

COMMUNICATING THE FUTURE

By Soedjatmoko

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Mr. Chairman, Members of JUNIC.

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to the United Nations University. We are all delighted that JUNIC is holding its eighth session here and that you will have the opportunity of meeting our staff. We also hope that the University's invitation will enable you to meet a number of Japanese governmental, institutional and media representatives during the programme that has been arranged.

Let me first take the opportunity, on behalf of the UN University, to thank those JUNIC members--in particular my good friend Yasushi Akashi--for the helping hands you have extended to us at many times and in many places around the world. This is, as you know, still a relatively new institution and your readiness to help us gain greater recognition and understanding are warmly appreciated by all of us at UNU.

I have studied the Agenda for your meeting and some of the papers which have been circulated. I am impressed by the range of topics with which you are concerned--from the broad sweep of the new world information and communication order to detailed planning and co-ordination of information support for important UN events and themes.

Co-ordination is something which everyone believes to be necessary in theory, but finds difficult in practice. Co-ordination inevitably involves some loss of independence but I am sure it is a price we should be ready

to pay--in this as in many other fields--and an example we should be willing to give. I would like to congratulate Mr. Akashi, Miss Doss and all the members of JUNIC on their readiness to take a broad view and on their success in acting on that conviction.

One very effective manifestation of this broad view in action is, of course, Development Forum. It fills a need for issues to be related and examined in the round rather than sectionally or institutionally and I believe that JUNIC should be collectively proud of its work, under the leadership of its Chairman, to maintain and develop this publication. I am glad that it is receiving recognition from Member States and I hope that the efforts to establish stable long-term financing--which is so essential to its effectiveness and development--will be successful.

We are very pleased that JUNIC's first regular session since the University became co-publisher should be held here. Less than a year of our two-year experimental association has passed but in this short time, with the co-operation of our co-publisher and the Editor, we have been able to bring the voice of the world academic community more fully into the debate of global issues through Development Forum's pages. You will understand, however, that at this early stage it would be premature for me to make any judgment or forecast on the future of this association which is a subject our governing Council will be giving careful attention to at its next meeting.

The pressure of urgent events in the UN often makes it difficult to find time to look beyond the immediate future. Therefore, having praised JUNIC for the wide-ranging and important work which it is doing, I would

like, with the Chairman's permission, to ask whether this is, in fact, enough, and to suggest that at least some of your time at this or future meetings might be spent considering what the role of UN information should be as we move toward the 21st century, and what part JUNIC might play in defining that role.

As some of you might already know, I spent a number of years in an earlier career as a communicator, as a journalist in Indonesia. So I would make a modest claim to professional kinship with communicators and information specialists like yourselves. The years since then have only heightened my conviction on the importance of the role of communications in helping knit together our understanding of this often contradictory, rapidly changing world in which we live. The global communication system, with its phenomenal technological advances of the last few decades, has become a pervasive force in helping shape the world, for good or evil. New ideas, new values, and new perceptions now speed across the world, both stimulating and unsettling millions in the process.

It is this manifest ability of modern communications to influence and touch the lives of people everywhere which brings me to suggest to you here today a new information role, particularly for those, like yourselves, who serve the United Nations system. This role, in its most basic terms, involves helping humanity to enter the world of the 21st century--a world that will be increasingly crowded, hungry and competitive, and badly in need of understanding itself. This new role would focus on engaging the public at large in a world-wide process of mutual education through sharing of information.

I recognize that this is a vast broadening of the concept of UN information, and would entail an engagement of enormous magnitude. I do not suggest, nor expect, that you could do it alone. I would content, however, that you are excellently positioned, with the UN system, to be active and important agents in triggering and sustaining the momentum of such a process of global mutual education.

It is natural, given the astonishing number of developments in communications technology that we should become pre-occupied with the medium and give too little attention to the message.

Of course, we are not now short of information to communicate; in fact, there is too much. But is it really the information that the world needs to prepare itself for the future? We talk often about the rural poor of the third world--half of humankind--but what do we know of their real information needs and of effective ways to meet those needs? How can we make it possible for their voices to be heard in the babel of international communications? If we do not address ourselves substantively to such questions we shall be failing as communicators to play our part in increasing understanding and ultimately lessening tensions.

