

**Statement by H.E. Mr. Johan Verbeke
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**Launching of the International Human Solidarity Day
10 November 2006**

On this day that we launch the International Human Solidarity Day I thought it might be worth sharing with you and all our friends here some thoughts on the very concept, on the very meaning of solidarity in a globalized world itself. We have been speaking a lot this morning about solidarity but it may be worth going somewhat into depth to see exactly what we mean by that concept. From time to time we have to do that kind of self-reflection.

I would like to develop two strands of ideas. The first one is that there are two different concepts of solidarity, the narrow one and the broader one. The narrow one is well known by many of us, very often referred to as a principle of enlightened self-interest. Basically, it comes down to the principle that even if there were no altruistic concerns among the rich nations to help the world's poor that own self-interest should lead them to do so.

As a matter of fact that utilitarian concept of solidarity is being reflected in UN documents from time to time. I am just referring to one of them, the report of the High-level Panel on Financing for Development of June 2001 and I quote "In the global village, someone else's poverty very soon becomes one's own problem: of lack of markets for one's products, illegal immigration, pollution, contagious disease, insecurity, fanaticism, terrorism." This is a concept of enlightened self-interest.

I personally, however, would prefer a more broad concept of solidarity, a more broad concept of justice. And I am thinking now of a concept defended by John Rawls in his "Theory of Justice" which is very intricate but original position known as the 'veil of ignorance'. Just for the record, the basic question all of us rich and poor, North and South should ask ourselves the following: what principles of law, of governance, of distribution of wealth would people choose in conditions that prevented them from knowing beforehand what positions they themselves would occupy in society. That is the famous 'veil of ignorance' and I recall it because it is a central idea that reflects a very deep idea of solidarity and justice.

What principles would each of us in this room, you and me, choose, what principles of governance, of law would we choose in conditions that would prevent me and you and each of us to know beforehand what positions we ourselves would take up in society? I think this concept needs further reflection since it is a deep one as regards solidarity generally and solidarity between the North and South specifically.

However, there has always been and this is the second strand of thought I briefly share with you, a limit to that kind of concept of solidarity. The limit is two-fold, it is a limit in space and a limit in time. The limit in space is that very often solidarity ends where a nation state ends. Of course we know the basic, fundamental, intrinsic solidarities which we have with our children and family members with a bond of love, friends with friendship, neighbours with neighborliness, and compatriots with the nation state. But very often that is where solidarity ends and the critical circle of concern is the nation state.

The concept of development as we refer to as globalization should lead us to reconsider the moral significance we currently place on national boundaries. Should we continue to consider the nation state as a frame of reference or should we break it up towards the world community? Our problems now are too intertwined to be well resolved by a system consisting of nation states only in which citizens give their primary and exclusive loyalty to their own nation state rather than to the larger global community and such a system has not led to great enough will to meet the pressing needs of those living in extreme poverty. Imagining ourselves to be part of a national community seems fine when we think of it as broadening our concerns beyond more limited tribal loyalties. It is less appealing when we think of it as erecting fences against the rest of the world. That is the dimension of space. There is also the dimensions of time and with that I close Madame Chairperson.

We should enlarge our circle of solidarity, enlarge our circle of concern to go beyond our current generation and to reach out to future generations and perhaps to the past generations through what we call the duty of remembering, the duty of memory as we know about genocide and holocaust and other. But I speak here to future generations and there I can be very brief because we have been working on that in the United Nations as well.

The core concept of course to be recalled is a concept of sustainable development which at its very core indeed asks us look beyond the current generations. There is also the principle of precaution. The precautionary principle basically tells us that to act today to avoid the risk of future serious and irreversible damage, even in the absence of full scientific certainty. The third principle, in this connection I would briefly like to recall is the principle of discounting the future costs basically retelling that we have to invest today to secure the future of tomorrow and in that connection we have recently seen the Stern Report on Climate Change which basically made convincing demonstration that we have to take the future and the future generations more seriously.

Thank you, Madam Chairperson.