Education Or Catastrophe: Who’s Winning?

OPENING ADDRESS
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Members of this distinguished audience will recognize the allusion in the title of my remarks: “Education or Catastrophe: Who’s Winning?”

H. G. Wells wrote in his Outline of History early this century that “Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.” I don’t suppose anyone here disagrees with that assessment. But the question is — as we come to the end of the century and approach the turn of the millennium — will the race be to the forces of destruction or the power of instruction?

There is no shortage of money on catastrophe. It is commonplace to speak of our world in a state of crisis. I am hard pressed to think of any day when my newspapers, television or radio does not tell me that our entire world is in a profound state of crisis, that nothing will ever be the same again and, moreover, that we have few if any solutions with which to confront the new and amorphous crisis of our times.

We are witnesses, actors and victims of no ordinary crisis. This is megacrisis, the dimensions of which we do not fully understand. In the eyes of an increasing number of thoughtful people, the most recent parallel to the events of our time was the Industrial Revolution which transformed what was then the largest part of the world from rural to urban, from feudalism to capitalism, from religious to secular. It is sobering to recall the defining characteristics of that lengthy transformation, including massive unemployment, homelessness, street mobs, violence, demagoguery, and, of course, a pan-European war.

Now this is all a bit depressing and my intention is neither to depress you or to sound apocalyptic. But it is reality. It is the reality in which the issues and challenges of development find themselves today.
The most commonly offered explanation of the development downturn attributes it to the current global recession. The recession is indeed deep and enduring and is connected with a decline in the financial commitment of industrial nations to development. But this, in my view, is a symptom and not the cause. For the cause we must look much deeper.

The fact is that the idea of global development finds itself today in a context which is light years apart from that which we confronted only a decade ago.

The new context involves first, a Dramatically Changed Political Environment. Included here is the obvious collapse of communism, the end of the cold war and the resulting tidal shift in the international geopolitical landscape. Of greater significance, in my view, is the fact that the role of the individual country or nation-state has been diminished, being supplanted by forces such as supranational and transnational entities.

Almost all of our large development cooperation institutions were designed to facilitate development through the nation-state. The financing of the development effort remains almost totally dependent on funds provided by OECD governments. This suggests the urgent need for fresh thinking about the structure of development agencies, as well as imaginative new approaches to the financing of development.

Second, Growth in Social Demands and Consumption Levels. The global ecosystem has finite limits and will not be able to withstand indefinitely the pressures of population growth and uncontrolled development, nor the high consumption levels in the North. The Brundtland Commission thundered this message in 1987 as did the Earth Summit in Rio last year. We need to rethink what we mean by development from top to bottom. This means abandoning what has been the dominant socio-economic paradigm followed for the past half century, namely the infinite growth, material progress paradigm.
Thirdly, the "Globalization" of Economic Affairs. Countries are increasingly powerless to distribute social benefits or guide the economic well-being of their citizenry. Financial markets are increasingly independent of production and distribution of goods and services. A satisfactory response to this tidal shift will require major policy adjustments, highly trained professionals, and agile managers. Many of the world’s poorer regions do not have the institutions, human resources or financial flexibility to make these adjustments.

Fourth, the Content and Direction of International Trade. The content of international trade has shifted away from commodities (exported primarily by developing countries) toward high-technology services and manufactured products (typically the exports of industrialized nations). Powerful new regional trading blocs are fast emerging that are having major economic effects on all the nations of the world.

Fifth, the Emergence of Entirely New Technologies. Principally in microelectronics, biotechnology and new materials, technology is fast changing the way in which the international marketplace functions. Individuals, groups and nations active in generating and exchanging these technologies will prosper in the emerging new order; those left behind will become increasingly marginalized.

Sixth and finally, Global Shifts in Socio-Cultural Value Systems. Witness the emergence around the world of a westernized-consumerized popular culture, the deterioration of collective bonds of community and kinship units, and the loss of traditional spiritual and ideological reference points.

Taking this all in all as I have outlined it, a pessimist likely would bet confidently that catastrophe is on a roll. At the very least it appears to be far ahead in the race. But there is an education advantage and it is this: people in developing nations are quick learners. This doesn’t mean that we can teach them anything. The irony is that many of our attempts to teach have been fiascoes by which both teachers and taught have been confounded. Yet while growth, it seems, cannot be taught or fostered, it can be learned.
The facts are clear. The developing world has made great strides in the past and, after a decade of setbacks, many parts of that world are making astounding leaps forward today — mostly without our assistance, though not without our investment.

When the world economy was working, assistance helped facilitate development’s success. Transfers from the wealthy to the impoverished worked magnificently in the 60s and 70s. Following the second world war, Brazil doubled its per capita output in 18 years, Indonesia in 17, Korea in 11 and China in 10. During the period 1960-1980 the gains in developing countries as a whole were impressive. From 1970 to 1980 GNP per capita tripled in East Asia and the Pacific.

