

Thinking in the Active Voice¹

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by
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I have been asked to reflect on macropolicy and the individual. It is appropriate that we consider this theme since, in its essence, macropolicy begins with the individual, and ends with the individual. Everything in between is talk, words waiting to be made real in human action — made real by individuals working together to realize a scheme, or a dream.

This dynamic is not a pyramid — individuals at the base, the “idea” at the peak. Rather it is a circle — a circle defining the reflection and action of real people thinking and doing about change.

Once formed, who knows which arc began the circle, and which completed it?

From this beginning, please allow me to spin and weave some thoughts and reactions on the material we have examined, and the lives we lead.

I find one of the most powerful and positive things about the document we have been asked to study, is the way that it reveals that some things that we have always known, but were obscured, now can be said — if only carefully, and in logic of systems analysis, rather than politics. As an example, paragraph 48 states:

There is a double negative impact of inequality on poverty: inequality, whether by gender, social category or region, not only limits the poverty-reducing effects of growth, but also inhibits growth itself.

When I came across this statement I was gratified, but also intrigued, because the statement is made almost in passing, even though it implicitly challenges the core assumption of the document — that poverty reduction must be predicated on economic growth. I expect that this dilemma will be one of the preoccupations at the heart of our discussion this week.

Now of course, the fact that sharp inequalities of gender, social category and region — among other factors — limit the poverty-reducing effects of

¹ A slightly edited version of this paper appears in *Negotiating Poverty, New Directions, Renewed Debate* (eds. N. Middleton, P. O’Keefe and R. Visser), Pluto Books, London, 2001. Some formulations in the paper have been adapted from the essay, *International NGOs and the Challenge of Modernity*, by Brian K. Murphy, in *Development in Practice*, Volume 10, No 3 & 4, August 2000.

growth, and inhibit growth itself, has long been known, formally by everyone who has studied economics or sociology — and instinctively by almost everyone else. But it was not so very long ago that we would not be able to declare it in this kind of forum. Clearly, it is becoming more permissible to acknowledge some previously masked political-economic phenomena and correlations, even if depoliticized and stripped of context.

This process of changing discourse is interesting, and relevant to our discussions. For while some things that everyone has always known can now be said, still other realities remain obscured.

In 1990 I published in a Canadian periodical, an analytical critique of structural adjustment and Canadian ODA. The essay explained why existing structural inequalities would inevitably exclude the poor from the benefit of the wealth that was being concentrated through imposed neoliberal economic policies supported by Canada and other OECD nations. My article was one of several thousand essays written about that time — some of you probably wrote such pieces as well — that analysed the flaws in these policies, flaws that apparently now can be recognized, but were then denied aggressively by the multilateral establishment and our own governments. We were savaged for saying then, what senior bureaucrats in Paris, Bonn, London and Washington now suavely acknowledge as new insights, recently revealed. The difference, however, is not in the science. The difference is in politics.

The essay I refer to was called *The Dice are Loaded*. The title was taken from a song by Leonard Cohen, in which Cohen writes:

Everybody knows that the dice are loaded
Everybody rolls with their fingers crossed
Everybody knows that the war is over
Everybody knows that the good guys lost
Everybody knows that the fight is fixed
The poor stay poor, the rich get rich
That's how it goes.....
Everybody knows.

It was true then. It is true now. And everybody knows. So why isn't this perspective part of the explicit text of this consultation?

If we are serious about reducing poverty — that is, if we actually intend to *do* it, rather than talk as though we would *like* to do it, if we could — then we have to be willing to say openly what we all know, as human beings, as specific people, as individuals. These are, first and foremost, personal, moral, and ethical issues, not technical issues. And they are

political issues. We can never escape the politics we enact and implement. We cannot separate what we do professionally from what we think and believe as private persons.

