A Global Compact for Human Development  
(Mahbub ul Haq)

There was an interesting intellectual get-together at Bhurban, Murree, on 15-16 April 1996. About 33 of the leading thinkers and policy makers from all over the world had assembled in this secluded, scenic spot in Pakistan to think about a global compact between rich and poor nations which would lead towards a new, more humane world order in the 21st century.

The dilemma faced by these intellectuals was a formidable one. Despite unprecedented human progress in the last few decades, at least one-fourth of the world’s population lives in degrading poverty, over one billion people lack access to basic education and primary health care, and the already wide income disparity between rich and poor nations has more than doubled over the last 30 years. In a world of such disturbing contrasts, where so much prosperity co-exists with so much poverty, what could be done to give a decent chance to everyone to get an access to the opportunities of life? This is the issue that engaged the attention of this eminent group of intellectuals.

The Bhurban Seminar formulated a concrete 12-point agenda for action and recommended it to the international community for its serious consideration and implementation. This agenda is reproduced below:

1. Each developing country should prepare a concrete plan of action for the provision of basic education for all children, boys and girls, including compulsory primary education in all countries; provision of primary health care for all people, including universal immunization coverage for all children; extension of safe drinking water to all people, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas, through low-cost, mass coverage programmes; provision of family planning services to all willing couples; and elimination of severe malnutrition. For this purpose, each developing country should earmark at least 20% of its national budget, and each donor at least 20% of its aid funds, so as to ensure the universal coverage of these basic social services by the year 2010 at the latest. In implementing this “20.20 compact”, programmes for children and women must be accorded the first claim on resources.

2. Each country, poor or rich, should formulate its own human development strategy to ensure that existing levels of poverty are at least halved by the year 2010, and completely eliminated within the next three decades, as envisaged at the time of the Copenhagen Summit in 1995. The UNDP should assume a leadership role for the preparation of these national plans and for monitoring their orderly implementation.
3. A 25 year perspective plan for global economic advance should be prepared, with targets and measures for supporting poverty reduction, for eliminating hunger and malnutrition, for accelerating economic growth and employment, for ending marginalisation of the poorest and least developed countries, for moderating the growing disparities between the richest and the poorest people both within countries and among countries, and for moving towards more sustainable growth patterns regionally and globally. The World Bank (in cooperation with the UN agencies and regional banks) should take the lead in preparing such a blueprint and in discussing it with leaders of governments, business, labour and other members of civil society and in monitoring and reporting annually on its implementation.

4. A strategy must be designed for sustained and high levels of employment in all countries, rich and poor. Such employment strategies should be given top political priority. Some of the key components of such strategies will consist of large and sustained investment in education, training and skills; effective ways of improving access to assets — in particular, access to land and credit for low-income groups — and enhanced flexibility of labour markets, without damaging social safety nets. No such employment strategy can ever be indifferent to the working conditions of labour or to the inhumanity of encouraging child labour which takes away the very promise of childhood from innocent children.

5. The next century should be celebrated as a period of real gender equality when all existing gender disparities have been eliminated, both in human capabilities and human opportunities; when all remaining legal discriminations against women have been removed, both in law and in actual practice; when women's economic contribution is fully reflected in national income accounts and in all economic settlements between women and men; when the Beijing Plan of Action (1995) has been fully implemented; and when a high-powered UN Agency for the Advancement of Women assumes the responsibility to follow up national and global actions for women's advance and to regularly monitor their progress.

6. We must ensure that democratic governance and respect for human rights and rule of law are enshrined as natural norms of civilised societies. The progress of political freedom in each country, and in the world as a whole, should be fully supported and regularly monitored. The International Court of Justice at Hague should be empowered to try gross violations of basic human rights, including the right of every writer and artist for free speech and all other political and cultural rights.

7. Each country, rich or poor, should formulate a national environmental plan to ensure that its demands on the earth's natural resources are contained within sustainable limits. It should be remembered at the same time that global
sustainability without global justice will always remain an elusive goal: global sustainability requires a major adjustment in the consumption life styles of the rich nations and a far-reaching redistribution of access to global resources and opportunities in favour of the poor nations. All nations of the world should collectively pledge to implement Agenda 21, endorsed by the Earth Summit in 1992.

8. The informatics revolution in the developing world must be accelerated so that these nations can manage to leapfrog several decades of development, close their existing technological gaps with the rich nations, and use the emerging forces of globalization as a new opportunity, not a new threat. The developing countries must be made equal and vigorous partners in the new information super-highways in the 21st century.

