

SESSION 3: SUSTAINING DEVELOPMENT AND WITHSTANDING CRISES

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This paper focuses on just and equitable governance and people empowerment consisting of (a) shared accountability and responsibility; (b) leadership by example on the part of the governors, the political leaders; and (c) participation and involvement on the part of the governed – civil society and community, built upon trust and mutual respect.

Good morning, Your Excellencies, and to my fellow humanitarians and colleagues in peace work and human development across the globe. I am grateful for this opportunity to share my views on the pursuit of sustainable human development and pushing forward the Millennium Development Goals. The United Nations should be commended in organizing this forum where the perspectives of non-governmental organizations, civil society and the private sector can be presented as inputs to the consideration of means to accelerate the attainment of the MDGs. I only hope that the sparse attendance at these sessions (as witnessed yesterday) is not an indication of a lack of seriousness on the part of the General Assembly in listening to the views of civil society. I, and many others, came thousands of miles across the globe to be sure the GA could hear and know something urgent from the ground, to be certain Member States could hear the voices from the Philippines and from the rest of our region in Asia, in particular. And please engage with us, your development partners in the pursuit of the MDGs, in the spirit of mutual respect. To those who are present, I thank you very much and pray that you will listen not just with an open mind but with an open heart.

My views come from my limited 24 years experience both in government peace policy work, and NGO humanitarian work in both natural and human-induced disasters, and as a peace and development worker and human security advocate in marginalized, chronic-conflict areas in the Southern Philippines. It is from this perspective that I raise issues from the ground, or at the micro-level as you may wish to refer, which are, at the end of the day, life and death situations confronting the poor and the marginalized. The complementation with the work at the macro-level of many NGOs present here is critical and duly recognized. Whatever learnings I gained from my experience were frightfully deepened by a recent episode in my

life during which I was held captive for 61 days less than two years ago by the Abu Sayyaf terrorist group on the island of Basilan in the Southern Philippines. I survived that experience with a grim realization of the complexities that confront us as humanitarians, human rights advocates and peace workers.

We talk of sustaining development, but what is this development we refer to? More often than not this is measured by goals defined by an elaborate process of consultations, whether they be national or global, eventually carrying the imprimatur of whatever ruling bodies there are at that level.

We speak of eradicating poverty and hunger, improving maternal health, reducing child mortality, ensuring environmental sustainability and others. But are these goals known to, much less understood by, the intended “beneficiaries” or “objects” of these development efforts? Let me cite just one example from my personal experience.

In one municipality in the conflict-ridden province of Sulu in the Southern Philippines, I was involved in the implementation of a water and sanitation project over the period from 2005 to 2007. It could have been a simple matter of digging a well, putting up the infrastructure to provide access to water for the community, perhaps giving a few lectures on the importance of sanitation and then moving on to the next community. This, unfortunately, is the mode of development of many aid agencies which need to report physical accomplishments to their respective Governments.

We realized, however, that such a mode of project implementation would be short-sighted and unsustainable although we would be able to report to our sponsors that we had completed this project. However, we were also sure that if we were to return after a year or two the likelihood would have been that the project would have fallen into disrepair. The community would then once again have had to draw their water from infected sources kilometers away, child morbidity and mortality would still be at unacceptably high levels. Most important, the sense of frustration and helplessness on the part of the community would have been intensified.

Hence we took the route of utilizing the project as a means to achieve a higher goal: that of giving the community a true sense of empowerment. We made it clear that if the community really wanted a clean water system, we would all need to work to attain it. No one is going to get paid to drink clean water. Respective contributions were agreed upon in public, respecting each other's word of honor given in the presence of the community as a whole. Through a series of dialogues, we discovered that people were not aware that their water was contaminated by e-coli bacteria and that this was in fact the primary cause of the diarrhea that prevailed in the community and the resulting deaths that occasionally occurred. By using popular tools we slowly made people understand the link between unsanitary water and unhygienic practices to diseases which were prevalent in the community, leading them to want and resolve to correct the situation. Only when this point of realization and resolution was reached, did the physical implementation of the project begin.

But implementation involved the community planning how the project would be designed and carried out, to include defining policies that would govern project administration including payment for the use of the water and system maintenance.

