

A A P S O

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Social Development: Concept & Role of the NGO's

by

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Introduction

The UN-ECOSOC by its decision No. 230/91 of May 30, 1991, requested the Secretary-General to carry out consultations with all states members of the United Nations on the possibility of convening a *World Summit for Social Development*. On December 17, 1992, the General Assembly adopted without a vote resolution 46/139 on social development which welcomed that decision, and called upon Governments to cooperate fully with the Secretary-General in this regard. On the basis of the report presented by the S-G, the General Assembly adopted on December 16, 1992, the resolution 47/92 to convene the said Summit early (6-12) 1992, to be hosted by the Danish Government. The preamble of this resolution referred to "the need for the *enhancement of the social component of sustainable development* to achieve economic growth with social justice"; and "to address ways and means for the elimination of widespread poverty and the full enjoyment of human rights, including civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights as interrelated goals". It further stressed that *poverty, unemployment and social integration* are closely related in all societies, with a particular impact on developing countries, which calls to intensify efforts to foster sustainable development and to promote policies against poverty and unemployment in all societies, whether at the country level or through the mobilization of the resources possessed by the UN System, since increased international cooperation for economic and social development would significantly contribute to strengthening of international peace and security. The selection of the three issues mentioned before came as a result of consultations carried out by the representative of Chile to the United Nations, Ambassador Juan Somavia, in his capacity as special representative of the S-G. The latter, in a note addressed to the Preparatory Committee for the WSSD, mentioned that the Summit will coincide with celebrations by the UN of its 50th anniversary, and that it will represent the culmination of efforts made to reconsider the outcomes of the termination of the cold war. He added that the Summit should formulate a coherent approach which ensures harmony and integration among economic, social and environmental dimensions, and which ensures for every one his rights in development; the whole world is looking for the outcomes of the Social Summit to reorient it towards a new direction.

Objectives of the WSSD

Article (5) of the General Assembly's resolution No. 47/92 defined the following as objectives of the World Summit for Social Development:

(a) To further the objectives of the Charter of the United Nations, as stated in Article 55, to promote "higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social

progress and development", and "solutions of international economic, social, health, and related problems", with particular focus on social development aspects;

(b) To express a shared world-wide commitment to put the needs of people at the center of development and of international cooperation as a major priority of international relations;

(c) To stimulate international cooperation at the bilateral, regional and multilateral levels, through government, private and non-governmental initiatives, in order to assist in the implementation of nationally appropriate, effective and efficient social policies and to formulate strategies which enable all citizens to be actively engaged in those policies;

(d) To formulate strategies on goals, policies and priority actions that could be taken at the national, regional and international levels, to address in the different development realities, core issues of shared universal concern in the field of social development, giving particular attention to the needs of the least developed countries;

(e) to create international awareness of and address the modalities to attain the necessary balance between economic efficiency and social justice in a growth-oriented, equitable and sustainable development environment in accordance with nationally defined priorities;

(f) To address, in creative ways, the interaction between the social function of the State, market responses to social demands and the imperatives of sustainable development;

(g) To identify common problems of socially marginalized and disadvantaged groups and promote the integration of those groups into society, highlighting the need for societies to equalize opportunities for all members;

(h) To promote programs to ensure legal protection, foster effective social welfare programs and enhance education and /for different groups in all societies, including the marginalized and disadvantaged groups; *training*

(i) To assist in ensuring a more effective delivery of social services for the more disadvantaged sectors of society;

(j) To highlight the need to mobilize resources for social development at the local, national and international levels.

(k) To make appropriate recommendations regarding more effective action by the United Nations system in the sphere of social development, in particular measures and policies for the revitalization of the Commission for Social Development;

Three prevailing concepts for social development

The literature on development, especially that issued by the UN, points to differences in the meanings assigned to social development.

- ♦ The first, and more common, is the **sectoral concept**. Development itself was basically considered as economic, which made references to social development in many works, especially documents and conventions of the UN, put emphasis on social sectors, especially of a services nature. This helped the statement of objectives of social nature in a more rigorous manner when formulating development strategies, and interconnecting them to economic objectives, and in giving deeper insight in the nature of interrelationships between the economic and social dimensions. The main outcome of this approach is that it enabled the realization of the significance of the **location of people in the process of development**. One may consider that the recent concern within UN circles with sustainable human development is a result of carrying this concept to its extreme.

