

The changing role of the DHL – bridging the information gap between developing and developed countries

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In the next five minutes, I have a huge task to accomplish- as huge as participating in putting forth a plan for pushing a gigantic mountain and dropping it in a deep chasm separating two worlds, one developed and the other- to use a decent expression- less developed.

I would like first to thank those who have called for commemorating the 40th anniversary of the establishment of this great Library, which bears the name of Dag Hammarskjold.

I would also like to stress that my presence among you inspires me with a warm feeling, assuring me that we are living in "one world" even if that one world is full of chasms, which need to be eradicated.

The chasms are many, and they are not restricted to the information field. It suffices to know that, according to the World Bank latest report, 7% of the world population possess 43% of production. This terrible deficiency parallels the domination of developed countries over information technology. Computer hardware worldwide is either IBM or Apple compatible, both of which are not products of developed countries but of one single country- the United States. Moreover, the world software market is dominated by a very few corporations. How is the case then with third world countries? They will be seen to suffer not only from a gap but from a serious disadvantage, since they do not possess the keys of progress.

Those who possess the keys, and also the gates of progress, misuse them so as to dominate the third world. I wish to say that the weapons of the West/ North to dominate the East/ South are no longer the gun or the machine gun, not even atomic weapons, but rather the information weapons, the production of its tools and programs and the control of its content- which is information.

The gaps are not restricted to that. They also have to do with the flow of information. Information is seen to pour in one direction: from the West/ North to the East/ South, whereas the North knows almost nothing about the South.

This does not mean that such a gap separates developed countries from less developed ones, or the classes in one society, it also puts dividing lines between (different generations). For examples, before coming here I faced a query from my daughter Yasmina about whether I had been born and lived in the "old world". Have any of you faced that kind of question before?

Throughout its march, humanity has spent millions of years before managing to move into civilization (the age of agriculture), and likewise needed thousands of years to get into the industrial age. But before only less than three centuries, some societies succeeded in plunging into the information age.

Apart from the fact that several human societies have come to represent pockets captivated in the past, what I wish to stress here is that moving away from one age to the next has always been accompanied with a period of turbulence as a result of the change overcoming (value systems), which gives expression to the (spirit of the age). I venture to say that we are now experiencing this turbulence in a more acute manner as a natural result of the shrinking of the time span during which such changes take place. This consequently leads to creating feelings of (alienation) in everyone.

From the book to the internet, taking into account all the other traditional means of conveying information, there is a deep chasm reflected in figures and numbers you are all familiar with, separating developed from less developed nations. The sum of trillion dollars invested in the field of software programs, of which one single country owns 70%, perhaps summaries this gap or gives expression to it.

No-one has sympathy for figures and numbers. But figures and numbers here speak for people who expect us to sympathize with.

Despair prevails in this area. The few optimists who write the world bank report on development in the world, whose report for 1998-99 was entitled (knowledge is the route for development) maintains that: "regardless of the efforts exerted in this respect", there will always be problems pertaining to knowledge, since we cannot get rid of the information gap and information shortage.

The principal problem is thus not in the existence of the information gap, but in the fact that such a gap is continually getting larger and deeper. Perhaps we ought to- before trying to get rid of it - stop such continuous bleeding.

Politicians in developing countries exclaim that their countries have mostly fulfilled their obligations in the Uruguay Assembly by opening their markets and restructuring their economy, whereas developed countries have not fulfilled their obligations towards developing countries. They also protest that decisions concerning the decreasing of poorer third world countries' debts have largely not been carried out. Politicians in developed countries answer in a sagaciously quiet tone: Nothing on the face of the earth is given freely except for parents' love.

It will not be fair to ask those who are advanced to halt their progress so that they could be reached. At the same time it would be insane to ask them to extend help with money or expertise in the form of "cooperation" that would lead to the welfare of all, or even to establish competition on "fair" bases, allowing developing countries to overcome the barriers of poverty and backwardness.

Naturally, developing countries have to follow policies that enable them to narrow down the information gap which separates them from rich countries. Yet, how could they reach such an end in the absence of a fair basis for international competition. For instance, placing computer programs under "literary works" rather than "patents on an invention" in the agreement concerning intellectual property has aimed primarily at enabling developed countries to longer benefit from legal protection (fifty instead of twenty years). This will lead developing countries to spend huge amounts of money on importing such advanced technology in order that they could follow scientific progress, and will also lead to the widening of the gap between the two sides.

In the information age, the new system of values depends on relativity which equalises all things, even contraries, and which is at the same time capable of justifying everything. We should also mark that the information age is likewise the "postmodern" age. It is natural that the term "postmodernism" is also known as "antifoundationalism". Postmodernism describes a world with no foundations, no center... a liquid world with no substance, which has led to the strange coexistence of irrationalism, science and technology.

What is needed is a separation between modernity and concepts of material progress and relating it to the two concepts of human nature and common humanity so that we could name a target for modernity other than production and consumption. This will lead to a modernity that enhances our material existence without denying the spiritual dimensions of that existence, a modernity that lives the present without denying the past.

As a result, we repeat our call upon leading industrial countries to shoulder their responsibilities towards taking a positive role in making available the gains of modern information and technological revolution, and of eradicating the barriers standing against the flow of information technology and changing the strategies of

its relation to the third world, to make it based on the true exchange of information, hence on real knowledge and mutual respect and interests.

Third world leaders have also first to change the strategies of their relations to their peoples, in order to build them on true democracy, not on a façade, and on the freedom of expression and human rights. These bases alone are what will make their countries producers of information, not heresy.

We will keep repeating such demands even if our role in the less developed countries shrinks and becomes so marginalized that all we can do is applaud.