COMMENTARY

WANTED:
HEARTS, MINDS,
NAMES
. . . AND GUTS

Determination and optimism make change

ERNEST COREA

In a sleepy little township off the southern coast of Sri Lanka the only movie house in miles rarely draws a capacity crowd. Perhaps the movie house is badly sited. Perhaps the potential clientele is too poor, on the average, to include celluloid entertainment as a line item in their household budgets. Who knows? But the old lady who owns the movie house remains undaunted. Her house is never half-empty. It is always half-full; she insists.

In numerous capitals across the world, a similar sense of optimism does not come so naturally. Cultivating it, however, often appears as essential as eating or drinking. How else can one come to terms with the tortuous process of change?

To governments and peoples in those countries that the experts have classified in their quantified, heartless jargon as LDCs, LLDCs, MSAs, or whatever — anything other than lands with real live people — optimism is frequently compulsive. The slightest shift from bad to better has to be viewed as a vector pointing, even with some hesitation, towards good. To see it any other way would be to succumb to a kind of national moodiness that moves inexorably towards a nadir of chaos. Every event has more than one dimension. Your point of view determines the dimension you choose to emphasize. And in that emphasis lies a difference of perception between achievement, however partial, from which sustenance can be drawn for the future — or failure, from which there is no salutary escape. It is the act of choice that holds together the hopes and aspirations of those who see inequities as a passing, albeit prolonged, phase in human history.

Somewhere around two decades ago, a former British ambassador in the United States, Sir Oliver Frankis, introduced the phrase "North-South relations" into the lexicon of international politics. A "worldwide cleftage along that axis might come to rival East-West relations as central concern of world politics," he argued, in the context of a broad review of international development policies. That was remarkable prescience for somebody writing shortly after the Marshall Plan had referred in a desultory kind of way to aid for "dependent overseas territories." That was at a time when the paternalistic concern of the World Bank and the specialized agencies of the UN (supplemented by avuncular bilateral charity) was considered more than enough of a crutch to help the children of twilight and darkness (brown and black) limp, walk, skip, and finally run towards prosperity and dignity.

That was in the 1950s when, by and large, it was assumed that half-full lives could be made full with some concessions, some assistance, but without any major alterations in the overall state of relations between countries and peoples. Frank's assessment at that time was, in a sense, revolutionary. From another point of view, however, it was almost inevitable. For, despite the relative simplicity of ideas in the 50s, that was a decade in which the fate and future of the world was decided on a framework and a renewed pledge of development strategy in the 1980s. The North-South relations, the session had been a resounding failure. The South, or the world's disadvantaged countries, had signal failed, they claimed, to secure the large sums of money they had hoped to wrest from the North. Ergo, they were leaving the "glass house" as empty as always. Not quite. The regular session endorsed an International Development Strategy with specific goals and objectives for the 1980s, "a document" according to Canada's Secretary of State for External Affairs, Mark MacGuigan, "which can serve as a benchmark for the efforts of the global community over the coming decade."

The regular session failed, however, as did the 11th Special Session, to secure agreement on a framework and procedures for a global round of negotiations aimed at re-fashioning economic relations between South and North. The failure of the 11th Special Session to reach agreement and the transfer of deadlock to the 35th regular session of the UN General Assembly did not, however, end the momentum of a search for accommodation and change. Early in January 1981, Assembly delegates returned to the joust. Hanging over them was the presentiment that movement was unlikely until the change of guard had been completed at

Development) secured agreement on the establishment of a Common Fund, whose Articles of Agreement were adopted in June 1980. UNCTAD IV alerted the world to the particular and generally forgotten or ignored difficulties of smaller, resource-sparse countries. The (August-September 1980) 11th Special Session of the UN General Assembly produced a framework for development strategy in the 1980s, and a renewed pledge of enhanced resource transfer. All, obviously, has not been lost.

When the 35th annual regular session of the UN General Assembly broke last year, New York's media pundits declared that, in terms of the North-South relationship, the session had been a resounding failure. The South, or the world's disadvantaged countries, had signal failed, they claimed, to secure the large sums of money they had hoped to wrest from the North. Ergo, they were leaving the "glass house" as empty as always. Not quite. The regular session endorsed an International Development Strategy with specific goals and objectives for the 1980s, "a document" according to Canada's Secretary of State for External Affairs, Mark MacGuigan, "which can serve as a benchmark for the efforts of the global community over the coming decade."

The regular session failed, however, as did the 11th Special Session, to secure agreement on a framework and procedures for a global round of negotiations aimed at re-fashioning economic relations between South and North. The failure of the 11th Special Session to reach agreement and the transfer of deadlock to the 35th regular session of the UN General Assembly did not, however, end the momentum of a search for accommodation and change. Early in January 1981, Assembly delegates returned to the joust. Hanging over them was the presentiment that movement was unlikely until the change of guard had been completed at
Washington. Nevertheless, the Assembly decided to keep the issue open. The unstated assumption of that decision is that movement is still possible.

Patience and optimism have once again been established as virtues worth cultivating. But patience is not pervasive. In parts of the South, impatience has grown to the point at which there are very serious thoughts about “delinking” — withdrawing from a skewed global system and concentrating purely on South-South relationships. “We have nothing to lose from the process except the indignities forced on us,” an African finance minister once said. “Delinking” will create quite severe hardship at the outset, it is argued, but that will be more than compensated for by the preservation of dignity and self-respect.

