Peter Mason jealously guards the ability to work for children on "both sides of the line" in conflict zones. **JULIE MCCROSSIN** reports.



Former Sydney lawyer Peter Mason in Peshawar in Pakistan for UNICEF.

It's been 27 years since Peter Mason travelled to New York to work as a litigator specialising in international corporate litigation and, since 1998, as the legal adviser to UNICEF. Yet Mason still thinks of Sydney Harbour every day. "My partner, Chris Thompson, and I live in Brooklyn, on the East River, looking directly across to Manhattan," Mason tells me when we meet for breakfast at Balthazar Restaurant in New York City. "I get the ferry to and from work, which always reminds me of home."

Mason works in UNICEF House, directly opposite the famous United Nations Building. It's a fantastic location for a job he loves.

"We are driven by our mission of helping children. We operate in 152 countries, often in humanitarian crises. We have a staff of some 12,000 people," he explains.

"In a nutshell, my job is about helping to unpack problems and identify solutions, using the legal lens as the beginning, but touching on aspects of the entire organisation as well. My work covers the broadest range of legal practice, from matters before international legal tribunals – such as the International Criminal Court – to major corporate transactions. I am a member of UNICEF's international management committee and of the finance and investments committee. I have previously served on the UNICEF audit committee."

The diversity of the legal work is quite remarkable.

"It's very broad," Mason says. "On the one hand, UNICEF is a human rights organisation. We have a mandate to protect the health, education and welfare of children and adolescents everywhere. Many of the legal issues related to that come to my office. We operate as a creature of public international law, so we have to negotiate with governments and sign agreements that are effectively treaties. They get registered with the treaty office of the UN. But then, on the other hand, we're a \$7.5 billion global business and we do sophisticated business transactions in order to operate the business. All these things come through my office."

I ask Mason for some examples of his work that illustrate the range of legal issues that arise.

"UNICEF purchases more vaccines than anyone else in the world," he says. "So the development of our vaccine contracts is incredibly important, complex and interesting. We do innovative things like create virtual stockpiles of major vaccines that can be drawn on very quickly to respond to disease outbreak emergencies."

"At the other end of the scale are the *amicus curiae* briefs we file before international courts. We filed an *amicus* brief in the Thomas Lubanga case before the International Criminal Court setting out a series of measures the court could consider in the reparations phase after Lubanga was convicted of recruiting child soldiers. Our submissions were very positively received.

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"UNICEF has a long history of promoting innovations to help kids. Back in the 70s, we helped develop a new water pump that was light and easy to install and use. Now you'll see it all over the world. Today we are challenging universities and the private sector around the world to help us solve a range of product and program problems we face in our work."

"We're even developing an investment fund – a kind of venture capital fund – specifically to promote innovation that helps children. There is a legal dimension to all these initiatives, from intellectual property rights to commercialisation and manufacturing, and my office is part of the team that develops innovative ideas and makes them a reality," Mason concludes.

Mason's team is surprisingly small.

"We have six lawyers. They come from outstanding law firms," he says with pride. "We work closely with the lawyers at the UN Secretariat and we're incredibly lucky to have a network of top-tier firms around the world – Cravath in New York and Allens Linklaters

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in Sydney, to name two – which give us assistance pro bono."

Mason clearly relishes the intellectual challenge and diversity of the work. He also spends a lot of time on planes as part of what might be called "troubleshooting".

He has travelled to most of the 152 countries in which UNICEF works.

"The travel can be up to 10 days a month and it's to a whole range of places. I travel a great deal because working directly with UN colleagues and government partners around the world is absolutely critical," he explains.

A key priority is access to conflict zones while keeping UNICEF staff and partners safe in an era where television images of injured children around the world are disturbingly common.



Peter Mason has travelled to most of the 152 countries in which UNICEF works and spends much of his time working in the field in conflict zones.



We work very, very hard to get access,” Mason explains, speaking slowly and deliberately. “It sounds trite, but everybody loves their children, and an organisation that says simply, ‘We are just here to help your kids’ tends to get co-operation. We jealously guard our ability to work on both sides of the line and we have a long history of that.”

How hard is it to keep staff safe?

“That is a serious and troubling problem. Once upon a time, the UN mantle protected us, but that really isn’t the case any more. We devote a lot of resources to training and protecting staff,” Mason says.