Conventional wisdom concerning policy advocacy — whether done from the inside by agency staff, or from the outside by academics, or by NGO policy activists — is that if we want to have influence, we cannot say some things that everyone knows to be true, nor demand measures that radically and rationally respond to what we all know. Rather, we are told, we must be “realistic” and “pragmatic”; we must tailor our message carefully to what political and economic leaders are willing to accept at the moment. Paragraph 48, which I quoted earlier, continues: “Public policy aiming at reducing inequalities is a challenge and a test for poverty reduction strategies, and may involve conflicts of interest that require tactful political coalition building.”

In this milieu, the policy advocate — whether an insider or an outsider — spends an inordinate amount of time trying to calculate the limits of the acceptable within whatever ministry or institution that is being lobbied — and tailors the message accordingly.

The irony here is that, of course, it is *we* who are being lobbied and critically influenced in this situation. The form, structures and politesse of class and political power set the parameters of our language, our social critique and our proposals.

I want to step out of that box slightly, and talk a little about what everybody knows — and propose that it is time that we were more uncompromising in saying it. For social and economic development policy does not flow unbidden from the forehead of the gods. It is invented by people, people like us. That is the explicit premise of this consultation. Macro-policy is based on myths and ideology as much as by what passes for science. And it reflects and reinforces existing relations of power, not — as we would like to believe — the relations of power that are expressed as a distant ideal in the rhetoric of multilateral framework preambles, much less, UN conventions.

Real people wrote the documents in front of us, valiant individuals struggling to define and push the limits of what is an acceptable discourse on poverty reduction in the prevailing ideological arena. Simply comparing the first and second drafts we all received of Chapter One, indicates the intricate negotiations of analysis and diction that underpin the policy framework we have been asked to examine. As persons of evident influence — I am bemused by the label “expert,” a status I think might better be reserved for the poor themselves — our own task is to exercise our individual authority to bring clarity, accuracy and justice to

bear on the discussion that has been prepared. Each of us has to take individual responsibility for the policies under discussion, and the picture of the world that the policies describe and circumscribe.

In her keynote to the *Conference on Economic Sovereignty in a Globalising World*, in Bangkok in March 1999, Susan George declared,

No matter how many disasters of all kinds the neo-liberal system has visibly created, no matter what financial crises it may engender, no matter how many losers and outcasts it may create, it is still made to seem inevitable, like an act of God, the only possible economic and social order available to us.

She continued,

Let me stress how important it is to understand that this vast neo-liberal experiment we are all being forced to live under has been created by people with a purpose. Once you grasp this, once you understand that neo-liberalism is not a force like gravity but a totally artificial construct, you can understand that what some people have created, other people can change. But they cannot change it without recognizing the importance of ideas. I'm all for grassroots projects, but I also warn that these will collapse if the overall ideological climate is hostile to their goals.²

The project of development and “modernization” began with the conviction that there is a natural order, design and progress in things, and that humans, as part of this design, have the capacity and responsibility to promote and direct progress through the application of science and technology. Within this framework, progress is equated with technological invention and capitalist enterprise, industrial development, economic growth, and the expansion and integration of markets. These have come to be the *essential* human activities, the normal and natural vocation of all human beings and societies.

Development — and specifically international development as defined in the last half of the 20th century — is the concerted program to bring the entire planet into one clear and unified road of progress, a road that is explicitly the road of liberal capitalism.

² George, Susan, *A Short History of Neo-Liberalism: Twenty Years of Elite Economics, and Emerging Opportunities for Structural Change*, address to the Conference on Economic Sovereignty in a Globalizing World, hosted by Focus on the Global South, Bangkok, March 24-26, 1999, papers available at www.millennium-round.org; see also Susan George, *How to Win the War of Ideas, Lessons from the Gramscian Right*, in *Dissent*, Vol. 44, No. 3, Summer 1997.

Within this framework, all problems and catastrophes that emerge within the project of modernity and progress are seen as aberrations in the normal and natural course of things — indeed as *abnormal* — in spite of the fact that these effects are not rare at all, but the norm itself. They are a common element that marks the development era and its various strategies and false starts.

