Social Equity, Social Justice and Poverty Reduction

by
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I would like to give you a couple of personal reactions to what I’ve heard about this meeting, and give you a sense of the direction that I’m hoping that this may lead to. I had long discussions with Mary [Mary Robinson, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights] for quite some time, and she has talked to me about the importance of a rights-based approach to development. I have said to her what I believe and what I think may have come out in these meetings - that in terms of intent and values and objectives, there’s not a lot that separates your organization and the organization of the World Bank. At least I believe that to be true and I think that we’re both steeped in a desire to improve the human condition and to deal with the issues of social equity and social justice. While the language that we use may be different, the sort of people in our organizations and the fundamentals I think are quite similar. I believe that to be the case, and I hope that over the two days you’ve found that the people here do not have two heads and breathe fire and are only interested in commercial activities.

In fact, there’s a very deep commitment in this organization to human values and to the issues of social equity and social justice and poverty alleviation. Certainly I believe that to be the case of my colleagues. So, it doesn’t surprise me that as you went through your meetings and you came from the general to the specific, that you discovered in two areas - as I understand it - namely in the area of judicial reform and legal rights and the area of HIV/AIDS, that although the language that we may use may be different, that in the implementation phase we are very, very close. That is my belief about the relationship between us - that in terms of substance there are many, many areas that we can work together. It so happens you’ve discussed two, but I think there are probably twenty-two or two hundred and twenty two areas in which we could find common ground to work.

Without asking for an acceptance even of the proposition that we’re close in terms of underlying values, I believe that the smart thing to do in any event would be to work on some specifics together and try and see how it feels after we’re done. I would suggest to tease out the problems, hopefully adduce the areas of common interest and common understanding and try and build a better understanding between our organization and yours. I think we have different vantage points, and different strengths and different leverages. I think your leverage comes from your character as an institution based on the rights that have been agreed to in
international conventions which have not only value, but also some political overtone because they’re politically agreed to.

For us, this is a transition point in a fairly long journey. You may be amused to know, when I arrived, that the general counsel was giving me guidance on what it is that I could and couldn’t do within the context of this, then rather more bureaucratic, organization than it is now. He said very quietly to me: "Of course, we are not allowed to engage in politics, and you cannot mention the 'C' word"; and I said: "What is the 'C' word?" And he whispered in my ear: "That’s corruption." And I said: "Why can’t I mention corruption?" And he said that corruption is essentially political and it gets into the concerns of our Board members and we are a non-political organization.

I took that for a few days, and then gradually started to redefine corruption as not a political issue but as an economic and moral and social issue, and an issue which addresses the very question of poverty. I gave a speech at the Annual Meetings in which I spoke about the cancer of corruption. That was literally the first time that a World Bank President had gone public using the word. It’s preposterous, but it’s true; and that’s just a little over five years ago. Yet now we’re operating in a hundred countries dealing with issues relating to governance and corruption, and it’s done without a murmur on the part of our shareholders. In fact they join us in talking about corruption. Now the “C” word is acceptable and a lot of other things are becoming acceptable, such as the role in leading judicial reform, the role in protecting contract rights, the role in protecting property rights - these are all things which become more and more accepted. In labor rights, we seem to be able to get everywhere except publicly espouse the right to organize.

I actually pulled together a group here in May when we looked at the extent to which we can change our language and the pace at which we change our language. I think pragmatically. We need to take it step by step and not lose the initiatives that we are gaining in terms of the protection of many of the rights that you very appropriately espouse. So if the results of today’s meeting for those of you which come from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is that you’re interested in pursuing this further and talking specifics and meeting with appropriate regularity to see how we’re doing - from our side, we’d love to do it.

I came along at the end of the day, really with all the work being done, simply to add my personal support to doing that and to say that if you all decide that you want to do that, I’d be delighted. Not because I have any less belief than you do on the importance of rights-based work - I think I’m reasonably passionate on the subject that you understand that I want to make sure that we’re an effective instrument to bringing it about.

The language may be somewhat different from yours. I don’t even mind if you attack us from time to time on the basis of not having a rights-based approach - it might help us. I think the important thing is that we build
a sense of mutual trust so that together we can achieve the objectives that you want to achieve and that we want to achieve.

Thank you.