Human Rights and Development Toward Mutual Reinforcement


By James D. Wolfensohn
President
The World Bank Group
New York City, March 1, 2004

Thank you very much Mary, and thank you Phillip for being here, and thank all of you for attending this gathering. I'm very happy it is in the room of a very good friend of mine, Lester Pollack, whose name is on a plaque by the door and happy that we're here to inaugurate it. I also must acknowledge Mary's team and Phillip's team and my own team for the work that they've done in preparing for this meeting.

Let me start by saying that Alfredo Sfeir-Younis gave me three versions of a speech. It's very lengthy, very complicated, and frankly beyond me. He knows so much about this subject that I think he assumed that I would be able to enter immediately into a discussion at the highest possible level of human rights activists, relate it to the work of development activists, and emerge with some searing highlights that I could leave you that would set the tone for the entire day.

Sadly, I'm unable to do that because I'm really not there yet. And one of my hopes is that in the course of the day we may, with my colleagues, elucidate just what some of the issues are and what is the way forward in a debate that I've never fully understood.

Let me tell you that what I'd really like to do is just to give you my feelings about this issue of human rights and development, and some of the thoughts that go through my head as I think about the subject.

And, as I try to lead our institution in a way that will profit from the activities of human rights activists and, indeed, the approach I have discussed with Mary many times: the human rights based, or a rights based, approach to development, as compared to what it is that I imagine we're doing already. I've said to Mary a number of times that I think that there's a tremendous coalescence between what we do every day in our institution -- perhaps not speaking as much about rights as we should -- but where in fact we are giving effect to the agenda of the human rights community.
I did take the trouble last night to read each of the declarations and the covenants that have been agreed to by the UN. There's quite a volume of them, but I did decide that if I was going to come to this meeting it might be worthwhile to read. And, it was a profitable activity because I started circling with my pen first, the elements of the universal declaration. And then of the covenants which you are all, of course, very familiar with: Civil and Political Rights; Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the Right to Development; and then various other human rights instruments which have been added since.

And, when you go through it, when you start with the preamble to the Universal Declaration, and look at the various articles you, of course, start with the right to life, liberty, and security of every person. You move to issues of recognition of rights before the law what we would incorporate in our work in legal and social, and judicial reform and various aspects of what that law should be: the right to nationality.

And, when I read about that right I thought about what we did six months ago. We ran a conference in Europe which we stimulated with six central European governments on the Roma Peoples. We didn't call it a rights conference, but we did gather the representatives of 12 million people together who will join the common market and who suffer by not having passports in many cases. We just had what I thought was a fantastic conference, and I never mentioned the word human rights. But, it just jumped out at me as I thought of the many activities we do every day that seems to be in keeping with this.

I then looked at Article 17 on Property Rights. I looked at the Right of Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion. I thought of the activities of our own situation in seeking to reach out and to have a dialogue on faith and development. Over the last five years, we pulled together for three separate meetings faith leaders from around the world. We have engaged in this dialogue despite the fact that some have expressed the view that such a dialogue pollutes our institution, by having religion as an aspect of our activities.

It also goes on to talk about culture. I had the same experience on culture. We ran a conference in Florence on culture and development which we had 700 people. We expected a couple of hundred but 700 turned up for a four day conference. And, that, too, was resisted by many of our shareholders as being exotic, elitist and not the sort of thing that a development institution should do.

And, I remind you of that because we work for the same people that wrote this and their application of the principles to which they have so vigorously attested I might tell you, in actuality, sometimes varies with the notion that they had when they signed it. And, I raise that point, too, because we are not an institution just composed of my colleagues and myself able to do what we'd like to do. We're an institution which is owned by and, to an extent, dominated by the very same people who wrote the Declaration of Human Rights and the addenda thereto.

