THE DISAPPEARING VISION OF GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

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During most of the past half century, while the ideological duel of the Cold War was conducted, the idea of global development has served as the engine and intellectual base of North-South relations. Yet today that idea and the forces that have sustained and nurtured it are in serious trouble. Poorer countries -- particularly those in Africa -- profess their alarm over what they interpret as international abandonment, if not betrayal, and development workers grow increasingly disheartened at the prospect of trying to do much, much more with much, much less.

Why is the idea of global development in such difficulty? It has, after all, endured for almost five decades as a towering and inspiring vision which stimulated international enthusiasm. It is not due, I am convinced, to a decline in interest and political will resulting from the current economic downturn in the industrial North. These are the symptoms; the causes are much deeper.

The declining commitment to global development is attributed by many to the abysmal failure of previous development efforts. But such a conclusion is patently false. Consider the facts. The 1980’s will, doubtless be recorded by historians as the "lost decade" for most of the nations of the South, but during the period 1960-1980, the gains in developing countries as a whole were nothing short of remarkable. Their GDP growth exceeded that of the industrial North. Unprecedented gains in literacy rates, nutrition, life expectancy, infant mortality and agricultural output are all part of the public record. That same period testifies to the speed with which development, as measured by output per capita can occur. Brazil doubled its per capita output in eighteen years, Indonesia in seventeen, Korea in eleven and China in ten.

Yet the vision of global development is unravelling. It is one of the victims of the massive changes and discontinuities of our times. Included here are the following:

♦ **Dramatically changed political environment.** The role of the individual country or nation-state has been diminished. Supranational and transnational entities increasingly erode the ability of individual nations --especially the poor or weak countries -- to control their own economies and their national destiny.

♦ **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 high consumption levels in
the North.

- **"Globalization" of economic affairs.** Countries are discovering that they are increasingly powerless in the distribution of social benefits and in guiding the economic well-being of their citizenry. Financial markets are increasingly independent of the 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 simply do not have the institutions, human resources or financial flexibility to make these adjustments.

- **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.

- **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 the generation and exchange of these new technologies will prosper in the emerging new order; those left behind will become increasingly marginalized.

- **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.

If poor countries tremble in the face of the massive discontinuities of our times, including the globalization of economic affairs, so also do rich countries. For today North and South alike are locked in a relentless race to stay competitive. The fear of falling behind, of losing ground, has become the preeminent motivator in world affairs. Individuals, businesses and governments are driven by a perception and a reality of remorseless competition.

This is hardly a climate conducive to the idea of development through cooperative international effort!

But something more is happening, something perhaps even more important than the globalization of the marketplace and its immediate effect on the idea of development. A foundation stone of Western thought and the dominant western belief system since the nineteenth century has been
a profound faith in progress, principally through advances in science and technology. Such advances had bestowed upon the industrial nations a high material standard of living which successive generations believed would continue indefinitely. It is this idea of progress and its inevitability that today is rapidly fading. The Western expectation, for example, that the next generation will necessarily achieve an improved (i.e. more materially enriched) standard of living than the present one is now seriously in doubt. And our ecospace informs us in increasingly strident tones of the damage inflicted by our "progress" though science and technology and of the limits of our technological civilization. Thus, the development vision which inspired international efforts for over four decades is, like an endangered species, close to extinction. This is far from being a temporary phenomenon in response to transitory factors. It arises from the tidal forces that characterize the last decade of this 20th century. And it is part of the larger -- and also vanishing -- Western ethos which held that advances in science and technology would necessarily and inevitably lead to improvements in the well-being of people and of the earth itself.

The proverb holds that without vision the people perish. And a new concept (perhaps a vision?) is emerging under the banner of sustainable development. These are, of course, but words which point to something amorphous and which require much more than simple definition. But the concept does clearly require that we rethink what is meant by "development"; it debunks any underlying notion of development as a linear process. And it invites fresh thinking about social, economic and political institutions in developed and developing countries alike. Given the current state of the vision of global development as formulated by the architects of the post-1945 order, that new challenge is exactly what is needed.

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