

Acceptance of core values is key to human survival

This is the text of a speech delivered by Dr. Soedjatmoko before a global conference of spiritual and parliamentary leaders on Human Survival held at Oxford University, U.K. April 11-15, 1988.

By Soedjatmoko

The centrality of the problem of human survival is becoming increasingly apparent. The rate of population growth combined with the profligate use of natural resources, the damage being done to biological diversity and the impact of industrial pollution are already pressing in on the globe's lifesupport systems. Global weather patterns and climate are already affected — and will increasingly be affected — by the results of human intervention... These in turn aggravate in many cases the endemic poverty in various parts of the world. Poverty in the Third World is further increased by the vagaries of the world economy and the persistence of its structural dualism. The present net resource outflow from the developing countries to the industrial North and the sluggish growth of the world economy are a reflection of the unresolved debt crisis.

A seemingly runaway technology, essentially labor-saving, while enhancing productivity, further increases unemployment and poverty in the Third World to a scale that is beginning to overload the political systems of many of those countries. The fact that between 25-35% of the total number of scientists in the world are employed in the military and arms related sectors of the economy, raises further questions about the degree to which science and technology, as organized at present are capable of serving human and social purposes, rather than those of destruction and violence.

All these problems have now become interrelated and hence infinitely more complex.

Social change

But compounding all this is the rapidity and pervasiveness of social change itself, outstripping the capacity of institutions and political systems to respond adequately. And this in turn casts doubts on humankind's capacity, as presently organized, to control the continued damage to the globe's lifesupport systems before this reaches points of irreversibility, and to arrest the slide into political fragmentation, fanaticism and violence. And over all this, of course, hangs the continuing specter of nuclear war, despite the hesitant and, hopefully, first steps towards

tion and the slower death resulting from irreversible damage to the globe's life supportsystems now set the inescapable limits to the degree of individual and collective thoughtlessness, irresponsibility or folly the human race can afford.

All this is not new. The seriousness of the human condition and the interconnectedness of its problems that has grown out of humankind's new condition of global interdependence, has been persuasively presented in a set of reports of major significance produced by a number of independent World Commissions. The Brandt report on Common Prosperity, the Palme report on Common Security, the report of the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues chaired by Crown Prince Hassan of Jordan and Sadrudin Agha Khan: Common Humanity, and the Brundtland Report entitled Our Common Fu-

ture, all have consolidated the present state of our knowledge and understanding of these problems. All these reports have presented policy recommendations for action and international cooperation.

Little action

Still the most urgent question remains: why is so little being done about these threats to human survival? True, important first steps are being taken in terms of nuclear arms reduction. It remains to be seen however to what extent the reduction of competition in numbers is not being replaced by a competition in the quality of weapons.

There have been a number of local, and even a few regional, environmental success stories. Nevertheless they still constitute rather fragmented efforts. Much less is being achieved at the international level, although there too one can count a number of isolated success stories. None of these however have been commensurate with the scale of international or national actions that are required to make a difference in terms of significantly enhancing the chances for human survival.

The failure or inadequacy so far, of timely international action has many reasons. It certainly is not only the lack

of agreed analysis of many of these issues, on which effective international action could be based. Another is the complexity and magnitude especially of some of the transnational problems, which governments and political systems are not organized to handle effectively. This pervasive problem of the inadequacy and growing obsolescence of our presently known systems of governance, at the national as well as the international level, may be one of the most pressing problems on the human agenda. Aggravating this situation is the absence or weakness of both national and international constituencies that could compel governments to act. There is also the degree of uncertainty that still surrounds some basic scientific questions as well as their policy implications: But lying close to the heart of the problem of the near paralysis of international action is the prevalence of national interest, often taken in a very shortterm sense. What the proper management of interdependence calls for is a voluntary blunting of the sharper edges of national sovereignty for the sake of common survival. This however is not likely to happen unilaterally. It will have to be part of a general process of increasing global awareness and conscientization of the peoples in this world and their governments. Like so many of the valuechanges that have taken place in recent history the initiative will not come from governments, but rather from grassroot movements whose lead governments then will have to follow. The labor movement, the liberation movements, the women's movement, the environmental movement and the peace movement, are examples of this process.