I've said to Mary many times: "You know, one of the things we have to do in our institution is to try and get things done but to some of our
shareholders the very mention of the word human rights is inflammatory language. And, it's getting into areas of politics, and it's getting into areas that they're very concerned about. We decide to just go around it and we talk the language of economics and social development."

And, then I continue to read the Universal declaration and it refers, as you know, to social security, equal employment, the right to adequate standards of living, motherhood, children, education, international order. All these are the things which, if you had asked me to indicate what is the agenda of our institution, I would have told you before re-reading this document was the charter of our institution. It's actually what we do every day. We come in and we, basically, have a motto just inside our door which says that we should fight poverty with passion and that we should do it every day.

And, I have 10,000 colleagues, some of whom probably have never read the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and certainly not read the covenants in detail as I can now claim I have. They come in and we deal with this development agenda in a way that is, we think, pretty strong. The people feel morally pretty strong. They don't actually think that they're any less strong than rights activists. They actually think, correctly or not, that they're on pretty high moral ground and that their job is to deal with the question of poverty. And, when you look at what they're dealing with it candidly is everything that is in this document of the rights agenda and the covenants thereto.

I was really fascinated last night, when I read this because I could pick, and I only mentioned a couple of issues. I could see in this document that if I had read this thoroughly and before I articulated the program of our institution, this could have been the framework which led us to the framework of the poverty reduction strategy, or the comprehensive development framework, or the interconnection of rights, which is, of course, referred to here - the interconnection of rights which we have said in terms of our approach to poverty and development is an interconnected process. You need to have all the bits functional because if you don't, you're going to fall with inadequate attention to those things which will make the achievement of your objective on poverty unattainable.

So, there are an enormous number of parallels between what we've, what you'd say, lucked into, or, come to over 50 years and the integrated at world development approach that those concerned with human rights in terms of the literature which I also read some of last night and in the last days pumped full of it by my friend Alfredo whose major job in our institution is not to ensure that all my colleagues are educated but to educate me as I discovered. Every week I get something new from Alfredo so you should know that that white bearded gentleman over there is a great factor in our institution, and he feeds me this stuff intravenously. And, it's having an effect as it is on many in our organization.

But, then I thought, also in our organization why are we arguing? Why is there any heat in this debate when all of us face a much more difficult and significant problem? We can argue with each other and debate as I
know we will today on an approach on the five subjects which will, I think, demonstrate a considerable community of interest between the two communities and I hope, at the end, bring about a methodology of moving forward in a better, more complementary and mutually supportive way. And, as Mary said, when I came to the Bank and we were not allowed, as Peter Eigen well knows, to mention the word "corruption." It was called the "c" word. I was told within days of getting to the institution by the general council and in great secrecy, "Don't mention the 'c' word." And, I said, "What's the 'c' word?" He said, "Corruption."

Well, maybe we need to mention the "r" word which is "rights." And, maybe coming down the line we will talk much more about rights as we move forward. But, in the case of rights it's not because I think there is any difference of view. I think, there has been because of the history of our organization and because of the nature of how we need to progress things with our board and with our client countries, that we tend to approach it from an economic and from a social point of view, staking out objectives which are articulated in the Declaration and in the covenants but where we don't refer back to this document but, rather, pick up from the document within the context of seeking to address the question of poverty.

Let me return now to the thought that I was just about to say. Why is it that we're debating while Rome is burning? There is an issue that I think each of our communities needs to face, and that is our shareholders who set the Millennium Development Goals. And, who, as a result of the meetings in Monterey and Johannesburg set a basis on which these goals might be achieved. That these Millennium Goals we have, in most cases, very little chance of achieving because of the interest and support and priority that is given to the question of achieving those goals at this time.

There's a fair chance that statistically we will achieve the poverty goal. But, if you read the statistics, they are highly biased by China and India. And, if you take a look at 47 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa you'll find that statistics are, in fact, going in the other direction. If you look at education, the goals of primary school education, which, by the way is mentioned many times in the covenants as well as in the initial charter...if you take just that, our experience has been that we started with the fact that there are 130 million kids, the majority of whom are girls, not in primary school. And, so we thought, let's take that as the first target for the millennium goals because no one can disagree with that.