Communication--by definition--is a two-way process. Therefore its practitioners, and especially those in the UN, have, I believe, an almost unique opportunity to respond to and articulate some very fundamental concerns and aspirations of people everywhere in the world. One should lay stress on the word, people, for they, and not governments or individual agencies, are the ultimate constituents. We need look no further than the first words of the United Nations Charter--"We, the peoples" of the world--

for moral authority on this.

To help nurture this process of mutual collective education for the 21st century, we should look to the innovative and creative thinking that is emerging from outside conventional institutional frameworks. It is noteworthy, I believe, that all of the major UN conferences of recent years--on environment, women, habitat, science and technology--have been accompanied by non-governmental forums. These forums have been concerned with some very basic issues that are beginning to stare us in the face as we move into the 21st century.

Much of what is new and innovative about values and perceptions is not initiated by governments, but comes from the people, in expressions of their aspirations for a more decent, secure and equitable way of life. This is all part of a groping toward a human collectivity, a seeking of fresh answers for a different future--where the world's peoples and their leaders must learn to think of the human species as a single and indivisible unit comprising a global society of many cultures. A great deal of rich and original thought is arising from this quest, which is manifest on a world-wide scale.

It seems to me that all of this ferment and questioning in the non-governmental sector--which is to say really in the world at large--signals a truly massive shift in the world society's value systems. One can discern three major thrusts that are helping drive it, and that need to be understood if we are to cope with the insecure, perilous and fragile world of the 21st century.

The first of these will be the far greater numbers of people who will

have to share this planet in the 21st century--no matter how effective some nations may be in curbing fertility rates. Here in Asia alone there will be one billion more people as we enter the next century. And, as with peoples throughout the developing world, they will all want more--more material goods, more just and humane treatment, more education, more of everything. Their expectations and aspirations for more are already being fed daily by the advances in communications technology.

A rural villager in this future world will be unwilling to wait another 30 years without electricity in his home. And once he gets electricity, he won't settle for a single light bulb. These and other demands for the simplest of life's commodities in the industrialized societies will sorely test and strain the institutional capacities of nations. New instrumentalities of management, and more effective ways of educating one another will have to be devised to cope with such demands--lest the world slide on into more and more senseless violence bred by poverty, degradation and despair.

Such a quantum jump in population as is now projected will set off an almost incalculable chain of consequences. To take just one of these, consider the implications of learning to live under conditions of extremely high population densities. This will require that we develop a greater capacity to manage, in a humane, just and efficient manner, high concentrations and large numbers of people.

Learning to live in areas of high density, with some degree of harmony and civility, will require major cultural adjustments--a process in which the communicator could play a central role. Density, for instance, is

bound to reduce personal space. To survive in such an atmosphere, people will have to learn to develop a corresponding sense of inner space--through heightened perception of beauty, artistic creativity, or religion as an inner experience. Our salvation may well lie in our ultimate ability to make every human being an artist.

A second important thrust in the alteration of our global situation involves major shifts in the configuration of power in the world. These include changing relationships between the countries of the North and South, altered balance of power among the industrialized countries themselves, and shifting patterns of power among the third world countries.

These power shifts have added to the instability and fragility of the international monetary system. The Bretton Woods agreement no longer exists--and yet nothing has replaced it. The world's economy runs--to the extent it runs at all--on a sputtering motor ill-designed for the economic fuels of the late 20th century.

Another disturbing focal point of instability is the world food situation. So too is the global energy outlook. Projections of food and energy supply and demand indicate converging tracks--with spreading and disastrous consequences as rising fuel prices inevitably push food prices beyond the reach of hundred of millions of already hungry people. The implications of this kind of grim coalescence speak to the need for more effective international management capabilities and improved global decision-making ability, as well as the need for more innovative and equitable patterns of national and global development.

The question that emerges from these and other signs of power shifts

and dispersal then is: How to manage a system in which no country or regional bloc is in command? How do we regulate wisely the environment, the unstable food chain, the growing populations, and the seemingly unending string of crises and outbreaks of violence which spill across national boundaries with a frightening ease? Military power, it is all too clear, is not the answer. Finding out what is the answer will involve a major global learning process.

The third major thrust can be seen in what I would call, "The Movement from Below." By this I mean the surging aspirations of hitherto marginalized sectors of society which are manifest on a world-wide scale. These trace their roots in part to the liberation movements during and after World War II as the peoples of many countries sought to throw their foreign shackles. They also reflect profound and large-scale social and value changes.

