AN ETHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR HUMAN SOLIDARITY
A draft presented to the Independent Commission on
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In a world of shrunken spaces and high density, porous national bound-
aries and horrifying destructive power, expanding technological capacity and
instant communication, we live in imperfect but vivid intimacy with all of our
fellow human beings. Our attention to any one segment of humanity may be
limited or self-limiting. But our mutual ability to affect each other's lives
for better or for worse has never had the scope and immediacy that it has
today.

Humanitarianism is a basic orientation toward the interests and welfare
of people. This perspective demands that whatever detracts from human well-
being must be questioned, regardless of its effects on economic growth,
political power, or the stability of a certain order. Abstractions like
growth, stability and order are not taken as ends in themselves, but only have
value as means toward greater well-being for people.

Humanitarianism proceeds from the recognition that each one of us is no
more and no less than a human being. The quality of human dignity, however
defined, belongs to each one of us equally. To emphasize our common humanity
is not to deny or downplay the importance of transcendental concerns, but
simply to recognize that no one definition of a higher truth is universally
and unconditionally accepted. Common humanity is a point we can start with as
we learn to live with multiple perceptions of the truth. And it has its own
value. As soon as we brand our opponents as devils, we deprive them of their
humanity, and ourselves of the humane standards we hold ourselves to in deal-
ing with fellow human beings.

The humanitarian perspective necessarily takes a long-range view of human
welfare, for one of its essential dimensions is solidarity with future
generations. Our first responsibility to our progeny is to assure that they
have a future by avoiding catastrophic war. A further one is to assure that
they do not inherit a planet whose productive capacity has been substantially
and irresparably decreased. A third is not to deprive our descendents of the
chance to learn what we do not know, such as the value of species that seem to
us useless. In other words, we have an obligation not to foreclose the
options available to our successors. Humanitarianism is cautious. It has a
strong bias against the irreversible.

Humanitarianism is not a formula for resolving dilemmas. It is a framework for recognizing them. Once human welfare has been placed firmly at the centre of concern, however, there are still a host of questions to be resolved in any specific set of circumstances. The humanitarian perspective includes an ethical orientation that equips us to approach these difficult questions: an ethic of human solidarity.

Modern communications have played a tremendous role in strengthening the sense of human solidarity. This was seen most recently and dramatically when the images and descriptions of the continuing famine in Africa burst upon the consciousness of the public in Europe, Japan, the United States and elsewhere. Coming face-to-face, in an almost literal sense, with suffering on such a scale challenges people's notions of what it means to be human. It brings about an expansion of our moral universe.

An expansion of the moral universe to match the functional interdependence of people is highly appropriate. The expansion needs to take place in several dimensions: horizontal, to cover more of the globe; vertical, to take in new kinds of moral issues; and temporal, to cover future generations. Individual and institutional capacities to respond to expansion are, however, far from adequate. In some cases, the expansion of the moral universe is overwhelming, and produces reaction-- chauvinism, survivalism and extreme parochialism are manifestations of this.

There are deep ambiguities in virtually all the ethical choices that people are called upon to make. These arise because worthy goals can and do conflict with each other, because contemporary life is extremely complex, and because we cannot perfectly foresee or control all the consequences of our actions. It is impossible, in any complex situation, to do only one thing, and the unintended consequences of a choice may overwhelm the intended result. Even with a firm ethical orientation toward human well-being, we cannot eliminate risk, the possibility of tragedy, or the real constraints that prevent people from doing what they believe to be right. The distance and disjunction between intention and result make caution an ethical imperative.

Certain other ethical imperatives follow from the fact that we cannot control or foresee consequences in a complex environment. They include the responsibility to examine and try to understand the full range of consequences of an action, to avoid one-dimensional thinking. Another is to make every effort to minimize harm, and to compensate the sufferers when harm is unavoidably brought about in pursuit of a competing good. A third is to exercise discernment in the face of unintended harm. Justifiable actions may bring harm to some people, and it is important to acknowledge bad consequences for what they are rather than insisting that they are tolerable because unavoidable.

