

**ETHICS AND DEVELOPMENT DAY
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ETHICS, DEVELOPMENT AND DISASTER¹

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The relation between ethics and development is a grand subject, which has implications for a thousand specific problems in the world in which we live. It is wonderful that this general discipline, with such a wide reach and central relevance, has found a fine and productive home at the Inter-American Development Bank, secured by the long-standing commitment of President Enrique Iglesias and the firm and innovative stewardship of Bernardo Kliksberg. The intellectual engagements of the "Ethics and Development Day" provide an apt setting for the celebration of the leadership of IDB in this field, and I am very happy that so many distinguished people have joined us for these deliberations. I feel very privileged to be here. I am also especially pleased that the Prime Minister of Norway has been with us through electronic communication, and we appreciate his message very much indeed.

Norway occupies an extraordinary position in the world of ethical practice in economic development, not only for contributing a towering proportion of its national income for aiding the poor and the troubled across the world, but also in using her powerful voice in world affairs to present the perspectives of developing countries and in explaining how global justice can be effectively advanced. Recently, when I spoke at the General Assembly of the United Nations, I had the privilege also of hearing again the powerfully argued case for global equity presented by Mrs. Hilde Johnson, the Norwegian Minister of International Development, for the consideration by other member states.

Even though "ethics and development" is a very general subject, the usefulness of the discipline greatly depends on our ability to apply these general ideas to serious problems that confront the world. It is, thus, not surprising that a lot of the empirical work related to this subject has gone into exploring

¹ Text of keynote address at the Ethics and Development Day at the IDB on January 11, 2005.

very specific problems, varying from the centrality of global justice to the practical relevance of business ethics. This is indeed the right direction in which to go.

The latter - the constructive role of norms in business and commerce - is an old subject, which has engaged such leaders of social and economic analysis as Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill. I heard from Enrique Iglesias just this morning that my old friend, Professor Robert Heilbroner, has just died: his insightful exploration of the ideas of classical economic thinkers - "the worldly philosophers" - bring out how many sided their visions were, compared with the narrowness of some of the contemporary mainstream economics. The neglect of these far-reaching perspectives in much of on-going economics calls for a broadening engagement, and the growing literature on ethics and development has taken on that task with much dedication and skill. The initiative here is an extremely important part of that global movement, and I am delighted (to go back to a point I touched on last year) that Bernardo Kliksberg's web-site is growing faster than that of Jennifer Lopez!

Similarly, the discipline of ethics and development has helped to give recognition to the distressing fact that the world in which we live is both remarkably prosperous and thoroughly miserable, where a massive command over resources, knowledge and technology go hand in hand with the rugged presence of extraordinary deprivation and staggering inequality. An astonishing number of children are ill-nourished, ill-cared, illiterate and needlessly ill, with millions perishing every week from diseases that can be completely eliminated, or at least prevented from killing people with abandon.

Aside from the long-standing presence of stubborn and persistent challenges that the world faces, we also encounter, from time to time, a sudden outburst of new and unexpected problems and tragedies. The discipline of ethics and development should also take them on board and critically examine the understanding that a general outlook can offer to specific challenges that the world has to cope with as a matter of extreme urgency. The recent human disaster resulting from an underground earthquake on the day after Christmas, which led to devastating tsunamis in the Indian ocean, which have already killed at least 150,000 people in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand and a number of other countries is just such an event, and since this year's Ethics and Development Day is being held under the shadow of that catastrophe, I thought I should comment specifically on the relevance of our general discipline for a fuller understanding of this very specific calamity and policy issues associated with it.

I know, of course, that the immediate geographical region with which IDB is involved is far away from the location in which the tsunamis have recently occurred. But we live in an interdependent world in which substantial tragedies suffered by any part of humanity has ethical and reflective relevance for every other part of mankind: the cerebral distance between Banda Aceh and Rio de Janeiro is far less than the physical distance that geographically separates them. I hope the inter-American region never has to suffer from a calamity of the kind that has plagued the lives of people who surround the Indian ocean, but there is need to understand what can be done if and when a calamity of this kind occurs, and also to examine what ethical demands have to taken seriously by people who may avoid - or even be immune to - such catastrophes.

Let me, then, comment briefly on a number of issues related to the recent tsunamis that particularly call for an ethical approach to development. The first point concerns the indivisibility of the human predicament. This is an essential feature of an integrated ethical approach to development for two distinct reasons: one, ethics unites social concerns to yield reasoned imperatives (in a way that Immanuel Kant has brought out with such clarity), and two, ethical connections draw our attention forcefully to the empirical interlinkages between the lives of different people. The ethical demands have led to an unprecedented response across the world, with contributions adding up to billions of dollars (I will say on this presently), but no less important is the empirical reality of the shared nature of the human predicament, which is also brought out graphically by the way the disaster killed the rich as well as the poor.

The tsunami took the lives of wealthy tourists relaxing on the beaches in the island of Phuket just as it killed hard-working fishermen trying to make a meagre living on an unsuspectingly dangerous ocean. There is an old view which sees development as separated enhancement of individual living standards, the sum-total of which is identified with development. That view has sometimes given a limited amount of guidance to development policy, related particularly to individual incentives, seen in splendid isolation, but an event like the tsunami disaster reminds us immediately how interlinked our lives actually are. Interdependences are hard to avoid. The rich may try to live in capsules of opulence, with lavish homes, fine hotels, excellent hospitals, distinguished schools, from which the masses are kept out. In the long-run, however, the walls of separated grandeur tends to come tumbling down, through violence, crime, social discontent, and the spread of communicable diseases. (Enrique Iglesias made a similar point in his speech, with much force and clarity.) While that societal process is indirect and can be quite slow, the tsunami disaster brought out with arresting suddenness how hard it is to build walls of security around oneself, leaving all others behind. John Donne's far-reaching insight that "no man is an island, entire of it self" is not just a moral proposition, but also an epistemic understanding informed by an ethical outlook.