In spite of this self-evident reality — which everyone here knows — social, cultural and environmental disaster continue to be described as deviations from the march of progress, rather than as intrinsic to the project of global development itself. Not allowed into the official discourse is the reality that “development” is an imposition on those who are being “developed,” and that progress itself is often destructive of what already exists — while offering little to those dislocated by “progress.” This in spite of the fact that this critique has been voiced by serious observers from the very moment the project began almost 55 years ago, and the effect has been evident for all to see from the beginning.

Today we sense that the wall may have been irretrievably breached by the events of the last few decades. We can only hope so. The negative effects of development practice — and progress itself — have come under more intense scrutiny in recent times. Still, it is extremely difficult to get any more than lip-service to the proposition that the application of the norms and tools of “progress” — which are often dangerous and destructive, and always only selectively beneficial — should be a democratic choice in the context of processes of self-determination, rather than imposed from outside with the collusion of national elites already integrated within the global economy and political system.

Fully 15 years ago, Sithembiso Nyoni declared that the poor are fighting

an internationally well-organized system of domination and exploitation...which would rather see the poor removed from the face of the earth than see them change their situation or have them gain real power over their own fate.³

She warned that “we cannot reverse the process of underdevelopment by using the same tools, methods, structures, and institutions which were used to exploit and dominate the poor” in the first place.

³ Nyoni, Sithembiso, *Indigenous NGOs: Liberation, Self-reliance, and Development*, in *World Development*, special issue Autumn 1987, called *Development Alternatives: the Challenge for NGOs*, proceedings of a symposium held March 11-13 in London, England, under the sponsorship of World Development and Overseas Development Institute; pp. 51-56.

Let me repeat: *we cannot reverse the process of underdevelopment by using the same tools, methods, structures, and institutions which were used to exploit and dominate the poor in the first place.*

The politics of utility

How are the pervasively negative effects of “progress” rationalized and justified? At the core of the “development” ethos is the ethics of utilitarianism. The criteria of politics and action are utility and pragmatism: *what is useful is true, and what works is good.*

The golden rule of the ages, “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” — a rule which in these times could be re-phrased: “guarantee for all what you expect as a right for yourself” — is replaced by the reductionist utilitarian principle, “the greatest good for the greatest number.” Pragmatism replaces justice as our guide. Individual morality and personal ethics is replaced by technique and disembodied social engineering.

Cloaked in the language of objectivity and good intentions, utilitarianism is promoted as democratic and inclusive, where the best thing possible is always done, and the majority always benefit. To the contrary, it is most often undemocratic and exclusionary, and *always* begins with the assumption that some people — a *lot* of people — must lose.

Utilitarianism is a win-lose proposition based on the explicit and calculated exclusion of some — often the majority — for the benefit of others. The cost/benefit analysis is virtually always done by those in a position to ensure their own interests, or by their proxies — including people like us in NGOs, universities, research institutions, and official development agencies — operating in professional capacities.

But of course, the issue is: *who* benefits and loses, and *who* decides? When a cost-benefit calculation is made, who makes the calculation, who benefits, and who pays the cost, are critical issues. And when we presume to make this choice on some calculation of a greater good for a greater number, what of others — the *lesser* number — who not only do not benefit, but actually pay the freight for the rest of us, often at the cost of their communities, livelihoods and very lives?

The choice of who pays, and who is left out at the table of globalized progress, is not haphazard. We know who they are, and their characteristics — race, gender, and class — and we know where they live. As Susan George says in the same speech I quoted earlier,

Politics used to be about who ruled whom and who got what share of the pie. Aspects of both these central questions remain,

of course, but the great new central question is, in my view, “who has got the right to live and who does not?”. Radical exclusion is now the order of the day....