The need to act without perfect knowledge or certainty is a major dilemma for those who hold power. Inaction is no alternative-- it can be as decisive as action, and just as damaging. No single person or institution has the capacity to marshall all the facts, understand all the alternatives, or

predict all the reactions to and interpretations of an action. Therefore no one can be self-sufficient in making complex ethical decisions. This fact underscores the crucial importance of continual discourse on ethical issues. The broadest possible discourse, within and among different cultures, can at the very least uncover differences of conviction and their sources. Exposure to different ways of looking at a problem may increase understanding and in doing so enlarge areas of agreement. These are the prerequisites for an expanded consensus on humanitarian issues.

The preoccupation with humanitarian issues arises out of a sense of the tremendous vulnerability of the human person in today's world. Violence has become a fact of life, in the daily lives of millions as well as in the wars that continue to plague the developing world. Civilian casualties have shown a steady tendency to rise in proportion to combatant casualties in recent history. Torture is reportedly institutionalized as an instrument of repression in more than 100 countries. Indiscriminate weapons are being used in actual conflicts and as the basis of strategic doctrine-- nuclear weapons being the leading example in the latter category. Starvation continues to be used as a means of suppressing opposition, while control over civilian populations serves as a tactic as well as an objective of armed conflict. State authorities seem to be increasingly willing to use violence, not only in their relations with other states, but in extra-judicial proceedings against their own citizens: political opponents, criminals, misfits, or outcastes-- extending even to the children who inhabit the street.

Man's inhumanity to man is not an invention of the modern era, but the scope of his capacity to act it out is historically unprecedented. Ancient themes such as greed, betrayal of popular will, lust for power, and ethnic hatred combine with more recently emerged economic and social strains to create new sources of conflict. Rivalry over land and resources has intensified, spurred by the need to satisfy the requirements and aspirations of growing populations. Developments in science and technology raise new ethical challenges by endowing human beings with powers that far outstrip their collective good judgment. Many kinds of environmental problems show no respect for international borders, such as the air pollution that produces acid rain or the destructive land-use practices that disrupt hydrological cycles.

Increasingly, impelled as refugees, expelled as misfits, or volunteering as migrants, people, too, ignore international borders. The vast population movements that are taking place give rise to a plethora of humanitarian problems. Those who succeed in moving often become targets of resentment, exploitation, discrimination or debilitating dependency; while those who do not are often stopped by inhumane methods.

Around the world, poverty holds more people than ever in its grip, while income disparities fuel tensions that can erupt into violence between or within countries. Even the search for solutions to these basic problems can lead to conflict, as ideological disputes over economic strategies degenerate into violent confrontation. Meanwhile, the frustration of heightened popular

aspirations generates political discontent, and there are almost always internal or external forces willing to exploit that impatience.

National governments, clearly, are not in control of the processes of change. Their ability to direct the course of events is being eroded from two directions at once: from below by sub-national groups that have lost faith in the government's commitment to represent their interests, and from above by transnational processes and institutions. The nation-state is on the defensive. In many cases, this has prompted governments to respond to internal challenges with repression and to external forces with the refusal to cooperate in common endeavours. The pursuit of national security has come to place excessive reliance on the use or threat of force. This has led to the militarization of whole societies and the neglect of the economic, social and political factors that determine in large part a nation's vulnerability.

It is important to recognize the nature of the historical process in which contemporary humanitarian issues are imbedded. It is one of tremendous turmoil, fragmentation and vulnerability-- in the developing countries in particular. In some cases, the turmoil is part of the struggle to throw off the remnants of colonial structures and power relationships. But in many more, the end of the colonial era has been followed in short order by a new period of contention, as mechanisms for political representation have failed to take hold. In a number of countries, the state apparatus has been captured by one class or ethnic group, which has used it for their own advancement. But even without the willful appropriation of the benefits of state power, the development process itself generates inequalities that a representative government must mediate. All too often, however, states have failed in or abandoned their mediating roles and substituted repression for social management. Increasingly, therefore, resistance to inequality and the violation of humanitarian norms manifests itself in opposition to the state.