The growth and articulation of those feelings can only exacerbate international tensions. For, in truth, those feelings are rarely based on cold and rational calculations. Rather, they are manifestations of deeply felt inward emotions, arising from a distaste for the prospect of being continuously disadvantaged. Those who argue for accommodation, for concessions and compromise, however abrasively they might do so, continue to take the optimistic view that change can be wrought by negotiation and should not be wrested by turbulence. They see every slight shift of emphasis among their counterparts in the North as a possible opening towards progress, and it is in that spirit that many of them reacted to a remarkable “media event” last year.

In the spring of 1980, many of the world’s leading media houses rediscovered the world’s poor. The “wretched of the earth,” to borrow Frantz Fanon’s evocative phrase, occupied prime time on radio and television, as well as valuable column space in daily newspapers and news weeklies. The quality of coverage was as astonishing as the quantity. Past norms were suspended. The world’s poor were not paraded across air waves and column space as bulbous-eyed, hollow-cheeked, potbellied, and half-clad. To the contrary, they appeared, instead, as part of an equation that if properly worked out across the world, could yield the coefficient of international stability.

The “media spring” of 1980 was a reaction to a report written under the direction of an illustrious and dynamic West European - North-South: a program for survival. The Report of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues under the Chairmanship of Willy Brandt. A technocrat who was associated with the Brandt Commission has said that “the real starting point (of change in North-South relations) is to cross a philosophical bridge that recognizes the need for change, and the trouble is that too many people participating within the international discussion have not yet crossed that philosophical bridge.” Yes, surely, that bridge must be crossed, but not only by participants in international discussion. It must be crossed by a host of others without whose understanding and acceptance the changes that can make our global village more livable will not be attempted. The most crucial lesson to be drawn from reaction to the Brandt report is that change will not come unless North statesmen who understand and who care give their hearts, minds, names, and guts to it.

The South is already committed to change. They have no alternative. Leader after leader at the Sixth Conference of Heads of State of Government of Non-Aligned Countries (more easily recognized as the Non-Aligned Summit) held at Havana in September 1979 made or implied the point. “Some of us are better off than others, but, among the disadvantaged, comparisons are sometimes little more than a relative measure of hardship. . . . What is more important, then? Should we engage in fervent discussions over political schisms and semantic nuances, or should we summon the political will to combat human suffering?” said J.R. Jayewardene of Sri Lanka.

The world is often told that the North-South relationship remains interminably at the level of dialogue, with inadequate progress into the realms of action that lie beyond dialogue, because too many countries of the South have combined to form a redoubt behind inflexible negotiating positions, and because their most-used weapon is “rhetoric.” The seeming indecisions by representatives of the South at international meetings reflects their commitment to a deeply felt cause. It also reveals the assumption that militancy as a tactic in international negotiation is the only substitute available for the forms of domestic militancy that pushed forward the process of political liberation in earlier years. Unfortunately, it is also true that some South representatives conceal their lack of preparedness and some of their negotiating incapacities behind a cloud of verbal fog. Still, it can be argued, with demonstrable justification, that dialogue remains dialogue because the North strategy is “to talk them (i.e., the South) to death.”

Equally prevalent is the complaint or charge that too much is said at the broad level of global policy and too little on the nuts-and-bolts of action-oriented sectoral specifics (energy, food, trade, etc.). This is a difficult charge to sustain at a time when the world’s bookshelves are groaning under the weight of research studies that delve deeply into specifics ranging from monetary stability through food security to trade imbalance.

Excuses for the slow pace of negotiation can be found, but excuses don’t resolve issues. There is no getting away from the reality that, until this relationship is rearranged, the world will continue to be burdened by a sense of global crisis. It is because this reality has been recognized that a new round of negotiations has been scheduled for later this year. The seven industrialized countries that attended the Venice Summit of June 1980 pledged themselves to cooperation with developing countries, and agreed that “aid policies and procedures and other contributions to developing countries” should be a focus of attention at their next summit, which will be held in Ottawa, Canada, July 1981. The Brandt report proposed that a mini-summit should be held for major and binding decisions on international economic cooperation. This is likely to take place in Mexico this summer. North-South arrangements will certainly appear high on the agenda of Commonwealth leaders when they meet in Melbourne, in the fall. The Brandt report’s moving argument for “survival in mutuality” will form part of the backdrop to those meetings. So will the invitation by the heads of state and government of non-aligned countries to their privileged counterparts who have been urged “to exercise the political will and courage and take steps to seek a solution to the problem of recession in their economies, based on the generation and growth of aggregate demand and productive capacity in the developing countries.”

Words, figures, proposals, compromises, solutions . . . these have been heard in the past, and will be heard again in the future. They will have real meaning only when the journey towards that “philosophical bridge” is truly on its way.

Ernest Corea, Director of the Cooperative Programs Unit at iieic, was formerly Sri Lanka High Commissioner to Canada.

Commentary provides a forum for readers to explore topics raised by Reports, or to present alternative perspectives, informed opinion, and analyses of development issues. The views published are not necessarily those of the editors or iieic.