- ♦ The second concept is the *groups concept*, by which emphasis is made of the conditions and issues related to certain groups of people, that are not reached by development in a proper way, either due to certain distorted social practices, or because of shortcomings in development strategies. Women and children acquire a great deal of attention within this concept, although age is gaining a wider zone with the result that problems of young people and of the elderly are gaining in weight. The international community is also concerned with other groups, such as the disabled, the migrants and minorities. The Summit adopts this concept when dealing with the issue of "social integration", which may be classified also under the third concept of social development.
- ♦ The third concept is the *problematic concept*, which directs attention to specific problems that should have been dealt with by development, but which have acquired disturbing dimensions, as a result of the failure of the applied norms of development to deal with them properly. Sectors and groups may be similar in different societies; but problems may differ both with respect to their nature, causes and/or effects. Therefore the three issues selected for the Summit may be common to all societies from the point of view of their subject-matter but they may differ in regard to their diagnosis and treatment. What is propounding them for international consideration, besides their existence in practically all countries, is that they may acquire dimensions which may *threaten world peace*. This inspired the idea of connecting the convening of the Summit to the termination of cold war and the retreat of ideological disputes.

These three concepts are in fact restricted concepts of social development. They either place it in a subordinate position to economic development, or consider it as problems whose solution would bring about satisfaction with the achievement of what may be contemplated as social development. This runs in contradiction with the idea that development is a continuous human endeavour.

Back to square one

It may be argued that concern with the social dimension and with the issues of poverty (low income) and unemployment takes us back to the early days of the emergence of the UN System immediately after world war II, i.e., half a century back. At that period attention was directed towards the treatment of unemployment, both in industrial countries whose economic structures were destroyed during the war, and in underdeveloped countries. Thus the UN Charter referred to full employment as an objective. It assigned to a group of eminent economists the task of studying the national and international measures that should be undertaken in order to decrease "unemployment and under-employment" in underdeveloped countries, paying due regard to the then prevailing world conditions and development requirements. Thus we are witnessing today a recurrence of the same type of problems, which means, in fact, that whatever efforts made to deal with them could not eliminate them, but permitted their coming back, maybe in different forms. The question may be raised: Is this due to the nature of human life and its development; or is it a consequence of shortcomings in the concept of development itself?

Unjustified coverage of all countries by the concept of development

The concept of development has been correlated with the state of underdevelopment which prevailed in many countries. Consequently it involved those actions recommended to those countries in order to improve their economic and social conditions. If so, then the so-called de-

veloped countries have already satisfied the requirements of development, hence they have no place in a study of development except from three points of view:

- ♦ The first is to benefit from their experiences, without trying to replicate them.
- ♦ The second is to study the repercussions of developments in their conditions on the development of underdeveloped countries.
- ♦ The third is to define the role which they have to play in assisting underdeveloped countries in achieving required development.

The first result of including developed countries in recent discussions of development is the loss of the precise notion of the word as the purposeful action to be taken in order to improve the conditions and capacities of societies which had suffered from underdevelopment due to internal factors which may be similar or different, and to international conditions that are subject to the impact of the actions of the more developed countries whose weights are much greater, and who possess the means of political and cultural interference in the feeble communities. The most probable outcome of this is a shift in the significance of development because of the comparisons made on the basis of such indicators as the per capita income or the HDI (human development index), which make underdevelopment synonymous to a lower rank along the scale. This treatment which involves submission to a historical paradigm of development could not stand up to rigorous scientific analysis; nevertheless it lies at the bottom of several current treatments of development issues.

A wave of fashionable concepts: Sustainable Human Development

More serious is that we are presently living an era of fashions in concepts, development among them. This is not the place to list the several concepts propagated; but we may specify two of them. the first is that of *sustainable human development*. We have already mentioned that human development was the result of the attempt to put the people at the center of the development process, which is a plausible attempt. But when we turn this into a continuous research effort, we find that all countries are included, which depicts the extent of differences in achievement, which takes us back to the notion that development countries are close to the optimal position (100 % of the proposed index). This means that underdevelopment is expressed as the extent of deviation from the optimum portrayed by the achievements of the developed countries. Further, the idea of constructing the index in terms of an average conceals dispersion around that average. We may recall that it has been generally accepted that the average of income was deemed insufficient as an indicator of development, in the absence of considering income distribution whose inequality has increased over time, both within and among countries. We may mention just one of the symptoms of dispersion which had been often quoted as a serious phenomenon, namely "unemployment among graduates", which shows the wide difference between the educational accomplishment and economic achievement. In our view, the combination of illiteracy and unemployment is much more indignifying and conducive to the deprivation of the human being from the capability to look after his own welfare or to contribute to the development of his society. In other words what is worse than the wide dispersion of human development indicators around their mean, is the low value of the mean attributed to an overall low level for all of them.

The fashion became clear in the coinage of the term "sustainable development" then the linkage of the two by speaking about "sustainable human development". Sustainability in its essence means that the prevailing pattern of life should not lead to the exhaustion of the base upon which

life rests, and that the given pattern of life should not leave negative effects upon the environment which carries human beings, one generation after the other. In our belief the reference to "development" in this regard is misleading. For, suppose that what happens in the whole world is a state of stagnation, in which per capita income remains unchanged, which implies no change in the standard of living nor in the quality of life. Would this entail sustainability? Clearly the answer is negative. What is in conflict with sustainability is not the pattern of development in the sense of the change from one level of living to another, but it is rather the *prevailing patterns of living*, which had been fostered by the developed countries. Thus the problem arises in the manner applied in the *management* of conditions of living, rather than the patterns of development, whatever they may be. Before talking about the injury caused by the present generation to the future generations, we have to make sure that members of the current generation are not doing harm to each other. It is well known that the struggle of the third world during the last decades had been directed against this type of coercion, which is being confused by means of this improvised concept.