An important consequence of this process is the coming to prominence of new actors, both within the governmental structures of new states (or states that have radically changed their political system) and outside of state structures. Humanitarian norms are based on the consensus of what we loosely call the community of nations, and evolved in the 19th and early 20th centuries mostly in the context of war between European states. The new actors referred to above spring from movements and cultures that did not participate in formulating the international consensus on humanitarian norms, and have never been asked to give their views on it. It is not surprising that they feel little obligation to maintain it.

Many of the new contenders have no experience of real national politics, which are necessarily consensus politics, much less of international politics, which are even more so. Moreover, many states that accept international standards in external conflicts still refuse to apply humanitarian norms to internal opposition groups. These groups thus lack the incentive of mutual restraint to apply the norms themselves.

One additional explanatory factor in the fragility of the humanitarian consensus may be that the consensus itself has not drawn sufficiently upon non-Western cultural, legal and religious traditions. The historical reasons for this are comprehensible. Humanitarian law grew out of European experience and was codified initially by Europeans. Naturally, it drew upon European moral and intellectual sources. However, the norms of humanitarian conduct might become more firmly entrenched in non-European cultural areas if they were more explicitly related to non-European sources of inspiration. The holy texts of non-Western religions and the legal traditions, philosophies, and customary practices of other cultures abound in implicit or explicit moral injunctions that imply an ethic of human solidarity.

A broader consensus on humanitarian issues requires a search for the highest common values that are widely shared despite all the negative, conflictual elements of human societies. All cultures and religions accredit human beings with a moral dimension, and expect to see it manifested in however fragmented and diluted a form. Values such as a respect for innocent life, responsibility toward future generations, protection of the human habitat, an obligation to aid and protect the weak, altruism at least within the family circle and the immediate community-- if not the nation and the world-- are widely if not universally acknowledged in some form. This ethical core is the basis on which a wider consensus can be built.

Disregard for humanitarian values is not found only in situations of overt conflict. It is also manifest in the willingness of the international community to stand by while hundreds of millions of people sink into the depths of absolute deprivation. This amounts to the acceptance of a "doctrine of dispensability" applying to the poorest and most helpless members of society. While the first line of responsibility for them rests with their own communities and states, these entities are often helpless to remedy a bad situation. Often, they lack the resources or the skills to combat deprivation, or are in the grip of larger forces in the national or the world economy over which they have no control.

The international community can easily condemn violations of humanitarian standards. But it can hardly claim to be surprised when desperate people lash out violently, and in doing so disregard basic humanitarian principles. The first reaction of the perpetrators to pleas for restraint is likely to be: "Where was the outrage of the international community, whose norms we are now being asked to respect, during the quiet crisis that killed our children through malnutrition and disease, that despoiled our lands through environmental destruction, that imprisoned us in ignorance and oppression?" The keen sense of structural violence on the part of its victims, and their determination to resist it, is the link that joins long-term humanitarian issues of poverty and injustice to the acute outbreaks of violation of norms in wars or violent internal struggles. The contenders in such struggles are not likely to observe the norms set by the international community until they are acknowledged to be a part of it themselves.

To illustrate: In 1979 a papal envoy went to Iran to intercede with the revolutionary government on behalf of the American hostages, hostage-taking being one broadly-acknowledged violation of the humanitarian principle that non-combatants should not be made to suffer. Ayatollah Khomeini replied to the envoy: "Our people were massacred for fifty years, and the best sons and daughters of our nation were thrown into inhuman prisons where they died under brutal torture, yet the question of mediation never arose, nor did it ever oc- cur to His Eminence, the Pope, to show any concern for our oppressed people or even to mediate with the plea that oppression cease." The eye-for-an-eye im- pulse may be flawed as moral reasoning, but the episode demonstrates that the essential characteristic of a workable humanitarian ethic is universality. It cannot be applied selectively without losing all credibility. Only if it is based on human solidarity can it function at all.