A second issue I would like to touch on concerns practical policy in dealing with tsunamis in particular. It is quite unlikely that we would, in the foreseeable future, be able to predict with any certainty when an earthquake - on land or underneath the sea - would occur, and even more

implausible to expect that we could actually prevent them from occurring. Civilizations survive with permission from geology. And yet the killing that is associated with tsunami does not occur instantly, and as William Wordsworth said (in a different context), "the earthquake is not satisfied at once." Banda Aceh had very little time for warning since it is so close to the epicentre of the quake, but there would have been considerable time to warn people on the coasts of Thailand and Sri Lanka and India and Maldives, and even those in the more distant parts of Indonesia.

A system of warning is not, in principle, at all hard to put in place, and indeed something has indeed been achieved on this around the Pacific in a way it has not yet been attempted around the Indian ocean. A much fuller system - considerably more ambitious than in the Pacific warning system - can be put in place, with parametric modelling, which is triggered by reports of earthquakes which can come in with very little delay. It can link the location, intensity and other parameters of the earthquake to the likely effects on distant shores, in a few hours time. The potential warning time was long enough to use such a system, with the effect of cutting down the death toll in Sri Lanka and India in a dramatic way. Even the coastal residents and visitors in Thailand and parts of Indonesia could have largely saved their lives had such a parametric modelling been deployed with speed and ready communicability.

The coastal rich need such a system just as badly as the coastal poor do, but it is not within the powers of the individual wealthy to institute them. However, the costs involved can be comparatively little for a society, especially given the existence of many simulation experts who do similar work in other fields (especially in India). What is needed is a well-conceived public initiative that relies on premeditated readiness, rather than on attempts to take suddenly conceived action. This requires a public commitment, moved by the ethical importance of avoiding disasters of the kind that has just occurred. The discipline of ethics and development is not only about demanding the acceptance of moral ideas, but also about making intelligent use of policies led by an ethical commitment to prevent escapable destitution and demise.

Indeed, if I may take the argument further, there are a number of other areas of public action in which such an informed anticipation could make a real difference to human lives. For example, the spread of AIDS epidemic could have been much better anticipated with premeditated investigation, and the need for that is still very strong not just in Africa, but also in many other parts of the world,

including India, China and the Caribbean.

Third, we know from famine analysis that many people who die from disasters do not die from the immediate event, but from the epidemics and illnesses that the initial disaster generates. Indeed, only a relatively small proportion of famine victims die directly from starvation - they die more often from diseases that become rampant in the disrupted and debilitated community hit by a famine. But not only are famines entirely preventable, the death toll from famines can be drastically cut if public health and medical arrangements are put in place without delay.

This is the challenge that the tsunami-hit regions of the world are currently facing. So far the response has not been bad, but the system needs to be consolidated and reinforced. Also, there are difficult questions to consider from an ethical perspective in deciding on the coping strategies. For example, the banning of DDT, which has had a good argument behind it in terms of preserving some threatened species and preventing some possible human risks, also makes the fighting of malaria particularly hard. This is an issue that would have to be directly faced in dealing with tsunami devastated regions, because malaria can spread very rapidly with stagnant and polluted water that the flood waves leave behind. However, more generally, the need for a hard-nosed ethical examination of the pros and cons of banning suspected objects is strong in a world in which so many millions die from preventable diseases, like malaria, every month. I am not suggesting that the world must necessarily follow the lead of South Africa in removing the banning of DDT, but there is certainly a need for empirically informed ethical scrutiny in this field. Ethics and development, as a subject, cannot rely on appealing slogans only, but must take on the difficult task of balancing one evil against another.

Finally, I want to comment, again very briefly, on the unprecedented response in terms of contributions that have been coming from the rest of the world to the tsunami victims in Asia. It is useful to ask why the imperative to contribute has proved to be so much stronger in this case than in the case of other killers, including diseases (for example, TB or malaria which kills many more people each month than did the Tsunamis). To say that the suffering of the tsunami victims is more graphic and palpable is part of the answer, but does not, I would argue, go deep enough. What is relevant here is our ability to understand the predicament of others, and there is nothing as fundamental to the foundations of ethics than mutual understanding. Graphicness contributes to our ability to comprehend and digest the sufferings of other people, at considerable distance from us.

If this is correct, then our celebration of the outburst of human sympathy in this particular case can be sensibly supplemented by a determination to pay more attention to communication and the ways and means of advancing the understanding of the lives of other people. When I was Honorary President of OXFAM, I was always struck by the immediacy with which people react to the predicament of others - linked for example with starvation - when the facts of the case are adequately grasped. If famines get immediately eliminated in functioning democracies (a thesis for which I have presented empirical evidence as well as causal explanation elsewhere), the easy communicability of the predicament of the famine victims makes this a far easier task than overcoming other types of deprivation, such as chronic undernourishment or proneness to illness, the evil effects of which are harder to understand in an adequately moving way. The role of the media and the way in which news is covered and analyzed can make a big difference here.

John Rawls, perhaps the leading moral philosopher of our time, has argued that all human beings are endowed with moral capacities. He is right to insist on this, but the deployment of those capacities are severely constrained by the epistemic difficulty in grasping what exactly is happening and how things could be actually different. The lessons of the tsunami and the global response it has generated not only include the affirmation of the ethical capacity of people in general, sometimes even at great distance, but also the critical importance of communication and understanding. The connection between epistemology and ethics can be very powerful, and this is part of the interdependence of the world in which we live. Ignorance and incomprehension are enemies not only of science, but also of the practice of ethics.