The same sorts of aspirations fueled the civil rights movements in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. Similar motivations are apparent in the women's movement, and are in evidence in the evolution of workers and peasant associations in many parts of the world. The environmental movement and the peace and anti-nuclear war movements are also manifestations of these profound value changes.

While the desire to be heard and have a voice in one's own future is certainly one of the most fundamental of all human rights, it must be recognized that these movements from below often disturb the local and sometimes even regional political equilibrium. Like most processes of change, they often escape the ability of governments to control them.

They provide further evidence that many of our present institutions are no longer capable of managing the world's problems. Everywhere we turn we see this erosion of the management capacity of existing instrumentalities of management. And this is occurring at a time when problems, everywhere around the world, are looming ever larger. We have no choice but to learn new lessons about the governance of humanity.

A common denominator of virtually all the problems that confront the world as it moves toward the 21st century is change. Rapidly increasing, often bewildering, frequently frightening change is becoming man's constant and inseparable companion in life. The ability to adapt to change, to learn to live with change, is one of the great challenges of our time.

The modern communications system, if for no other reason that it is such an intrinsic, central part of this acceleration process, ought to be at the cutting edge of that change, seeking innovative ways to make it more orderly and humane and non-frightening. In addition, we should realize that the manner in which we use communication technology may have an important bearing on the evolution of our social and political institutions and processes.

The information services of the United Nations seems to me to be superbly positioned to take up this challenge. The UN system truly encompasses the world in an unprecedented fashion--its impact is felt from the smallest villages to the highest levels of international policy. It is itself a storehouse of information, yet one whose resources are only rarely exploited to their fullest. For instance, much of the valuable preparatory work for the UN conferences, comprising innovative thinking

and research, gets put aside and filed away during the process of assembling a politically acceptable agenda. There is also a great deal of original, yet untapped material, being generated by non-governmental organizations. The various movements from below of which I spoke earlier are sparking many stimulating and thoughtful ideas.

There is a good deal in all of this that is lively and provocative and controversial. These are qualities that keep questions off agendas, but they are precisely the right elements of the dialogue and information-sharing which is so urgently needed in the search for new ways to respond to global problems. This material should be culled, synthesized and injected into the intellectual mainstream--not left buried and gathering dust in files. Here might be a very important role for the UN information services in this process of public education through mutual learning and sharing of experience that could equip humankind for the 21st century. I am not asking that you offer solutions to problems--although, in fact, helping to sensitize the world to the existence of its problems is clearly a major part of the solution. Among other things, in raising global consciousness, you could be triggering the creation and expansion of knowledge and understanding on the part of many organizations and institutions.

One of these institutions, of course, is the United Nations University. In this process of collective self-education for a new future, I see its role, in concert with other research institutions, in expanding the knowledge base on which humankind will have to make its decisions about the future. Our knowledge base is seriously lacking--too many of our best intentions of helping humanity are undergirded by fragmented or ill-connected bits of

information.

To put it bluntly, we don't really know enough about a great many things--at a moment when global interdependence asks for more hard and relevant knowledge and much more finely tuned perceptions of the world around us. The explosion of knowledge that has taken place has not necessarily added to our capacity to solve some of the most important problems faced by humankind. What we have learned has often been irrelevant to these problems. I see the United Nations University as a focal point for the generation and dissemination of usable, practical knowledge--where the relevance of empirical, hard research can be tested and weighed through a dialogue of many cultures and ideologies.

The UN University obviously cannot do this job alone--nor should it attempt to do so. It must work hand-in-hand with many others, all engaged in the task of improving the world's understanding of itself. And one of its most important partners in the endeavour to articulate the concerns of this terribly hard to understand and vulnerable world will be you of the UN information services.

I realize that what I am suggesting goes beyond your present mandate and would cut across many sensitive lines of responsibility. But the world cannot go on as it is and communicators have a special duty to contribute to the changes of perception and practice that are so much needed. I suggest that JUNIC could play a vital role in bringing this need into focus.

I am grateful to you Mr. Chairman for inviting me to speak frankly. I hope that during the week I will have the opportunity of hearing from JUNIC members how they react to what I have said. In the meantime, I wish you every possible success with your full and important agenda.