Dual standards, or multiple standards tailored to specific circumstances or to the perceptions and ideologies of separate societies are a luxury that can no longer be afforded. Joseph Cardinal Bernardin stated the reason succinctly: "We live in a world which is interdependent in character and nuclear in context". With all societies so vulnerable to the actions of others, and all faced with the possibility of extinction, standards must be fashioned that are acceptable across a wide spectrum of cultures and ideologies. Embodied in these standards must be the notion of the human species as a single and indivisible but pluralistic unit.

Growing population densities, improved communications and transportation technologies, the unification of world markets, and above all the powerful means of violence now available mean that the world has become like a small island; there is no way for us to escape from or avoid the aspirations and am- bitions of our neighbors. People who live on islands or in conditions of ex- treme population density learned long ago that in such circumstances is it foolish to seek complete control over one's neighbors or total victory over one's adversaries. The ability to tolerate differences, and to empathize with those who are different is a mechanism for survival.

General rules and principle of human conduct have evolved in specific historical settings, and within those settings they have acquired strong pre- sumptive authority. But in a situation of rapid social, cultural and techno- logical change, the old presumptions may lose their reliability as ethical guidelines. Still, it is possible, if not easy, to define some of the outer limits of ethical behavior that would be recognized very widely in the modern world. The question is, do these outer limits help us very much in the ambig- uous and complex circumstances in which we must operate today? As James Gustafson has written, "Slavery and murder are always wrong... but that principle does not in itself resolve the question of how to deal with the massive dependence of large numbers of people on the choices made by those who have power to determine national or international economic arrangements and developments. Those arrangements put masses at the mercy of others, but we do not call that slavery; they may lead to malnutrition and death, but we do not call that murder". These ethical issues are not residual questions; they are absolutely central to the dilemmas of our times.

Stanley Hoffman makes the point that "we should not pose the problem of ethics and international affairs as a problem of morality versus politics....- It is through the right kind of politics that some moral restraints can become observed and practical." The right kind of politics begins with a sober consideration of the reasons of self-interest that will persuade states and other actors to accept the precepts of common humanity. These reasons emerge from the inescapable facts of interdependence, from which no nation today can insulate itself.

With the development of nuclear weapons, the destructive power of the instruments of war has reached levels never before imagined, so that even those states not directly involved in a conflict have a strong interest in mediating it. Powerful conventional weapons are easily available even to small groups, so that every country with an aggrieved minority faces a substantial risk. Furthermore, the volatility of a world that is going through a period of fundamental transformation creates a tinderbox effect in which conflict cannot easily be contained and isolated. Each time a violation of international law or norms of civility is tolerated, it sets a dangerous precedent that makes it more likely that similar violations will be attempted.

The willingness voluntarily to blunt the sharper edges of national sovreignty can be seen in all successful efforts to manage interdependence. It is no less essential to the task of preserving and extending humanitarian values, which are truly indivisible. Each violation in whatever sphere diminishes our common humanity. But trimming the edges of sovreignty does not imply undermining or superseding the nation-state. It does imply the need to agree upon some methods for holding states accountable for their actions, or for their inaction in the face of another's dereliction of humanitarian obligations.

In 1915, when Europe was overtaken by the horror of World War I, Sigmund Freud observed that restraint originates in dread of the opinion of the community. "When the community has no rebuke to make," he wrote, "there is an end of all suppression of the baser passions, and men perpetrate deeds of cruelty, fraud, treachery and barbarity so incompatible with their civilization that one would have held them to be impossible." Where there is no sense of community, where the community remains silent or cannot find its voice, restraint breaks down.

The refinement and extension of international legal instruments provide one important avenue for the explicit acceptance of humanitarian norms and the obligations that flow from them. There are serious gaps in the law as it stands, and an even more serious failure to secure general ratification of some of the existing instruments. But the greatest failure of all is not in coverage or ratification but in enforcement. In the face of gross violations of humanitarian principles, the community of nations too often "has no rebuke to make" unless it is a politically motivated one.

