

Improving People's Lives: The New Organizing Principle

"The World Social Situation is, in our view, the most serious problem that must be tackled today, since it poses a major threat to international stability." With these words addressed to the General Assembly in 1990, the then recently elected President of Chile, Mr. Patricio Aylwin set in motion the process that led the 1991 ECOSOC session to initiate consultations, and the 1992 General Assembly to convene The World Summit for Social Development.

The World Summit for Social Development is, above all, a political need. Social tensions, which underlie more visible political and economic problems, are becoming a major and increasing source of international tensions. They are a worldwide structural phenomena affecting human beings in all societies, although in different and more intense ways in the developing world. Even developed societies are living through some of the uncertainties that have traditionally been associated with life in the developing countries.

Suffice it to recall that 1.2 billion people live in poverty in our planet, that 40,000 children die a day from easily controllable diseases and, in the OECD countries alone, 35 million people are unemployed.

A linear projection of the present growth in human dissatisfaction, sense of exclusion and discrimination can only lead to increasing national and international insecurity. Can the United Nations do anything about it? I believe we can and I believe we must.

Inaction is the most costly course of action. We need to act preventively in order to respond in time to the tide of growing social conflicts.

Preventive international cooperation in the economic and social field is the equivalent of preventive diplomacy in state to state conflicts. In its deepest sense, successful international cooperation can limit, restrain and, ultimately eliminate tensions that left unchecked inevitably become inter-state conflicts. Migration and protectionism are two clear cases in point.

As a point of departure we should acknowledge collectively that reducing social tensions must become a major political priority of the international

community. Or said in the words of the Social Summit, that reducing poverty, increasing employment and promoting social integration—the three core issues of the Summit—is a major contribution to peace and security. The role of the Economic and Social Council is to address in a timely and effective manner these and other issues before they reach a critical crisis level in which open conflicts replace the possibility of peaceful cooperation.

It is evident that none of these are easy subjects. They are linked to major political considerations at the national level and question the extent to which present functioning of the international system hinders or facilitates the search for solutions in which all interests are adequately considered. However difficult our task, we have the obligation to "bite the bullet" and address in a reasoned and dispassionate manner the complex question of "what can we do about it?"

This is the essence of the Social Summit. We need to agree on concrete policy measures with respect to the three core issues. What actions are urgent, what agreements are possible, what cooperation is necessary to attain the objectives of the Social Summit so clearly summarized by resolution 47/92 which commits us all to "put the needs of people at the center of development and international cooperation as a major priority of contemporary international relations."

In this respect, I would like to share with you some perceptions that have emerged in the process of consultations and negotiations leading up to the convening of the Social Summit, as well as in my functions as Chairperson of the Preparatory Committee.

First, old security concepts are totally inadequate to deal effectively with the problems of the world after the end of the cold war because they cannot address the major question of human security.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the object of a security policy is to reduce insecurity in a given society, region or the world as a whole. The principal sources of insecurity as perceived by people in their day to day life are the result of poverty, unemployment, different forms of violence, exclusion and discrimination, political instability and the resulting weakening of social integration. Security as experienced by people has to do primarily with better conditions of life.

Security of people has regularly emerged in my consultations as a backdrop to the Social Summit, pointing to the need to make the promotion of human security a major economic and social policy objective, in the absence of which social tensions described above would expand with all the concomitant political implications.

Second, it is necessary to forge a basic understanding with respect to the role of social policies in the development of all societies.

In the political field, respect for human rights, promotion of open political systems and, ultimately, the installment of democracy have, no doubt, been driving forces. Major changes have taken place in Latin America, eastern and central Europe, together with some countries in Africa and Asia. In the economic field, open markets and economies, respect for macro-economic balances, care for low inflation and a major reliance on private investment, among others, are increasingly seen as effective points of departure for economic efficiency.

In the social field, the situation is different. A generally acceptable notion of social efficiency to balance the very precise notion of economic efficiency is lacking. Although positive advances have taken place, for example, within the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, we are yet far from an integrated concept of development that gives macro-social balances and macro-economic balances equal weight.

Social development continues to be seen by many mainly as a "soft" issue, as compared to finance, trade, defense or even foreign policy. Basically, it is seen as a more or less automatic product of sound economic growth (a derivative ex-post result) or as a "cost" of structural adjustment that needs to be taken care of through different safety nets to save the more marginalized and disadvantaged groups.