Solidarity

The need then is for the development of effective national constituencies linked together in a global network committed to a multivariied search for an inclusive and shared ethical framework for human survival and solidarity. These constituencies and such a network, merging these various perspectives, could and should place the responsibility to protect and nurture the global lifesupport systems with its attendant

the top of the national and international legislative agendas. They should and could also hold national governments publicly accountable for their actions or failure to act, nationally as well as internationally, on issues of human survival and solidarity.

The search for such an ethical framework has identified a number of new learning needs. They are in the realm of cognition as well as of attitudinal or value change. As to the first, the knowledge that is needed is by and large available. The problem is that it does not reach many of those whose behavior have considerable impact on the human environment: the poor and the illiterate in the Third World. It is unlikely, because of the cost involved, that in many parts of the Third World expansion of the formal schoolsystem will reach them. Most likely we will have to develop different and more cost-effective learning systems using modern technologies imbedded in traditional social infrastructures. Through which they have access to scientific information relevant to both the survival strategies of the peasants in many parts of the Third World and to the protection of their extremely fragile environments. One might speak here of the need for a poor man's learning system. Of course, in their case, access to scientific information will have to be reinforced by a proper policy framework of incentives and disincentives.

(There are, of course also those in the industrial countries who are not willing to weigh the external consequences of their industrial actions in the decisions they take).

Reason, civility

Neither is there an adequate development of teaching materials and methodologies for use throughout the existing school system. However the more fundamental problem the world's educational systems face is how to make new generations realize how much their own future, that of succeeding generations and that of their nation is bound up with humankind's collective capacity to tend the earth and its peoples.* We will have to learn to prepare

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agreed analysis of many of these issues, on which effective international action could be based. Another is the complexity and magnitude especially of some of the transnational problems, which governments and political systems are not organized to handle effectively. This pervasive problem of the inadequacy and growing obsolescence of our presently known systems of governance, at the national as well as the international level, may be one of the most pressing problems on the human agenda. Aggravating this situation is the absence or weakness of both national and international constituencies that could compel governments to act. There is also the degree of uncertainty that still surrounds some basic scientific questions as well as their policy implications: But lying close to the heart of the problem of the near paralysis of international action is the prevalence of national interest, often taken in a very short term sense. What the proper management of interdependence calls for is a voluntary blunting of the sharper edges of national sovereignty for the sake of common survival. This however is not likely to happen unilaterally. It will have to be part of a general process of increasing global awareness and conscientization of the peoples in this world and their governments. Like so many of the value changes that have taken place in recent history the initiative will not come from governments, but rather from grassroot movements whose lead governments then will have to follow. The labor movement, the liberation movements, the women's movement, the environmental movement and the peace movement, are examples of this process.

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The need then is for the development of effective national constituencies linked together in a global network committed to a multivariied search for an inclusive and shared ethical framework for human survival and solidarity. These constituencies and such a network, merging these various perspectives, could and should place the responsibility to protect and nurture the global life support systems with its attendant problems of poverty, will abuse, injustice and violence at

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changing world, in which unpredictability, instability, and vulnerability may well be the commanding features. We will have to develop their capacity to live in such a world without irrational fears or resort to violence, but with reason and civility, by learning to work out new balances between our longer range environmental responsibilities to future generations and our short term needs and political process, between the rights of the individual and his or her obligations to the larger community, between the need for growth and development, and the need for equity, between personal or group needs and the need for common survival.

Some of the learning needs have to do with different ways of thinking:

— to learn to think globally, i.e. not only in terms of one's own nation's or group's interests and orientations, and to learn to think of, and perceive and empathize with, the human as a single but diverse unit.