The sustained project of international cooperation should be to empower precisely those who are at the short end of the utilitarian equation, the lesser number (although, at almost three billion souls, they are a virtual majority on the planet at present), the permanently marginalized who are not scheduled today, or tomorrow, or ever, to be included in the greater good that utilitarian pragmatism and its corporate sponsors promise.

Point of view

The question of “agency” is critical here. Agency denotes action, and actors. The issue of agency is not only an issue of *what* is happening (the passive voice), but *who is doing* what is happening (the active voice), and who precisely is responsible for what is happening, and the effects we see in the world.

People are poor because of the way humankind acts and behaves — that is, how we manage our affairs, and in whose interests the world is organized and managed. Wars do not just happen; they are declared, financed, and waged by human beings. Tyranny does not just emerge; it is the brutal and intolerant exercise of power by a few people over the many. People are not simply poor, they are *impoverished*.

Yet, throughout the entire text we have before us, agency in this sense is not discussed. Poverty just *is*: a natural phenomenon with many factors and variables, but no agents. It is never defined as the specific effect of the actions, power and greed of real people who are not poor, but whose wealth depends on the poverty of others, the scarcity of others. Instead, poverty is defined within the metaphor of place — a place that people “move in and out of,” a place they “fall into,” and from where they need to be “lifted.” Or of disease or disability or “incapacity,” that can be remedied by education or micro-credit, or other inputs (“policy instruments” and “levers” which focus on “the links in the chain of causation”).

People apparently “fall into poverty” through some flaw, or deficiency, or even bad luck. If we fix the people — or change the luck — they can find their way out of poverty. In this discourse, poverty reduction implies helping people get out of this place called “poverty,” as poor souls eventually find themselves released from Limbo.

But we all know that if it were possible to fix each and every poor person on the planet today, poverty would not disappear. In any case, we know that we will never “fix” even a tiny proportion of the poor. That simply

is not how human development works. The task of poverty eradication is to eradicate the structures that create and depend upon poverty itself, rather than fix the people who are vulnerable to poverty. The people are transitory, the place is permanent.

I was talking one night with a very good friend — a Peruvian presently working within the UN system. At one point we were talking of the work of Gustavo Esteva and his critique of “development” and the caricature of the poor exploited by aid agencies⁴. My friend exclaimed that people in the aid business should talk less about poverty and more about *wealth*, and particularly the obscenely-increasing gap between the rich and the poor in Latin America and elsewhere. Indeed! If we are to confront the effects of poverty, ultimately we must confront wealth and its privilege.

Still, there is a instinctive resistance to accepting the intentional and rational nature of these systems. There is a resistance to the assertion that those who create and manage systems are responsible for their effects. There is resistance to the implication that we who observe these systems, who participate in these systems, who work in them and make them function, without struggling to change them, are complicit in their effects. From the point of view of those who are brutalized by global systems and their local inflections, evil received, is evil done, and there can be no neutral act — regardless of the good intentions of those of us who engage in international development programs.

A decisive obstacle to profound progressive social change — that is, fundamental social, economic and political transformation — is our fatal tendency to want things to change, without really changing anything — especially changing anything that affects ourselves.

But — and I think we all know this —we simply cannot transform the world, without in the process transforming ourselves. We cannot stay fabulously rich and still pretend that we are committed to eradicating poverty. We cannot maintain our privilege, if doing away with the inequalities referred to in paragraph 48 implicitly means — and does it not mean this? — that our privileges must be shared equally and universally. (The root of the word privilege is “private law,” as the root of the word deprivation is “the loss of the private”.)

And if privilege is shared, is it indeed no longer privilege, but a commons? Is the eradication of poverty not then the eradication of privilege, and the creation of a commons? And, therefore, is it not

⁴ See Esteva, Gustavo and Madhu Suri Prakash, *Beyond development, what?*, in Development in Practice, Oxfam GB/Oxford Press, Vol. 8, No. 3, August 1998, pp. 280-296.

specifically the eradication of our own privilege, and our own enjoining within a commons?