I probably should have said, and may well have done, "Every child has the right to primary school education. They have a right. It's written here. And, we just want to support that right. So, the right is agreed to by all the nations of the world. Now, let's get on with it."

Well, I did that and we came up with 18 countries plus five more -- the large countries that would have allowed us to tackle the question of how do you finance those countries that have an integrated approach to education, an interdependent approach to education as the charter says,
that have an effective program, that have a means of applying that program and who lack only the resources.

And, we came out with a number which was a couple of billion dollars a year for a period of seven to ten years that was needed as supplemental support for this education right and for this education objective for this millennial goal. Well, we succeeded in the first round of trying to get money for this in reducing the number to seven countries - less than seven percent of the kids involved. And, we succeeded, if that's the word, in putting together a total of $200,000,000 for three years.

And, then my friend, Jean Louis Sarbib, who'll be talking to you later went back and got what, I think he calls, a catalytic fund for a few hundred million dollars to see if we could come again. Mamphela is looking at me, I think I've got it right...a catalytic fund that will allow us, if we're lucky, to get this small number of kids into school.

Now, there the issue is as we define it. It's not the issue of advocacy. It is the simple fact that today people are really not interested in pursuing these goals if it requires extra finance. You hear of numbers...there's five billion more that is being put up by the United States to increase it's commitment of ten billion to fifteen billion, and there's another eight to twelve billion which will be forthcoming from the common market.

And, people will tell you that the last year was a reflection of a movement forward in an increase of six billion dollars in available funding for development assistance. In fact, if you look at the statistics, it goes from 52 to 58 billion. But, I asked my colleagues, since I used to be in the business of analyzing numbers, let's take them apart.

So, we took them apart. What is the six billion increase? Three billion of it is debt relief which is a zero contribution. It is money that would not otherwise have been paid and is now written off. In fact, of the 58 billion today, six billion is debt relief. Two billion is an increase in the money that goes to consultants and scholarships. Two billion. So, that makes five billion. And, two billion more goes to Pakistan and Afghanistan in special transfers, and we're not yet talking about special transfers to Iraq which also will probably embellish and strengthen the numbers.

So, far from an increase...when you really dig into it, it's at best a line ball. And, then when you do the analysis of the $52bn, which we'd done already some months ago, you dig down and you'd be lucky to find $26-28bn in cash.

Against that, you have agricultural subsidies, as Mary alluded to, of $300bn plus. And, you have expenditures on military expenditures and defense. In 1999, we had $800bn. And, our estimates today...probably a thousand billion.

That's the statistics. And, then we talk about achieving the objectives because the world is united in support. It's nonsense. We're spending 20
times the amount of development expenditures on military expenditures. And, the developing world, by the way, is spending $200bn a year on military expenditures. Very largely China and some of the large countries but still much too significant in Africa and other places.

Forgive me for this diversion, but I thought it was important that before we beat each other up, we understand that we have a common enemy. And, it is an enemy which is the enemy of indifference. It's the enemy of lack of focus on what each of our communities, the development and rights based communities, think about. And, it is here, that I think together we could make a big addition. By joining together to try and put pressure on our leaders to make this world a more focused and a better and a more effective place in terms of development and in terms of rights.

I look forward to the results of these discussions very much. And, I can assure you that, from the point of view of the bank, and from IFC -- you have Peter Woicke here who'll be addressing the private sector activities -- that from our point of view we are deeply committed and interested to try and clarify the role of rights in development. How we can go beyond language to try and make our work more effective, and how we can, from the point of view of advocacy, join together to get some effective results.

I simply have added the dimension that when the two of us are talking about our respective disciplines, let's not forget that there are people out there that neither care about rights nor development.

Thank you, Mary, for letting me join you.