— to learn to extend one's moral horizon so as to develop a perspective of human solidarity that embraces the whole of humankind across the globe, and temporally, extends to future generations.

— to learn to accept the inherent complexity of natural and social systems and to re-organize our educational, research, as well as governmental and political institutions and systems accordingly, without taking refuge in oversimplification, reductionism, dogmatism or single factor explanations.

Interdependence

At an even more fundamental level we will have to learn to accept limits and develop a corresponding sense of proportion, fairness and humility, flowing from the reality of global interdependence, however skewed, and from human kind's essential interconnectedness with, and dependency on nature. This may mean a break with the kind of hubris that characterized much of modern culture in the early part of this century. It also means having to learn that the record of violence in achieving its objectives is, in recent years a dismal one, that the use of violence often only invites greater counter-violence, and that the use of violence, however justified, may demolish the very goals and ideals that were sought, and create the mirror image or the injustice it sought to destroy.

We will also have to learn to accept that there are multiple ways of perceiving and expressing truth, and to accept the inevitability of religious pluralism and value-orientations in this world.**)

This acceptance may be the beginning of tolerance between and within religions and of cooperation between religions on issues that are linked to human survival.

One learning need that is of crucial importance in establishing a constructive dialogue between parliamentarians and religious leaders is based on the recognition that three interlocking sets of concerns assign a new role to the world's religions today: 1) the potential for extinction of humankind with the weapons of mass destruction we now possess; 2) the hunger and poverty which traps hundreds of millions in a life of daily misery and degradation, and 3) the urgency of managing more wisely and prudently the limited resources of the earth.

Police and ethics

There is also the need to re-establish the link between policy and ethics, between power and morality, especially in a period of massive social transformation. In such a situation the human person anywhere in the world is confronted with his need to find meaning in the changes in the economic, social, cultural and technological spheres, that are affecting his or her life and that of his or her family. It forces him to face the fragmentation of his own inner perception of himself and to try to overcome it. It is a fragmentation that has resulted, ironically, from the advances of science and its research into both the human body and human mind. However useful the insight gained, the process has also contributed to the much larger problem of the present human predicament. What is now called for are new efforts to reintegrate the human person's inner perception of his own humanity. In doing so he will have to address questions regarding the ultimate meaning of human existence and of his situation ***) And it is not unlikely that in that effort he or she turns back to the sources of his particular religion with the new questions and perspectives that the challenge of human survival forces upon him, and that he or she may well find new meanings in familiar texts, rituals and metaphors.

Any religion is bound to become irrelevant if it does not speak out on the burning moral issues of the time, even where they have a high political content. However there is no way to avoid the dangers of dogmatism, intolerance and absolutism, and the abuse of religion for political purposes that have marked the many disastrous periods in human history when in the name of ultimate truth the most inhuman acts were perpetrated and justified — if it is not realized that there are many different ways in which to translate an ethical judgement into a political act. In fact opposite political positions can be taken on the basis of the same moral judgement.

Social reality

The building of a new international consensus from which a more sustainable, humane and morally acceptable international order could evolve will depend on the ability to agree on basic moral principles and will require the cooperation between those who hold power and have the responsibility to create and extend the legal instrumentalities as one important avenue for the explicit acceptance of the core values essential to human survival — and the obligations that flow from them — on the one hand, and religious leaders concerned with the moral issues of their time on the other. It is the proper role for religions to articulate moral positions. But beyond this religious must mediate among the often conflicting demands of public order and social change by relating these to a framework of meaning that transcends the particular issues and passions of the day. It is an essential condition for the attempt to turn moral judgement into social reality.

