Remarks to the World Press Freedom Committee

by
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Washington, DC, November 9, 1999

Well, thank you very much, Jim Ottaway and Mr. Andersen, Mrs. Andersen, distinguished guests.

Let me say I feel very privileged to have been asked to speak at this group, particularly in the year after Kofi Annan addressed you. I think you will find some resonance in what I am saying with what Kofi said to you last year. And I hope I can give a slightly different twist to the thoughts he expressed to you at that time.

I should tell you, first, that the particular interest and involvement of The World Bank is in that part of the world that is in development and transition. Just to set the framework, this is the part of our world of 6 billion people which comprises 4.8 billion people, and as the Chairman said a little earlier, interestingly enough, the statistics on free press, although not identical, are roughly the same. You have 1.2 billion people in the OECD countries and you have 1.2 billion people who live with a free press. Freedom House came out with statistics which said that 2.4 billion people live without a free press and 2.4 billion people live with a partly free press, whatever that is.

What I am concerned about, and what we are concerned about at our institution, can be framed quite starkly by a number of elements. The first is that the 6 billion people that we have on the planet at the moment, will, in the next 25 years, grow to some 8 billion people, and virtually all of that growth, 97 percent of it, will be in the developing world. So the world we live in is surely changing.

And the second thing you should know is that within the framework of that developing world, we will also have a demographic change as the urban population grows by some 2 billion over the next 25 years. So we will have not only an increase in size, and in weighting in the developing countries, we will also have concentrations of people, much more significantly, in cities and towns.

The third development of course is the recognition of the fact that whereas once we talked about this developing and transitional world with a sort of distance it was something for official development assistance, it was something akin to a sort of charitable donation, except within the context of the Cold War, where the developing world was clearly some place that had to be saved from the Communists which allowed politicians and donors of funds to justify their support on the basis of political lines it is in fact much closer.
With the end of the Cold War and a move more to a market system, generally, the first reaction was to think of the developing and transitional world as something clearly outside wealthy OECD countries. But it soon started to become apparent, as it has today, that the issues of this 4.8 billion people, soon to be 6.8 billion people, are really the issues that we face in the OECD countries. We are linked, clearly, by financial systems, as was made apparent by the problems in Thailand, Korea, Indonesia, Brazil, Russia and, previously, in Mexico. A number of financial crises which bring home to us that instability in one part of the world is our instability as well.

And we have, with great clarity now, an understanding that those parts of the world, which now account for about 20 percent of the world's GDP, will, in another 25 years, become close to 30 percent of the world's GDP. So in terms of trade, and in terms of economics, and in terms of growth, it will be found in those countries, and that has a direct impact on us.

The third thing that is clear is that the air that those 4.8 billion people breathe, the environment they live in, the emissions that they make, or we make, all are part of our same planetary body. We are linked by health. We are linked by crime. We are linked by drugs. We are linked by immigration. We are linked by peace. We are linked by uncertainty and by war.

So the issues of this world are not just issues for The World Bank as a multilateral agency to think about. These issues cannot be considered apart from our own thinking in the OECD world. They are integral. Integral today, but, in 25 years, you have to say they will be even more integral, both in terms of size, importance, weight, and, finally, in terms of communications.

The drama of the way in which our planet is linked in terms of communications is really something that we witness every day, and which is the largest single instrument to unify our world, in terms of knowledge of what's going on, in terms of the creation of expectations, in terms of enfranchisement of the people who live in developing countries. It is very difficult, today, not to know what is going on, even in those countries, and so the shape of the world has changed, and the responsibility for newspapers and communicators of information has changed, dramatically.

I just want to touch on one point in relation to the developed world, and that is the crucial importance of groups like this, in helping to bring about an understanding that the agenda of development, while emerging on a long-term basis, and not easily seen compared with immediate domestic political issues, is an issue of the moment. It is our issue, and leadership needs to come from the press and from communicators today, lest our children, in 25 years, be left with lack of knowledge of that world, and with, unfortunately, not having done enough to ensure peace and stability in that world.

This issue of press freedom and leadership in our world is a crucial one for our times in terms of freedom and democracy around the world. Sadly,
it gets too little attention either in the press or on Capitol Hill, and this is not said as someone who happens to be working for such an institution and who, at this moment, needs a job. It is said because this is clearly and irrefutably an issue that requires greater exposure and greater understanding.

But let me move to the developing world, and there, let me talk about the role of the Bank, and the take that we have on the issues for that 4.8 billion people, soon to be 6.8 billion people. When I first came to the Bank, I was told you cannot talk about corruption. Corruption is the "C" word, I was told. You do not talk about the C word because the institutions charter states you should not get involved in politics.

You surely did not talk about press freedom, because press freedom was very close to politics. What could be more intrusive on politicians than a free press? What is it that could enfranchise people more than a free press? So our relations with the press, at the Bank, were characterized simply by press releases, and, I think, a measure of transparency in relation to your questions. What became very clear to me, after a year or two under this regime, was that the issue of corruption and the issue of press freedom, while they may have political impact, are in fact essential issues in terms of economic development.

Corruption is the largest single inhibitor of equitable economic development and so, three years ago, I simply said that I am redefining corruption, not as a political issue, but as an economic and social issue, and with that redefinition the walls did not fall down, the roof did not fall in. In fact, six months later, we had a meeting of the Development Committee, and every minister made a speech about corruption, even ministers from some countries that you might call corrupt, because they all wanted to espouse the belief, and their assertion, that corruption was in fact at the core of development. And of course they knew this because the strongest issue in political campaigns in the world of which I speak is in fact the issue of inequity. Poor people get very angry when someone else is rich at their expense, when inequity raises itself.

