

Mahbub ul Haq

A Global Compact for Human Development¹

We are greatly honoured to be associated with an initiative of the Forum that can change the lives of millions of poor people in the developing world.

Our challenge is this:

Can we make the 21st century a century of human development when all people enjoy access to education and health, when each individual is enabled to utilize his or her full human potential, when all people have developed their basic capabilities and enjoy equal access to the opportunities of life?

Let me be clear. This is a vision of human competition, not state welfare; of access to opportunities, not access to charity; of enrichment of human lives, not just enrichment of national income or wealth.

And the investment required to realize this vision is fairly modest. If we are to move over the next 15 years towards a society where there is universal basic education, primary health care for all, safe drinking water for every one, adequate nutrition for all malnourished children, and family planning services for all willing couples --- in other words, a world society where basic social services are available to everyone, both men and women, where the worst human deprivations curbing the potential of over 1.3 billion people today have been fully overcome, where all the essential ingredients for the full flowering of human potential are available in the form of adequate education, health and nutrition - then what is the financial cost of achieving such a society? According to the best available estimates, the cost will be around \$34 billion a year. This cost is less than 1% of the total income of developing countries, if they bear this burden themselves. And it will be reduced to 1/7th of 1% of the global income, if the entire international community takes up this challenge.

The question we face is this:

Can we persuade the leaders of the world to accept such a global compact for human development for the 21st century?

Let us again be very clear. Such a global compact is not yet another treaty, requiring the formal approval of the governments of the world. It is, in fact, a shared vision of what the world can and must achieve. It requires global understanding, not a global treaty. In the last analysis, most action must begin at the national level.

¹ A presentation made in the plenary session on 3rd October 1996 on the theme of: *Strategic Initiatives of the State of the World Forum*

And such action must begin in the developing world itself. These countries do not lack financial resources. What they lack is political coverage.

We need to ask their leaders and ask them bluntly:

Why do they insist on spending \$130 billion a year on their military when even a quarter of this expenditure can finance their entire essential social agenda?

Why do they insist on having 6 soldiers for every doctor when their people are dying of ordinary diseases; from internal disintegration, not from external aggression; from many threats to human security, not any threats to territorial security?

Why can't we convince the leaders of the poor nations that every tank they buy costs the immunisation of 4 million children; every jet costs the schooling of 3 million children; every submarine denies safe drinking water to 60 million people?

Why do we let them argue poverty of resources for human development when many nations spend each year more on their armies than on the education and health of their people, when they have well fed armies but unfed people?

And we need to ask the leaders of the rich nations at the same time:

Why do you keep subsidising your arms exports to poor lands when you argue against even food subsidies in these poor nations?

Why is it that you refuse to close down your military bases, phase out your military assistance and restrict the export of sophisticated military weapons --- even now that the cold war is over?

And why do you make such handsome profits on your exports of arms to poor, starved, disintegrating nations while giving them lectures all the time on respect for basic human rights?

Why not invest in their human development and make profits out of their future prosperity rather than out of their current state of human deprivation?

Why do they not immediately agree to sponsor the code of conduct on arms transfers that Oscar Arias presented this morning?

What we need to change is the mindset of our leaders. Changes in policies will then follow. And adequate resources for the priority human development agenda will then be available.

Let his Forum throw its full moral weight behind a global compact for human development in the 21st century.

Let it spread the message to all world leaders that such a compact is not only desirable, it is eminently doable.

It can be done if poor lands undertake to reduce their arms spending and increase their social spending instead.

It can be done if rich nations accept voluntary restraints on arms sales to poor nations and to eliminate their subsidies on arms exports.

It can be done if the United Nations organises a round of disarmament talks this time for the Third World, designing new mechanisms to settle their long-standing disputes.

It can be done if this Forum uses its global reach to civil society, particularly to media, all over the world to spread a new message of hope and political change, a new emphasis on human development priorities.

Of course, many other steps can help.

Developing countries can privatise their public enterprises and wipe off their expensive debts. They can cut out much waste and corruption in their budgets. And they can restructure their development priorities and focus on first things first.

The rich nations can help by cancelling all the debts of the poorest nations, by opening up their trade markets and by providing some additional financial assistance to poor countries.

But these steps may prove more difficult in the current environment. What is eminently sensible today is a trade-off between investment in arms and investment in people.

The stakes are high: the future of millions and millions of poor people.

The cost is small: less than 1% of the GNP of the developing world and less than 1/7 of the 1% of global GNP.

The task is manageable in the next 15 years.

There is an international consensus behind such a goal already, reached in the Social Summit in Copenhagen in March 1995 -- though the memories of such a consensus are already beginning to fade.

Let us make a pledge in this Forum that we shall not let the world forget their own recent consensus on human development and global poverty.

Let us make this pledge as we remember the words of Mahatama Gandhi, whom we honoured from this Forum last night. He said:

"Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen and ask yourselves if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to self-reliance for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melting away."

The strategic initiative that the State of the World Forum and the Human Development Center are designing on human development meets this critical test.