For parliamentarians and religious leaders to conduct a fruitful dialogue that could re-link policy and ethics in new ways that are relevant to the contemporary human predicament and that could contribute towards the building of an international consensus, there has, however, to be some common ground and a common language, if they want to be heard by the other side.» It is imperative therefore that parliamentarians do not legislate until they have heard and considered how the problem they are dealing with looks like when defined from a moral perspective. For much too long already have we allowed experts to define our problems for us, often in narrow materialistic terms, thereby leaving the moral issues as residual problems, to be taken care of once the experts have made their decisions. The rise in levels of religious intensity all over the world is part of the growing protest against the lack of weight given to the moral dimensions of problems — in so-called expert or technocratic advice or policy recommendations. Conversely, for moralists to speak as technological illiterates will not do either. Familiarity with the possible social and ethical implications of technology and technological choices, as well as sensitivity to the validity of other cultures and value systems in the world, but also sensitivity to the realities and limits to power, will be essential condition for relevancy. In fact, the more science and technology have an impact on society and its evolution, the more ethical judgements become necessary. What is needed then is a revitalized capability

for moral reasoning. For, when everything is said and done, in the end, as the Dutch philosopher Van Peursen points out: the Future is an ethical category.

Ethics

The educational system everywhere therefore needs to link more closely training in the natural and social sciences with a new kind of humanities, one that is totally conversant with science and technology, as well as with the global issues, and capable of relating those issues to the values of their own society as well as those of other societies in the world, in order to build up that capacity for moral reasoning in a national as well as global context.

This will require, more generally, a renewed emphasis on multidisciplinary research, in order to deal effectively with the fact that many of the major issues lie at the interface between disciplines or scientific fields.

There is then also a need to develop methodologies for the teaching of ethics, in both a historical and global, pluralistic setting, possibly through familiarisation with the literary, philosophical, religious and historical classics of one's own culture and at least one other culture. Identification with some of the literary characters of symbolic expressions or with the human dilemmas, paradoxes and perplexities of human existence might be a good beginning — as are case studies of difficult choices in real — life situations — towards the stimulation of one's capacity for empathy and of the moral imagination. As under present circumstances non-violence is no longer an utopian goal, but has become a practical necessity, the historical and contemporary study of non-violence a political strategy, and peace education in general, might have some practical significance as well. The teaching of ethics would also have to help nurture the sense of inner security often drawn from faith, that enables one to forego aggressiveness and violence in situations of great vulnerability. This could in addition also be done through the nurturing of one's sense of inner space, through religion, the arts or simply through a sense of humor and the capacity to laugh.

New revolution

Humankind may well stand at the beginning of a new kind of Copernican revolution. From a view centered around the nation-state to one in which the state system revolves around the commonality of a set of core values pertaining to human survival and solidarity. It requires the extension of one's

moral horizon, and of one's personal loyalties and commitment beyond the tribe, the community or the nation to the human race as a whole. The identification of such a set of irreducible and shared values need not in any way lead to the imposition of a single value system on the whole of humankind. Humankind's racial, cultural and religious diversity, like the biological diversity on this planet, ensures rather than reduces, the stability of the human race. In this regard cultural pluralism is based on the fact that these shared core values are imbedded in different value configurations that are specific for each culture and each nation.

Living together on this finite planet, where we all have the ability to damage, if not to destroy each other, requires an enlargement of our concept and our sense of neighborhood. Neighbors are bound together in mutual dependence, and on that functional score all people today surely qualify as neighbors. But we lack the positive qualities of neighborliness: empathy, an acknowledgement of mutual obligation, and a reasonable level of tolerance. It is not that the classic neighborhood is not also the ground for intense suspicion, jealousy and even hostility. But its members know that, withall, they must live together, and that the expression of open antagonism leaves all poorer and less comfortable. There is also a degree of acceptance, within bounds, of the Town Drunk, the Village Idiot, the Black Sheep — on the grounds that they display weaknesses that we all possess to some degree. In the final analysis they too belong. Mutatis mutandis the same could be said about the family. Both are essential training grounds or learning environments, for the give-and-take, the mutual tolerance and the inculcation or reinforcement of human values that living in a crowded, pluralistic and extremely vulnerable world requires.