I cite this as an example of how, in my view, development can become sustainable: it requires the involvement of communities every step of the way, an involvement growing out of a realization of the need for change and a desire and willingness to work for that change. In the process people realize their capabilities and strengths and are able to apply that to other areas of need in their community. This is not a new concept. It is however one that is often just paid lip-service to, with project implementing agencies making token gestures in this direction. If seriously applied it is a long drawn-out and intensive process of trust and confidence building but one which pays off in the long run.

There is however another side to this coin. Pure "People Power" is a nice concept but it needs the support of social institutions, of Government, to provide the technology and the legal framework within which communities can grow and prosper. Unfortunately, in the community in which we implemented our project, things did not work out as we had desired. In the beginning, the elected leader of the municipality welcomed the project. He exhorted his constituents to involve themselves. He convened and presided over meetings during which

the needs of the community were discussed. He encouraged our NGO to continue to work with the people.

But as the people found their strength, and gave voice to their frustrations and aspirations and began questioning why things were being done in a particular manner, the attitude of the elected leader changed. The basic message brought across at this stage was: “Enough of this silliness of empowerment! This has gone too far!” We realized then that things can only be tolerated up to a certain point. In most cases, governance people refuse to change. “The status quo must be protected and maintained!”

Governance therefore is key to sustaining development, but it will need to be of a kind that lets people discover their potentials and their strengths, that encourages them to be creative and find new ways to address obstacles and crises that will undoubtedly be encountered along the way. It is a mode of governance that calls back the true spirit of public service, of service to the people, rather than the mode that prevails in many societies today, where the predominance and preeminence of the Governors over the Governed is emphasized. We organize meetings to bridge government officials with the people, raising the latter’s hopes that their elected leaders would finally be listening to their concerns, but then government officials do not come. Worse, they may not even be present in their respective posts. How then can sustainability be attained if the primary duty bearers do not take interest?

Climate change, food insecurity, water and energy scarcity and inefficiency – how do we address these and other multiple crises? There are all sorts of technical solutions and innovative ideas to target these various crises, as have been pointed out by others. But all will be for naught if we do not go back to the basics: a mode of Governance that sees people as CENTRAL to the development process and provides the framework and the means for people to define and implement their own solutions to the crises that confront them. At the same time, communities must be ready to take up the challenges and the responsibilities to develop solutions by themselves and not wait for others to deliver the answers to them.

How can the international community better support efforts to overcome humanitarian and development crises? Multilateral and bilateral aid agencies need to modify their perspectives.

As stated earlier, too often development aid agencies feel constrained to report on physical accomplishments and therefore race to build roads, classrooms, water systems, and run people through training programs so they can point to their ability to meet or even surpass the goals set for them. Project outputs are often gauged by the physical and measurable activities. However, it is the intangible that animates the tangible. More specifically in conflict areas, any intervention must essentially contain a healing and reconciliation process.

But what about the people factor? Have the so-called “beneficiaries” of all these programs agreed that these are what they need? Have they even been given the opportunity to define their felt priority needs, and to understand why these needs exist in the first place? Have they been allowed to reflect on these problems and explore alternative ways of addressing them? Have they reached the point where they have internally committed themselves to work out the solutions by themselves without being prodded to take action?

Thus, in my view, the international community, particularly donor agencies need to make a paradigm shift in their development aid programs – see projects not as the end-all and be-all but as principally a means of empowering people to work out answers to the various problems that face them in their day-to-day lives, knowing when they need to turn to others for inputs, but essentially taking responsibility for their own welfare. Any intervention, no matter how short-term, must become an opportunity for empowerment and enhancement of peoples’ resiliency, as it must become an opportunity to challenge and improve government institutions. Just and equitable governance and community empowerment – they are two sides of the same coin.

Only when we let the farmer in the field, the fisherman on his boat, the housewife in her home, discover their strength, only when our political leaders abandon their discredited means of entrenching themselves in power and realize that they are servants of the people, given stewardship over resources to be used for the good of all; only then will we find the beginnings of a development process that will feed upon itself and gain a momentum that will ensure its sustenance over time. Sustainable development, after all, is about shared accountability and shared responsibility. Without these as guiding principles, we may not see the MDGs realized. Thank you very much.