We are yet far from a clear recognition that social development is an initial component, a basic condition, indeed, a prerequisite for political stability and sustainable growth. It is not only an ex-post result of appropriate policies but an ex-ante condition for successful economic development and political stability. Politics, economics and social policies need to be an integrated whole with the same status in both national and international decision-making.

Third, the end of the ideological confrontation of the cold war is a unique intellectual and political opportunity to deal creatively with social problems. This is an extraordinary chance to find solutions without pre-conceived notions based on ideological prescriptions. We have the opportunity to liberate the imagination and to put at the service of the Social Summit the best minds and experience available.

For example, it is now easier to address the role of the market in a pragmatic and transparent way. Together with acknowledging its crucial role as a mechanism for the efficient allocation of resources, it is also analytically possible to address its limitations without endless ideological discussions. We know that the market has natural restraints in the struggle against poverty, in the need to protect the environment or with respect to the spatial allocation of production. In the same vein, we also know that traditional welfare policies were conceived for much lower levels of unemployment than presently exist, that systematic recourse to welfare benefits generates

dependency habits, limits personal initiative and permits abuses by recipients, and that much better targeted mechanisms are necessary.

This new reality is fully taken into account by resolution 47/92 when it affirms that one of the objectives of the Social Summit is to creatively "address the interaction between the social function of the state, market responses to social demands and the imperatives of sustainable development." It is a call to our creativity and imagination.

Fourth, in confronting the problems of poverty, unemployment and social integration we are not starting from scratch.

Very serious and successful efforts have been undertaken by many countries to resolve these problems. There is a wide array of available experience. We can assess the policies that have worked and those that have not. In this respect, the different ministries dealing with social issues in our countries and the experts in this field have a major role to play. The Social Summit is a political need, but its conclusions have to be based on the sound analysis of those knowledgeable in the formulation and implementation of social policies. This includes in a significant manner, the actors of civil society, among them trade unions, business people, social activists, researchers, religious denominations, voluntary agencies and initiatives, and the full spectrum of non-governmental experience.

At the level of the international community we are not starting from scratch either. We already have, within the United Nations family, an extraordinary volume of commitments, declarations, goals, objectives and targets in the social field. Our next effort has to be the identification of their practical implementation. Taken together, they constitute an extremely valuable set of guiding concepts that can serve as a commonly agreed basis of action which can be perfected, enriched and complemented by the Summit itself.

Fifth, the major strength of the Social Summit lies in the fact that it has been convened to deal with problems affecting all societies. This approach made it possible to muster a strong consensus behind the idea.

In that context, we need to look at the specific problems of developing societies and transition countries. In particular, I am certain that we shall all agree, that the least developed countries and especially Africa as a region, demand our particular concern. If any issue merits our individual attention it is precisely those countries acutely suffering the difficulties of trying to make development work in the most adverse circumstances.

Somalia is a good example of what happens when preventive international cooperation is absent. Because action was not taken in time, we have today the absurd situation that the cost of humanitarian assistance to Somalia per year is 166 million dollars while the cost of the peacekeeping operation to ensure its safe delivery is 1.5 billion dollars. This last figure is the equivalent of the yearly expenditures of the whole World Food Programme.

At the same time, we must welcome the opportunity of exchanging views on the social problems that developed countries are enduring and the type of hard choices they are facing. We may be approaching the moment in which structural adjustments in the North — hopefully with a human face — will be necessary to put its own house in order. This will contribute to improving growth worldwide and greater political stability of the international system. We all know that budget deficits in developed countries need to come under control soon.

Sixth, the World Summit for Social Development must be seen as a point of departure for launching a major international effort to address the most critical and urgent human needs in all societies on a sustainable basis.

In that sense it is a natural continuation of the Children's Summit and the Environment and Development Summit. It builds on what has already been achieved there and carries the momentum forward. Yet, there is a major difference we have to be aware of from the outset. The aforementioned Summits were culminations of lengthy processes of consciousness-raising on the need to discuss and address those issues at the international level and to receive clear political orientations from heads of state and governments themselves. In the case of UNICEF more than 40 years of successful activities and in the case of the environment, 20 years from the 1972 Stockholm Summit to the Rio Summit in 1992.