Even if our goal at the outset is more gradualist and reformist, does not the *reduction* of poverty imply at least a reduction of *privilege*, if not its outright eradication? And whose privilege is to be reduced, if not our own?

From this perspective, those of us involved in international cooperation and anti-poverty activism cannot allow ourselves to be constrained by a code of speech that uses the passive voice, and avoids recognizing and describing “agency” — that is, that the conditions we deplore are created by the identifiable actions of real people, including ourselves. At the very least, this is where we can begin to honour the privilege that fortune has bestowed upon us, and that has brought us all here to this room.

We have to speak out. We need to promote and support programs to challenge and transform these effects, and to change the systems that destroy rather than develop human societies. And to do so, we must address not only the factors that define poverty, but the factors that define and maintain privilege and the growing extremes of private wealth and power, within and among nations, and between and among individual persons, including ourselves.

Diversity and homogeneity

Ironically, it is globalization itself, in its extreme local manifestations, that is finally revealing the deep duplicity and fault lines in the development paradigm, and creating the opportunity for other perspectives and visions to emerge.

Modernity assumes homogeneity, assumes the increasing convergence of quality and interest into one homogenous global human future. Within modernity, diversity is seen as a deviation from the central axis of progress, and must be tamed and refined for the project to progress. The quest for a unified theory of nature and a unified practice of human society, was at its beginning, and remains today, the impetus of modernism, and the concentration of all human endeavour into one consolidated social and economic system, is at the heart of the project of modernity.

In this context, while paying lip-service to “difference,” development programs — whether those of the UN, of the international financial institutions, of OECD member nations, or the national and international NGOs subsidized by these nations — have never been patient with diversity.

Diversity implies not only diverse pasts, but diverse futures.

Diversity assumes diverse visions of the world, of the meaning of “progress,” and of quality of life and ways of being. Diversity assumes self-determination. It assumes that no option is “natural” and enjoys a special claim to absorb all other ways of being and systems of human community.

Due to the intense localization of the effects of globalization, those who are marginalized by the impact of globalization, are reinforced in their diversity and the particularity of their experience of resistance, adaptation and survival. The social solidarity required among people in the isolation of their abandonment by the state and the mainstream economy, nurtures the very diversity that globalization promises to absorb and level.

Communities are coming together to analyse and create local solutions to the crises they are experiencing. Citizen action, and heightened involvement in governance at the local level of municipalities, has reached unprecedented levels, and is fast becoming one of the most important political realities in countries around the world. As this organizing consolidates, we are seeing local associations reach out to others in their communities, and beyond to the national, regional and international level. They are creating together strategies of mutual support and collaboration on major issues — issues such as ending violence and constructing peace; enforcing government and corporate accountability; promoting democratic governance, human rights, social equity and economic opportunity; protecting local food security and traditional primary producers; and conserving the natural and cultural environment, including biodiversity.

People are making remarkable strides in taking control over their own lives. And a sub-text of this burgeoning movement is precisely the transformation of the social, political and economic structures that enforce the privilege that I spoke of earlier, of which we are the agents and the beneficiaries.

And let me be clear. When I speak of “we,” I do not simply mean — even *especially* mean — only the industrialized nations, or affluent people within these nations. I mean those of wealth and privilege and influence in *all* nations, north and south, who are beneficiaries of prevailing global systems.

It is in the context of the popular organizing and mobilization of resistance that I have described, that we all have a dynamic contribution

to make, if we can find a way to help each other move beyond mere humanitarianism and the cloak of “neutrality.”

What is required, if we have the imagination and the stomach for it — and if we are truly to engage in a project to eradicate the privilege that gives rise to the historic crime of poverty and its devastating human effects — is to give breath and heart to innovative and alternative ideas for developing and conserving creative, vibrant, tolerant, caring and dynamic societies. It is a role of nurturing mutual support and social solidarity, of promoting values of social responsibility and reciprocity, of supporting and mobilizing citizenship in the interests of the entire community. The essence of this role is participation, is activism — indeed, is citizenship itself.