So we launched into the issue of corruption, but we soon discovered that to attack the issue of corruption, you could not do it from Washington, or London, or Paris, simply stating that corruption is something that must be overcome if you are to have effective development. No statement by the President of The World Bank or G7 leader was adequate because the response came back was: "But you have corruption in your countries." We discovered, of course, that in quite a number of countries payments for bribes were deductible for tax purposes, and given that that was true, and is still true today, though it is now in the process of being criminalized by recent OECD actions which are being imposed over three years, it was sort of hard to take a pompous and high-minded attitude when your companies were out there paying bribes and the government was paying half.

So let me not suggest that corruption is the unique characteristic of developing countries. It is, I regret to say, known elsewhere as well. But what we certainly knew was, as we unleashed this debate on
corruption, that the only way, really, to deal with it is from within a country. You cannot impose cultural or political change from without. First of all, it is resisted. What you can do is to create a climate in the country for a movement on both corruption and on economic issues, and that has to be done from within, and that is where freedom of the press becomes crucial. Because if you are to get ideas moving in a society, there is an absolute need to put the magnifying glass on activities within that society and set the framework in which the people have voice and can listen.

We have just done a study of 60,000 individual poor people in over 60 countries. In the last eight months, we have in fact interviewed 20,000 people in 23 countries and we have produced a publication that many of you may want to get, at some point called "Consultations With The Poor". What is fascinating about it is that poor people are so very clearly not objects of charity. And let me parenthetically tell you that we have 1.2 billion people of the 6 billion in the world who live under one dollar a day. We have 3 billion people who live under $2 a day. We have 1.3 billion people that have no access to clean water and 3 billion do not have access to sanitation, and 2 billion without access to power. This gives you an idea of this globe in which we operate. But the poor people, the 1.2 billion, said a number of interesting things about poverty. I have visited, now, in over a 100 countries, slums and villages, and have met with these poor people and far from being objects of charity, they are part of the solution. They are the best people you meet, by the way, on trips, because they have exactly the same motivations that everybody in this room has. They want peace. They want family. They want a future for their kids. They want opportunity, and they know how to do things, when they have any resources with which to achieve their objectives.

These poor people came out with some fascinating findings in the study, and the first one, which differentiates poor people from rich people, is lack of voice. The inability to be represented. The inability to convey to the people in authority what it is that they think. The inability to have a searchlight put on the conditions of inequity. These people we interviewed do not have PhDs but they have the knowledge of poverty, and the first thing they talked about is not money. It is lack of voice; it is lack of the ability to express themselves.

The second thing is they do not trust governments. They do not even trust all NGOs. They want to express themselves and be able to express themselves. They want to be able to elect their own local people and gain access and representation. A free press is absolutely vital to that objective. If you remove the right to voice, and to exposure of issues, you remove the right for equitable development. It is just that simple.

Of course it is for that reason that governments who are oppressive in their regime, and who want to retain the status quo, try and remove the right to freedom of the press. That is really the other side of the argument about development. Freedom of the press is not a luxury. It is not an extra. It is absolutely at the core of equitable development, because if you cannot enfranchise poor people, if they do not have the right to expression, if there is no searchlight on corruption and
inequitable practices, you cannot build the public consensus to bring about change.

It is for that reason I have come to believe that this issue, which is before this club, and has been before you for years, is at the very center of my job. Because without the searchlight of transparency, any speeches and statements by international leaders, or by the Bank, are simply not effective. You have to create the environment inside a country for voice.

We have a lot of very interesting examples. In Buenos Aires they were giving lunches to kids at school. In the city itself it was costing $5 per kid; in the outlying areas it was $1.80. We put it in the newspapers and within two weeks, the city lunch price had dropped.

In Uganda and I see the Ambassador here, so she knows there was the issue of payments to teachers who were not turning up. We took the opportunity of publishing in the newspapers the money that was going to different districts for education, and when it was determined by the people that the teachers were not turning up, pretty soon they started to turn up, and you had efficient use of resources. I can give you literally hundreds of examples of the use of the press.

Over the last five years, we, at the Bank, have started to run seminars, globally, for people in the press. I saw in my notes that we had reached 3,000 journalists in over 50 countries. Through the World Bank Institute we are running courses on investigative journalism, which we are doing around the world. We are running courses on economic journalism, which we are doing around the world in a variety of languages, and we are running now courses on fighting corruption. We have just done a seven-country series in Africa, which we have run by video conference. We have satellite connections with our offices in the field. Initially seven teams of people came to us in Washington, and then for ten successive Thursday mornings, we ran seminars for these people by video conference, so that they could meet with each other and talk to each other, visually, and so that we could be at the center of that debate.

Most recently, I was in Durban, where we came together again in a conference on corruption. We had a mix of government officials, people from the press, civil society, all coming together because the movement needs to be expanded. So we are "walking the talk". We are part of this movement to recognize that free press is at the very center of effective development.

The poor people that I spoke of in this 60,000-person study are not objects of charity, but they do want to bring out their needs. They want to raise the issue of the increasing violence against women. They want to raise the issue of access to micro finance and other resources. They want to raise the issue of equity of education. They want to raise the issue, interestingly, that for them, the single biggest issue beyond voice is corruption. Corruption in their daily lives, not in tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars. But in their ability to get access to services, or to get their kids to school, or to get a pass to
work. Corruption hits poor people harder than it hits people in the middle class, or in the powerful class.

So any movement for equity, social justice and corruption needs a free press for it to work. It is for that reason that I am very happy to have been invited to speak to you, and it is for that reason that I look forward to working with many of you in this global fight in the years ahead.

Thank you very much.