“When we can’t send our people in, we do what we call ‘remote programming’. We find partners on the ground and make sure they have the things they need to do the things we would do if we were there. This in itself helps people get confidence in our commitment.”

Of course, UNICEF is welcome in countless countries. “My most recent mission to Yemen was very rewarding,” Mason says,

offering one of many examples. “We are working with the government of Yemen and a group called The Global Partnership for Education to make significant improvements to education, especially the infrastructure of schools and training of teachers. Another trip that was incredibly rewarding was to Nepal. I worked with UNICEF leaders from across South Asia on a range of matters, and I visited, as I often do, a centre that we fund. It was a centre for children who aren’t at school and are on the street. Many of them work in construction, including girls, carrying bricks. For a few hours a day at the centre, they get to be children and learn life lessons to protect themselves on the street.”

One boy Mason met at the centre in Nepal deeply moved him.

“He was 13,” Mason recalls. “He worked when he could and lived on the streets. He had a dream of becoming a metal worker but told me, sadly, that no one would teach him. These are the kind of kids we try to help.

“I love what we do. It’s a very inspiring thing to be part of.”

The most striking feature of my conversation with Mason is his unwavering passion and enthusiasm for the work of UNICEF. Yet when he joined UNICEF 15 years ago, it was a marked change of direction in his life as a lawyer.

After growing up on Sydney’s north shore, Mason graduated from the University of Sydney with an honours degree in economics and a law degree. He served as associate to Justice Trevor Morling in the Australian Federal Court directly after law school. Mason clearly has great respect for Morling, saying, “Trevor Morling has always been a role model for me, and I’m really grateful for all he taught me”. He then spent a couple of years at Allen Allen and Hemsley (now Allens Linklaters) before travelling to New York.

“I was a lawyer on Wall Street for quite a few years. I tried cases and appeared in court,” Mason says, “initially at the firm Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton and Garrison and later at Winthrop, Stimson, Putnam and Roberts.”

Why the change from corporate litigation to UNICEF?

“I have always thought I’d spend some part of my career in public service. Not just because it’s always seemed so rewarding, but I have always had this nagging sense I needed to give something back,” he says.

“Coming to New York really reinforced that, because there is a long tradition of public service by the New York legal community, and of lawyers spending time in government service. I originally planned to come to UNICEF for two years and then go back to private practice, but I guess things didn’t quite work out that way.”

When I ask Mason how he manages the stress, responsibility and pressure of his job – and the large amount of travel – he seems genuinely nonplussed by the question.

“It sounds odd, but I can’t think of a time during my 15 years at UNICEF when I haven’t really loved it,” he answers after a long pause. “The mandate of the organisation, the variety of the work, the incredibly high quality of the

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people I work with, and the dimensions of the work that are legal and policy as well – it all just makes my job incredibly interesting. I guess I realised a very long time ago that it would be self-indulgent to get too het up about any stresses and challenges of my job, because they’re so insignificant compared to the things faced by the people UNICEF helps. I just let go when anything comes towards me.”

How does he “let go”?

“I put it in perspective,” he answers. “I think to myself, ‘If that boy in Nepal who can’t find anyone to teach him to be a metalworker can handle what he faces, who am I to complain?’ Maybe it’s willpower, or maybe it’s focusing on the positives. I move onto the next thing. You have to be an eternal optimist in this job or you wouldn’t get out of bed in the morning.”

Mason’s enjoyment of New York is another supportive factor, as is his partner: musician and composer Chris Thompson, who also travels a great deal.

“Chris trained at the Juilliard School in New York and he writes and performs New Music. He and his group tour extensively in America, the UK, Europe and Asia. In fact, last year he travelled more than I did,” he says. “He even performed at the Sydney Festival 2014 as part of the group HIVE with Tyondai Braxton.”

They live in a Brooklyn neighborhood called DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass). “It has old cobble-stone streets, warehouses that have been converted into offices and lofts, and a very vibrant community of artists and musicians.”

Mason loves too many things about New York to list, but he especially loves the subway.

“I love the fact that in any single subway car there will be people from 45 or 50 countries and they are all being perfectly civil to each other and getting on. I think that’s an amazing thing,” he says with feeling.

Compared with so many countries Mason visits, this civility is miraculous. The subway car is a genuine “united nations”. **LSJ**