The essence of this role is not service, and is not technical, which is the path to which a preponderance of aid organizations in northern countries — and many of the larger national NGOs in the south as well — have allowed ourselves to be diverted.

The greatest dilemma of international development action is that development assistance has become an intrinsic part of the system that development activists and professionals were once committed to transform. Our role has become “to ameliorate the worst effects,” to care for those who cannot adapt, those who are left behind — that is, to “put a human face” on structural adjustment and the effects of economic globalization.

Firoze Manji, writing about the role of NGOs in Africa, says,

Solidarity is not about fighting other people’s battles. It is about establishing cooperation between different constituencies on the basis of mutual self-respect and concerns about the injustices suffered by each. It is about taking sides in the face of injustice, or the processes that reproduce injustice. It is not built on sympathy, charity, or the portrayal of others as objects of pity, nor the arrogant self-appointment as trustees of the poor. It is not about fundraising to run projects overseas, but raising funds that others can use to fight their own battles. It is about taking actions within one’s own terrain that will enhance the capacity of others to succeed in their fight against injustice.⁵

Our role, as individuals, as professionals, is fundamentally and inescapably, *political*, regardless of whether we acknowledge this reality,

⁵ Manji, Firoze, *Rights, Poverty and Development: The role of NGOs*, mimeograph of paper presented at the Third International NGO Conference, NGOs in a Global Future, Birmingham, January 10-13, 1999.

or act it out intentionally and explicitly. What is required of each of us, and all of us together, is to promote social innovation and change, and participate in and support organized resistance and dissent to the excesses of wealth and privilege — whether the privilege of class, of race, or of gender.

The world is not the way it must be if it is to nurture and protect human health and prosperity. It *can* be changed for the better, and this can happen best through the direct participation and agency of individual citizens collaborating to envision better ways, and mobilizing to bring our propositions forward in the diverse theatre of debate we know as civil society.

Particularly, we need to concentrate on strengthening the capacity of marginalized people to influence the social, economic and political structures that govern their lives — even as forces of globalization, repression and militarization threaten the basis of civil society and their very lives and livelihoods.

It has been said that politics is “the art of the possible.” To the contrary, politics *could* be the art of the possible. But historically, politics has largely been the business of persuading people that various transformative social visions and courses of action are *not* possible.

As just one small example, in Chapter One of the framework document that we have before us, we find the following in paragraph 46:

Small-scale rural, agricultural and service growth have a large impact on reducing poverty — more than any other form of economic growth. Where rural landholding is highly unequal — and land reform politically infeasible — labour-intensive sectors like small-scale industry and services may be the best option for pro-poor growth.

But who decides what is politically feasible or unfeasible? This is a classic example of obscuring agency. The fact is — as everybody here knows — the systematic undermining of small scale rural agriculture has long been at the heart of the imposed development strategies of the IMF and the World Bank, and the most powerful member nations of the OECD, as part of the neo-liberal prescription and structural adjustment. It is a policy promoted by economic elites in the interests of economic elites. It is a policy that benefits national and transnational corporate entities to the detriment of small local producers. It is a policy that benefits rich countries to the detriment of poor countries. It is a policy that has impoverished billions.

Small-scale family farming and market agriculture is politically unfeasible not because of some inevitable march of history and progress, but because it is not seen to be in our interests. It is politically unfeasible because it is not consistent with the project of modernity and “efficiency,” which privileges the concentration of wealth, “economies of scale,” and industrial agriculture, as manifest in the totalization of the control of international capital and transnational agribusiness. Let us at least be clear: it is “politically unfeasible” because it contradicts G8/OECD macro-economic policy.

However, other choices are possible, indeed, “feasible.” The operational concept in the phrase “politically feasible” is politics, *not* feasibility.