The major gains in literacy, nutrition, life expectancy, infant mortality and agricultural output throughout the South are all part of the historical record. Average life expectancy is now 63 years, 17 years longer than in 1960. Two-thirds of people have ready access to health services and public expenditure on health as a proportion of GNP increased by nearly 50% over the past 30 years. The adult literacy rate has increased by more than a third since 1970 and nearly three-quarters of children are in school. The mortality rate of young children has been cut in half since 1960.

As long as the world economy was growing and transfers were occurring, the South was making impressive gains. It was during the 80s that development stumbled and crashed.

It is undeniable that traditional forms of development fundamentally stopped working as we turned to the nineties, for the reasons I’ve stated and perhaps some others you can think of. But at the same time the pent-up energies of developing nations began to assert themselves.

Education may in fact be the tortoise, slow and steady to the wire. But even if the good guy comes home the winner in the development race, there is a difficult paradox to be resolved. There was a time when growth was thought to be an unmixed blessing. We know more today about the price of overproduction and overconsumption on this planet. It is, not to put too fine a point on it, the price of life.
If growth is to be achieved differently in future we are all going to have to learn how. All of us together, because we in the North also must change the ways we produce and consume, and we may in the end learn how to do this from new ways discovered in the South. This is the challenge of research for development.

With just one half of one percent of the world’s population, it is evident that Canada will not make a difference to international development on the basis of size. If we are to make a difference we must work smart with what we have: leveraging our resources by working with like-minded partners, in private and public sectors, from Canada and away, North and South; choosing our opportunities with care to maximize return on effort.

We must remain focussed and balanced, with a coherent grasp of global realities. We must understand what is really happening. We must have a plan that acts on this understanding realistically.

Do we have any idea how all the peoples of the world can develop a reasonable quality of life without destroying the world for future generations? I’m not sure we know how, although I think we have learned a lot from a quarter century of trying. Many of the lessons of the past can be applied with benefit to the future.

Needless to say, no such lessons will be applied if the institutional memory that retains them is not sustained. Those of us in the business of thinking about and doing these things must ceaselessly self-educate. And we must redouble our efforts to awaken those around us, and those on whose decisions we rely for support, to the immensity of the danger. I do not mean the size of the poverty problem, or of malnutrition. Most people understand that and know where their sympathies lie. The real danger — the one that is not adequately understood — is that the problem may be solved at the expense of the planet.
If we are to carry such a message we need a certain level of credibility in the community. I have a feeling, which you probably share, that we are misunderstood. I refer to a research study which we recently undertook. More than 50 opinion leaders from government, industry, the media, universities and NGOs were consulted. Because the role and the importance of research are not well understood, we have this image of being somewhat aloof. I think this is something we have in common. Both, you and us, because we are knowledge-based are sometimes perceived as not being part of the real world. But, if Peter Drucker has it right, our children will live in a world where knowledge will be the key.

I think it is time that together we build a constituency for what we represent and what we do. We need to create an intellectual partnership in ordre to raise the profile and the importance of research. We should be partners in public awareness.

Our particular business, at IDRC, is research for development. We will cooperate fully with those in the intellectual community who wish to create a knowledge-based paradigm for development that integrates economic development with environmental sustainability. We welcome partners in research for development, confident in the belief that this is the key to methods that are sustainable but do not inhibit growth.

Development most likely will be defined anew during the foreign policy dialogue that the new government has pledged to initiate. I have no doubt it will continue to be a dynamic enterprise speaking both to humanitarian and utilitarian concerns, to the best instincts as well as the self interest of Canadians. It will remain compassionate, true to the reality that Canadians care. But it will seek to do more with less. It will closely monitor results. It will insist on basic values of decency and freedom. It will listen more carefully for low-cost, low-tech local solutions. It will disseminate what is learned in one place to others, including back home.
I can't wait to make the new beginning and I hope some of you will be with us. The challenge of development is not to be resolved in my tenure, nor in my lifetime, but I am mindful of an anecdote that President Kennedy told of the French Field Marshall who was recently retired. One day he asked his gardener to plant a tree in a particular corner of his estate. The gardener protested that the tree the Marshall had selected was very slow growing and would not mature for at least a hundred years. "In that case there," the Marshall replied, "there is no time to lose. Plant it this afternoon."
Keith:

You may wish to lighten things up a bit at the start:

Thank you for the invitation to be here. I really appreciate the warm welcome and the kind introduction. I much prefer it to the one I had not long ago where I was introduced by someone who said that his duty as he saw it was to be so dull in his remarks that whatever I said would appear brilliant by comparison.

That was OK until he added, “Unfortunately I’ve heard Bezanson before and I don’t think I can do it.”

And/or

I’m not sure how long the organizers of this gathering want me to speak. I brought seven pages. If that’s not long enough, please ask some questions and I’ll be glad to reply if I can. If you find it too long, just shout “STOP”.