Re-orientation

Both the concept of neighborhood and the family are now in many ways under siege. So are the formal and non-formal school systems. To a large extent the electronic media may have arrogated some of their important functions in the transmission of knowledge, however superficial, and the shaping of value-configurations and expectations.

It is obvious that the adjustment of the formal and non-formal school systems from pre-school level to the most advanced regions of teaching and research — to the global requirement of human survival and solidarity should go way beyond the conventional notions of educational reform.

Global consciousness, the attitudinal and value — changes that are called for, as well as the need to involve the poor, the marginalised, the illiterate and the alienated in major learning processes, will require a fundamental rethinking of our educational methods and the organisation of our educational institutions and information — and communication systems. This may involve the integration of formal and non-formal educational institutions, multi-media infrastructures, and traditional social infrastructures of family and neighborhood, into a dense network of interactive, social learning environments at all levels of society, capable of involving the rich as well as the poor, the sophisticated as well as the illiterate according to their own diverse needs.

Over and beyond the changes in form and content, the re-orientation of the educational systems also call for the continuous reflection and redefinition of the individual's place, his responsibility and freedom, in his relatedness to himself, his family, his expanding community in the global society, and the Divine.

Precursor

We will also have to rethink our concepts of work, learning and leisure, and the various ways and phases, in which these might be intertwined differently in response to the much more rapid pace of social change and its continuously shifting skill requirements of a technology driven changing labor market. Already universities throughout the world are struggling to redefine their function in a very competitive, rapidly changing, and unstable, globalized, world economy. But very few have begun to organize themselves to deal systematically with the global issues of human survival, development and welfare in its various dimensions and in their inter-relationship with national problems. In that sense the UN University, headquartered in Tokyo, with its global mandate and its perspective of human solidarity, may well be an early precursor of a new generation of institutes of higher learning that the world desperately needs.

The search for an ethic of human survival and solidarity, i.e. for ethical systems that are relevant to the present human predicament, and the need to develop a worldwide consensus, compel us to continue this process of ethical reflection throughout the human community. The dialogue needed might start between spokesmen of the major religions, and between them and parliamentarians the

world over. But it must be further stimulated by the perceptions of non-religious ethical systems.

We will also have to realize that as a result of past colonial policies in many parts of the Third World, religious leaders in the countryside have been deliberately kept out of what later became the modernizing mainstream of national life in newly independent nations. We will, therefore also have to make a deliberate effort to enable them to participate in that continuing dialogue between parliamentarians and religious leaders. They can only do so on equal footing if their own, often separate, educational institutions can share in the access to modern knowledge and experience and can integrate that knowledge into their own values systems.

Throughout much of human history secular executive and legislative power on the one hand and religion on the other, have an uneasy relationship in their competition for the hearts and souls of people. The mutation in the human condition resulting from mankind's capacity to destroy itself and life that — in the words of Carl Sagan — graces our earth, now makes it imperative that both work together towards a reordering of mankind's collective priorities, and towards the articulation of a broad international consensus in order better to ensure the survival of the human species and its welfare in peace and justice. The business of building an international consensus around an ethic of human survival and solidarity is essentially a learning process. It is also a long-term proposition, even though the hour is late. Moving the world's educational systems towards contributing to that learning process may well be one of the most decisive steps that we can take as we move into the next century.

*)Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: "I will create a vicegerent on earth"... (Qur'an, 11:30). And he taught Adam the nature of all things... (11:31). He said: O Adam Tell them their natures...(11:33)

**)And if thy Lord had willed all who are in the earth would have believed (in you) together... (X.99)

***)Have they not travelled around the earth, so that they might come to possess hearts whereby they can understand or ears wherewith they can listen? For it is not the (physical) eyes that become blind but the hearts in people's breasts that lose perception) 22:46)

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