The weakness of international enforcement mechanisms in a world of highly politicized nation-states forces a return to the emphasis on consensus. The

importance of wider participation in consensus-making and a universal standard
of accountability has been noted. There may also be a need for additional and
more effective forums in which states can be called to account. The United
Nations does to some extent provide such a forum, but there should be more
outlets in which the voices of non-governmental actors and claimants can be
heard, as well as those of people who feel themselves unrepresented by exist-
ing political structures. Regional organizations may be effective settings
for such exercises in accountability. But there is little doubt that the most
powerful channels of expression for the powerless will continue to be through
non-governmental channels: through organizations, movements, and courageous
individuals. it is essential that such voices have access to means of commu-
nication so that others may have access to their message.

Calls for a strong international consensus are often dismissed as unat-
tainable, for they raise fears of a tyrannical imposition of a uniform system
of values on a highly pluralistic world. Uniformity is neither necessary nor
desirable, for an international consensus can and should be a flexible, dynam-
ic and minimalistic one. It requires identifying a few irreducible values--
but these may have a different configuration among themselves and in relation
to other values, depending on their cultural setting. What is important is
not the configuration, but rather that with each culturally specific setting
the irreducible values are to be found. Each nation and people has a stake in
helping to identify the core of the humanitarian ethic, and in tolerating many
different expressions of it. As Terry Nardin has written, "Not everyone is
committed to a pluralistic world, but everyone must live in one."

The idea of human solidarity implies an almost Copernican change of per-
spective, from a view centered around the nation-state to one in which the
state system revolves around the commonality of human interests, with human
well-being as its primary goal. It requires the extension of personal loy-
alties and commitment beyond the community or the nation to the human race as
a whole.

For centuries, the great religions have taught the essential oneness of
the human race. That transcendent perception of common humanity seems to have
waned, though it may yet be reawakened. It is strongly buttressed by the
exigencies of interdependence as well as the logic of moral philosophy. And
it is fully consistent with the reality of international pluralism.

Living together on this finite planet, where we all have the ability to
damage if not 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 acknowl-
edgement 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.

The greatest obstacle to the achievement of a sense of neighborhood based on an inclusive ethical consensus is the drifting apart of the rich and the poor into two separate worlds. Today, this is a far more complex phenomenon than the geopolitical division of the world into North and South, industrialized and developing countries. Today, the well-to do in Cairo, New Delhi, Lima and Lagos have far more in common with the well-to-do in Chicago or Paris than they have with the poor in their own countries. The affluent also communicate more easily with each other across national boundaries than with their poor compatriots. Technologies of communication and transportation, to say nothing of a pervasive commercial culture, have aided a new stratification of the world's people into transnational classes that share very little information, experience or common concern. The psychological distances between the strata are in imminent danger of reaching the point where the only form of discourse between top and bottom is violence, punctutated by occasional spasms of charity. To prevent the split between the two worlds from widening, and to restore the sense of solidarity among people, is a matter of the greatest practical as well as ethical urgency.

The business of building a consensus around an ethic of human solidarity is a long-term proposition. But this should not be a source of discouragement. There is plenty to do in the meantime, step by step, to remove the causes of human suffering and ease the lot of the victims of humanitarian disasters.

Three kinds of victims claim our attention. They are the victims of armed conflicts, the victims of natural or man-made environmental disasters, and, perhaps the most tragic for being locked into a seemingly unending state of misery and suffering, the victims of circumstance-- the most vulnerable members of the human family. Included in their ranks are the displaced, the stateless, various autochthonous populations, the "street children" of urban slums, and a host of others who are neglected, exploited, or bypassed by society.

Efforts to improve the plight of these victims need to be set within the larger context of a shared set of human values, ones that can honor both the diversity of the world's peoples and cultures and undergird the notion of our oneness on this troubled planet. The turbulence, confusion and dangers of our age are such that we must somehow find an overarching ethical framework for action, before it is too late to begin.