The Social Summit stems from a different background. These matters have been dealt with mainly at the national level, because they are primarily a national responsibility. The international discussion within the United Nations system has been fragmented and scattered, taking place in a parallel manner in different specialized agencies, programmes and UN bodies. Only in Europe has the idea of a "social Europe" taken hold.

This will be the first time in the history of the United Nations or the League of Nations in which heads of state and government will meet in order to deal with social development as a priority issue of the international agenda. In doing so we must be aware from the beginning of a major danger we will have to deal with intelligently. The danger of high expectations. We should not face the Social Summit with all the pent-up frustrations of what has not been achieved in other instances and, by so doing, place so many demands on its results that we inevitably determine its ultimate failure.

I believe that we can avoid this trap by understanding that we will set a new and engaging process in motion. We have to agree on what is doable and realistic in the short run, together with setting a framework for further goals and objectives, whose implementation will unfold in the medium and long term. Symbolic of this approach would be to launch in Copenhagen the United Nations commitment for social development integrating in a single vision short, medium and long term objectives to be achieved in a

given time frame. It should include clear and comprehensive directives to the United Nations system as a whole.

Seventh, the World Summit for Social Development is an opportunity to demonstrate that the United Nations can exercise leadership on issues that are perceived by people as crucial for their conditions of life.

The public perception of the United Nations today is that it is concentrated, with more or less success, on the activities of the Security Council where it is dealing with crisis situations that the media bring to our attention everyday. Yet we know that the social crisis that made this Summit necessary is more structural, pervasive, and ultimately more dangerous for world stability than the localized conflicts that are so much more visible but are felt by the great majority of people living outside of the crisis areas as distant and remote.

As an institution, the United Nations requires for its subsistence to balance its political attention to traditional peace and security matters with a similar dedication to economic and social needs. This requires leadership. It is in the interest of all countries to bring the United Nations closer to people.

To do so, we have no alternative to the United Nations. Despite all its limitations, that those of us who are part of it are the first to acknowledge, the United Nations is the only possible source of an equitable world order today. It is the only source of a shared system of values as embodied in the Charter. It is the only essentially democratic international, decision-making body. It is the principal source of intercultural respect and multicultural understanding.

For example, it is evident that with the end of the cold war a new organizing concept is needed to replace the old order of the struggle against communism on one side and imperialism on the other.

Shouldn't the improvement of people's living conditions and the planet become the new organizing factor of international life? Couldn't we use it as a yardstick to judge whether life on earth is getting better or worse? Couldn't this be the new cause of the international community based on the Charter of the United Nations? Isn't it possible to declare the commitment and the decision to significantly reduce poverty, increase employment, promote social integration and make sustainable development a reality, as the guiding value of international cooperation?

I believe that the current and future credibility of the United Nations system will depend on its capacity to respond positively to these questions. If the United Nations cannot exercise leadership to address the needs of people, it will succumb to a moral and political crisis that no amount of activity in traditional peace and security matters will be able to mask or replace.

Eighth, the Social Summit must have concrete results in terms of a political statement defining the nature and extent of the problem, a shared frame-

work of values to address social issues and a set of policy measures to attain the objectives of the Summit in the 3 core issues.

What can we expect as an outcome of the Social Summit? To begin with, it has a major symbolic value. It will launch the 50th Anniversary of the United Nations which has chosen as a motto for its celebration the phrase, "We the peoples of the United Nations... united for a better world." Nothing could be closer to actually generating the hope of a better world for all, than to creatively address the core-issues of the Social Summit.

Three areas of results appear necessary at this stage.

A political statement that acknowledges the seriousness of the world social situation, makes the necessary linkages with international stability and commits all societies to concrete action in this field.

A vision, a conceptual framework, a set of shared values or a philosophical unifying concept, however we wish to describe it, that serves as a common basis of inspiration to place social development and the needs of people at the center of development and international cooperation.

A set of integrated and comprehensive policy measures setting out what can actually be done in practical terms to reduce poverty, increase employment and promote social integration in a short, medium and long term perspective.

We also have to understand that a principal "result" of the Summit is to set in motion a process that can actually make a difference. This implies that the follow-up and implementation activities of what is agreed upon needs to be planned as of now, with the same care and dedication as is given to the preparatory process.