Paragraph 38 of Chapter One tells us of the need to

...identify which links in the chain of causation of poverty are actually amenable to change by policy intervention. Causes need to be linked to possible actions, and these have to be prioritised in terms of their likely efficacy.

From my reading, this is the pivotal paragraph in this chapter. But I propose that the logic employed is often precisely the reverse as what is described in this paragraph. We do *not* identify anti-poverty policies on the basis of identified causes of poverty. Rather, *we identify the causes of poverty that we are willing to acknowledge, on the basis of the policies and prescriptions that are already available, and consistent with our interests.*

It is the norm of international cooperation to identify and name only those causes of poverty for which we already have policy prescriptions that are consistent with prevailing ideology and economic orthodoxy — that is, policy prescriptions that are not merely “efficable,” in the words of paragraph 38, but “politically feasible” in the sense of paragraph 46. And these policies and prescriptions almost always are technical and technological, rather than social and political. And, as such, they are never sufficient to fundamentally confront the realities of poverty that we are discussing in this meeting.

This dynamic can be seen in some of the major development issues of our time. It is the essential sub-text of the issue of rural development and small-scale agriculture alluded to earlier. It has been the sub-text of the populationist debate, and the persistence of the population control bias of international aid. It is the sub-text of the perverse and catastrophic policy that defines the supply of narcotic plants as the problem, rather than the increasing demand for narcotics, and the social costs of the war on drugs. This calculation is based on the fact that the interests and tools

exist to wage a war on cultivators and traffickers, but there is no political will to decriminalize these drugs, and divert resources into a campaign to transform the social conditions that create the demand for the drugs in the first place.

To bring it home to one of the most difficult, and contentious, issues we face at this time, this dynamic is also an essential sub-text of the controversy that President Mbeki of South Africa has unleashed in questioning the definitions and prescriptions concerning HIV and AIDS in Africa. The prevailing descriptive definition of AIDS is predicated on the “efficable” — *that is, the politically feasible* — policy prescriptions available to deal with it. These are primarily medical prescriptions, and prescriptions of social engineering, rather than innovations in social and economic policy focusing on issues of equity and exclusion. So the causal definition is one of “disease” rather than “deprivation.”

That the scourge of chronic immunodeficiency and vulnerability to endemic infections is primarily the result of the conditions of poverty and social exclusion is not controversial. Everybody knows this. What is controversial is saying so publicly, and promoting approaches that prioritize confronting the poverty and related social factors of people at risk.

This is the message of President Mbeki, as is clear when we read his words and listen to what he has actually said. The example that he provides is an important one for all of us who wish, through our development activism, to promote fundamental progressive change in the world we share.

In the final analysis, this is what at stake in our deliberations. Policy is made by people. People like ourselves. It takes courage and political will to challenge conventional irrationality and the balance of forces that reinforce prevailing policy prescriptions, and maintain the world in its present trajectory. But other choices are possible. And if enough persons share a choice, and they have political power, that choice is not only possible, it is inevitable.

As Francis Ponge tells us, “Beauty is the impossible which lasts.”

Susan George closed her presentation in Bangkok by observing,

We have the numbers on our side, because there are far more losers than winners in the neo-liberal game. What we lack, so far, is the organization and the unity which in this age of technology can be overcome...Solidarity no longer means aid, or not just aid, but finding the hidden synergies in each other's

struggles so that our numerical force and the power of our ideas become overwhelming.

In closing, I know that many people sincerely believe that some things will simply never change, including many of the realities I have described today, and that we must work within these constraints.

I can only say in response, that while we must obviously work in the context of these constraints, it is precisely those things that are believed will never change, that we should most relentlessly focus on as change agents. And it is our charge as people of privilege and status, and as citizens of our various countries and communities, to speak the truth, to live the truth, and demand the truth. That, I think, is what this consultation is about.

It is a wonderful opportunity, and I am looking forward to being with all of you these few days.

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