Preventive Development

We may find enough justification for talking about sustainable human development, especially if we take in consideration that what the world witnesses today is the beginnings of what some authors labeled as a "third wave", and which I called in another context a shift from "capitalism" to "*technolism*" emerging as a consequence of the present technological revolution, which gives both the human aspect and the environmental aspect new and unprecedented dimensions. What sounds curious is the term that appeared in some documents produced in preparation for the WSSD is the term "*preventive development*" which seems to imply that worthy patterns of development should beware of accompanying negative aspects, so as not to wait until they take place to force the process into one of management of crises, but to have a broader view which anticipates such aspects and take safeguards against them, especially in those areas which are not explicitly tackled by development strategies in an appropriate manner; social items being on top. In his address to the ECOSOC in June 1993, Amb. Somavia mentioned that "*We need to act preventively in order to respond in time to the tide of growing social conflicts. We should acknowledge collectively that reducing social tensions must become a major political priority of the international community.*" But this does not call for borrowing a concept which had been recently repeated in the international jargon, advocating *preventive diplomacy*. The term may be acceptable when it is used in connection with the manner of *management of the affairs of the society* in general, which would justify the inclusion of all countries at the same time. Development has to retain its specific meaning, which is pushing conditions of life forward without being exposed to pitfalls whose very existence is an indication of lack of development.

Globalization, Universalization and the Prototype Thesis

Modern literature, and several documents forwarded in preparation for the Summit, have taken globalization for granted. The world is being interconnected in manner that raises the degree of interdependence which may be usefully invested under the present conditions of world accord. But globalization is something and universalization is something else meaning that attempts are being made to impose a single prototype over all countries in the world. There seems to be some confusion between the two, sometimes on purpose. Under this mystification the well-known Fukuyama "end-of-history" dictum resounded, putting an arbitrary end to the process of

change to stop at unique forms for all systems governing the different facets of human life. In the same spirit another process of enforcing conditionalities on countries of the third world, which practically nullified the concept of development as a process in its own rights, and subduing it to changes in the political and economic systems to liberal democracy, which leaves to market mechanisms, and hence to the powers governing them, freedom in determining the rules of action in the society which becomes integrated into the international economy by the force of the process of globalization which is being strengthened by means of the transnationalization of the production process under the leadership of transnational companies.

In this atmosphere the Social Summit takes place to deal with the third dimension which had not, so far, been exposed to the same degree of universalization, viz., the social dimension. That is where its seriousness lies, especially if it is taken as a start for the reconstruction of the world system, at the center of which the UN family lies. We may refer here to what Amb. Somavia mentioned in his inaugural speech to the WSSD Preparatory Committee, (New York, April, 12, 1993):

"At the end of the twentieth century the history of mankind is integrated as never before. We are part of a global village, we see ourselves as citizens of the planet, each one of us with an individual identity, a cultural and personal realities. Democracy is expanding as a political system which fosters a free and responsible citizenry. The market economy generates a growing consensus as an efficient mechanism for allocating resources for economic progress. The Social Summit offers us an opportunity to build the third and major consensus which is needed for the development and well-being of the planet: the *social consensus* which gives sustainability to the political and economic consensus and introduces fraternity and solidarity as a central component of human relations in this vast planetary village. I am sure that successful human development in the next century will depend on the *triad of political democracy, economic efficiency and social integration.*"

In spite of what he, and many others, mentioned asserting the importance of respecting the cultural diversity, and the need for coexistence and mutual respect among different cultures, the partial and abridged treatments of certain aspects of social development may lead to the dominance of concepts derived from the civilization which holds the privilege of setting in motion the two consensus in the political and economic fields. This is quite clear in the terms of conditionalities which are advocated for and by the international financial institutions within the stabilization and structural adjustment programs, and which initiated claims for the need for dealing with the negative effects of those programs from the social point of view, that led an organization such as the UNICEF to look for a "human face" in the programs imposed. In fact the very meaning of structural adjustment is the adaptation of the communities' conditions to the world environment, which means that the social aspects come second to the economic which are being tailored to suit the transnationals. Hence the "problematic" concept which is dominant in the Summit agenda reduces the social dimension to social care, in which "safety nets" are being constructed to pick up those who become victims of the application of the economic prototype, which is the utmost degree of a negative treatment of social development.

Access to Societies

There has been recently a call, through the Marrakech agreements which wound up the GATT Uruguay round, for enabling *access to markets*. Documents in preparation for the