Remarks at The Street Children Initiative International Conference

by
James D. Wolfensohn
President
The World Bank Group

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May I start by welcoming you to this rather large room for a dispersed group, and I am sure during the course of the morning we will become more concentrated, and seats have been set aside for some people who I trust are not being held up by the police outside, and who will join us later. But let me nevertheless say to all of you how enormously grateful we are that you have come to this conference.

For us, this is a learning experience and also an indication that we feel that we can contribute to this subject, but that we can contribute better if we can learn from all of you. We have no desire to replace anybody, misplace anybody, or to meddle in areas that are well taken care of, but we think that we can probably help in what we believe to be a problem of growing proportions and one which is of particular interest to many of us inside the institution.

I first of all want to thank the King Baudouin Foundation and the Soros Foundation, who basically have taken us under their wing and helped us in our early steps in terms of gaining more focus on this subject, and I am extremely grateful to both organizations as I am to Swedish Swedish Agency for Development Cooperation (SIDA) for their support of us.

What I would like you to know is that this particular focus comes in a way that is rather different from the way things have happened in the Bank before. We have a program here which is called the Development Marketplace, and what it is is a vehicle of renewal giving the opportunity for members of the World Bank team to put forward their ideas for development issues, that they think the Bank may not have properly focused on or not caught up with.

And in that Development Marketplace we literally have hundreds of suggestions made by members of our staff, very often jointly with other organizations, where they recommend to us initiatives that we should take more seriously or broach in a more focused manner. And then, as a management team, we give what we call prizes to these people, amounting this last year to $5 million worth of prizes, which can then be used by the staff members to pursue their ideas.
This is an idea to break down what, I discovered when I came here, was a fair measure of bureaucracy in the organization, and to unleash what is really remarkable in our place, namely the quality and initiatives of the people that work here, a group of about 10,000 great people of great depth, representing 140 different nationalities.

And so for those of you that have had a look at this book "Who Cares?" you will see in the front that Kate Schecter conceived this idea and basically put it forward, I think with Tim Campbell, who came from our urban development division. The Bank had been on the periphery of this issue, and had had an occasional project here and an occasional project there, but had never really taken a focused look at what it is that we might do with the street children.

And it started really in the European and Central Asia area, consisting predominately of transition economies, where Kate went to a maternal-child health meeting thinking that it was going to consist of the straight-forward maternal-child health issue with which we are rather familiar. Rather, she found herself in the middle of a two-day discussion on the breakdown of the family and on one of the results, which was the development of the problem of street children in East and Central Europe. We had been familiar with it in other places. And as a result of this, she came back and said, "Listen, we have really got to get our act together, and we should do more and we should be more focused and we should be more helpful."

The sequence of events that ensued was that we basically looked at the issue throughout the globe. With our 100 offices around the world, we started to gather information. And it was then that we came to the King Baudouin Foundation and the Soros Foundation to look at the 10 countries that they are particularly involved with in that area, and so we gathered information from Latin America, from Asia, from Central Asia, and started to get the framework of our growing understanding together.

For us, there are some benefits that we can bring and there are clearly things that we cannot do. With regards to the things that we cannot do, let me start by saying how impressed we are with the work of both individuals and nongovernmental organizations in this field, who are central to the delivery mechanism of services to street children.

All of us here understand the importance of love and the importance of human contact but, much to our regret, we too rarely get the opportunity at the Bank to get involved on the front line. And the achievements in this area are made at the front line, on a person-to-person basis, and on a human basis to try and train, to reintegrate, to show love and to show caring for this group of children.

And so we are just both enormously impressed and very supportive of that effort, and one of the things that we can do, I think, is to both support policy and help to redirect funds to those institutions that are on the front line.

The second thing we can do is, perhaps a little more easily, to bring focus to the issue and work at the level of policy with governments to
affect programs, in terms of recognition of the issue, in terms of the positioning of the issue, in terms of attitudes to the issue, and in terms of focus on the issue. It is in these areas that we hope to be able to do something.

And the third thing that we think that we can do is to be active in the surrounding framework the issues that relate to what causes the phenomenon of street children. We can work on and in social programs that may obviate or diminish the problem. And then what is it that one could do, having recognized the problem, to try and deal with the problem in a sensitive and appropriate way? There, too, we can have some influence at the governmental level and at the public debate level on this subject.

So we come to this meeting very much as people who are learners in the subject, but where we have, I think, real depth in some areas. Clearly, when we are putting more than $2 billion a year (1999) into social services and protection as lending for human development, there are elements that could be directed to street children.

We have over $1 billion a year going into education. There are aspects of education programs that could focus on this issue. With over $1 billion a year on health, again, this issue can be addressed, if we try and pull it together. And every dollar we put in, of course, is leveraged in the countries themselves, so that you start to talk of very substantial sums.

I think of the focus that we have brought in recent years to AIDS, as a singular example. We did not invent the AIDS issue. We are probably not in the lead on AIDS: It is WHO; it is UNAIDS. But I must say that in terms of focus and in terms of trying to drive governments, working through finance ministries and heads of state which we do we have an opportunity to enhance the attention on the issue of AIDS, and clearly that is an issue in which the Bank is making an enormous contribution, not because one would naturally have thought of us as the major player on the AIDS issue, but because of the leverage and the focus that we can bring to the problem.

And we sort of feel that we might be able to do something in relation to street children in the same way, not to displace anybody the UNICEFs or the official organizations or the nongovernmental organizations but to be an adjunct, to be an ally, to be a support, and to bring the weight of the institution behind this issue.

Last night I read this, "Who Cares?" and it does bring tears to your eyes. But there is an incredible thing which comes from my own experience with street kids, where I have had my association with them principally in Latin America, where by extension I can read into this.

The remarkable thing about the street children that I have met is the strength that these kids have and the surviving quality which they have, and the desire not to be the rejects of society but, rather, to really bring the strength that they have to survival, to refocusing on the creation of a future. And whether it be in Central America or in Sao Paolo, where I have had my personal exposure to this issue, I have become very conscious that this is not about derelicts; this is about resources
upon which we need to build. These are kids that can be, with love, converted. They just need help. They need to feel wanted.

These are very primitive reactions of someone who is not very skilled in this field, but it is a sort of sense that I have and want to contribute to this issue to try and see how it is that we, as a large organization, can help all of you to deliver the love and the opportunity that these kids clearly need. And I think that we are ready to do that, we are eager to do it, and we are very eager to learn from you in this day or two of meetings, to try and see how we can work together.

So my colleagues are here to discuss this with you for the full period. I regret to tell you that my own problem is that I have demonstrators outside who are basically saying that the Bank has no heart, is not interested in any human issues, is an organization without feeling, and that we basically do not care. That simply, I am happy to tell you, is not true. But I do have to get out there and start telling these people that they do not know what they are talking about, and if you will forgive me, it diverts me from being part of this meeting which I would truly have loved to be at.

But let me simply conclude by welcoming you again by saying it is a real privilege to have many of you here with us. You are very welcome here. We look forward to a long association with you. We look forward to working with you, and we look forward to supporting you in any way that we can, and my colleagues are eager to do that, and I will now leave you with them.

And I think the next speaker, who probably has remarks very well prepared, which mine were not, is Johannes Linn, who in fact is the Vice President in charge of the Europe and Central Asia Region. And so I am going to listen a little bit, and at some point sneak out, but it will not be because of lack of interest. It is because I have to get back to other things. So thank you all very much for being with us, and let me pass you on to Johannes.