9. A blue-ribbon commission of eminent persons should be set up to prepare a report within one year on a new framework of development cooperation in the post-cold war world in which development support is directed not towards strategic allies from the past but towards strategic global objectives of the future, including poverty reduction, environmental improvement, better population planning, drug control and other programmes to enhance the new frontiers of global human security and human development. Such a new framework should also focus on the total flows of goods, services, investment and labour between rich and poor nations, not just on aid; it should create a new sense of urgency for settling external debts of the poorest countries; it should expand the list of principal beneficiaries of private foreign investment in the developing world by creating suitable investment climate in them; it should persuade all nations, industrial as well as developing, to dismantle their growing protectionism and to undertake needed structural adjustments; and it should identify a new system of more democratic global governance, including the feasibility of global levies/taxes to finance the emerging requirements of global human security.

10. All nations should voluntarily agree to reduce their existing levels of military spending by at least 3% a year in real terms and to earmark these potential savings to accelerate the pace of their economic growth and human development. At the same time, the United Nations should organise a second round of disarmament talks -- focused on complete nuclear disarmament globally and on accelerated demilitarisation in the Third World. The United Nations must establish new mechanisms to mediate the underlying causes of tension in long-standing, unresolved conflicts, and to encourage both the arms-buying nations to adopt a new code of conduct to curtail their purchases of arms and to persuade the arms-supplying nations to restrict their supply of sophisticated military equipment as well as land mines, to close down their military bases, to phase out their military assistance and to eliminate their subsidies for arms exports.
11. All nations should agree to seek a new role for the United Nations to meet humanity's agenda not only for peace but also for development. The United Nations should become the principal custodian of global human security. Towards this end, the development role of the United Nations should be considerably strengthened and it should be given wide-ranging decision making powers in the socio-economic field by establishing an Economic Security Council. There should be no veto power in the existing Security Council or in the proposed Economic Security Council.

12. A global civil society requires major strengthening of the institutions of the civil society at all levels -- local, national and global. At its apex, it would be essential to create a Peoples Assembly in the United Nations, with two chambers in the General Assembly, one representing governments and the other constituting the elected representatives of the people -- so that the voice of the people is heard, not intermittently but all the time and at all levels, on all decisions that shape human lives. At the same time, local participatory institutions must be encouraged in all societies so that we finally enter the age of a real empowerment of the people.

This 12-point agenda is the real substance of the global compact on human development that the Bhurban group recommended to the world. The group made it clear that a global compact should not be viewed as yet another treaty, requiring approval of the governments of the world, but as a shared vision of what the world can and should achieve. It is an earnest appeal to all the participants in the emerging civil society -- not only governments but members of business and finance community, NGOs, media and grass roots organisations -- to share and disseminate the compact and to generate public pressures for its acceptance and implementation.

What are the prospects that the world might listen for a change? After all, the global agenda in the past has been littered with well-meaning proposals, largely unimplemented so far. Why should there be a different and a more supportive response to the ideas of the Bhurban group?

It is worth recapitulating the vision presented by the Bhurban Statement itself. It says:

"There are times in the lives of nations when an entirely new vision shapes their destiny. The 1940s were such a water-shed -- marked by the birth of the United Nations, the launching of the Marshall Plan, the setting up of the Bretton Woods institutions, the initial steps towards the European Community, the negotiation of new social contracts in the industrial nations and an irresistible movement for the liberation of former colonies. A new world order emerged in the 1940s from the dark shadows of the Second World War.
Fifty years later, there are reasons to believe that the world may be getting ready for yet another profound transition. There are many promising developments: the democratic transition in former communist countries as well as in many developing nations, the end of the cold war, a steady fall in global military expenditures for the first time in the life of the present generation, the opening up of all economies and societies, a dramatic revolution in information and communications, the strengthened prospects for peace in many parts of the world. At the same time, there are also several disturbing signs of growing poverty, rising social tensions, growing environmental degradation, spreading ethnic violence and disintegrating political systems. The question we face is this: what shall we build on - actions for a better future or pessimism about anarchic events? Our generation has no choice but to design a new compact for a more humane world order. Pessimism is a luxury we simply cannot afford.

These words are to be backed up by concrete action. The Bhurban Seminar was arranged through the superb organisational skills of Khadija Haq, Executive Vice President of the Islamabad-based Human Development Centre, and Jim Garrison, President of the San Francisco-based State of the World Forum which is chaired by Mikhail Gorbachev. The Bhurban Statement is being circulated to a world-wide audience for their comments. A detailed compact will be prepared on the basis of these comments and a practical strategy for global human development will be presented to the over 500 distinguished policy makers and thinkers from 50 nations participating in the 1996 State of the World Forum which will be held in San Francisco in October 1996. Mikhail Gorbachev will be joined by many world leaders in launching this global initiative.

When the Bhurban group, towards the end of its two day deliberations, was confronted with the inevitable question that their undertaking was far too ambitious and idealistic, their response was unequivocal: “Idealism in the service of humanity is no crime”. It will be interesting to see how far their thinking can influence the world of practical actions.