

Laws For The Young : Protecting Our Most Precious Resource

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OF ALL the heart-rending pictures and accounts of civil strife in Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and the Balkans, none is more agonizingly moving than those involving the young victims of these cruel conflicts. Yet this horrific evidence of suffering is sporadic, depending on the intensity of the given conflict, the whims of the major news media and, often, the economic interests of the large, industrialized nations. The true, horrific dimensions of the children's suffering in this world — the stark and outrageous fact that tens of thousands of young people are dying every day — is shrouded in obscurity, incomprehensible indifference and the unfeeling ciphers of statistics.

Even more disguised is the pernicious role of the environment, or rather of environmental degradation, in horrors wrought by disease, starvation and regional warfare. But there is an inextricable and vicious link between poverty, environmental abuse, civil conflict — and the suffering of children. For whatever ills beset a society, they will take their heaviest and most wasteful toll among the young and the helpless.

The plight of million of children in today's world — particularly in the developing countries — is one of the greatest challenges, if not the greatest challenge of our time. It is

inextricably related to the environmental crisis facing the world; indeed one of many symptoms of it, *albeit* the most brutal and pitiful one. Among the many ways in which we have squandered our natural legacy, none is more notorious and reprehensible than our waste of young lives.

It is unthinkable — but nonetheless calamitously true — that widespread death and misery could be all but eliminated by funds equal to the world's military expenditures every two weeks ! And this continues to be true, inspite of the demise of the Cold War.

But even if necessary monies could be re-channelled to meet this compelling need, we would still be treating only the principal and most pathetic symptom of the large crisis facing the global community. The concentration of population growth and pervasive poverty in developing countries, and of economic growth and its benefits in the industrialized countries, has created a serious and deepening imbalance that threatens the future of both rich and poor.

This menacing dichotomy has developed at levels of population and human activities which are still much less than they will be in the period ahead. Without massive and fundamental changes in our traditional patterns of production and consumption, and a concerted attack on world poverty, the Earth will continue on its pathway to destruction. And the children of the developing

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countries, who know nothing of politics, ideology or economic theory, will continue to be the principal victims.

No one who has been exposed to these appalling truths — as the author has been particularly in preparation for the Rio Earth Summit of 1992—could fail to be convinced that the pathway being taken is not sustainable. One need not be a scientist or a sociologist or a statistician to know this. As the author travelled to every region of the world, in advance of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, he saw the evidence everywhere of environmental degradation and its human consequences.

The author was shocked to see river valleys that he had remembered as lush and productive, now barren and deeply etched by erosion, where forests or small but productive farms once stood. He saw murky rivers, inexorably siphoning off the nourishing soil and carrying it out to the sea and the beaches — where it could produce nothing but ruin for fisheries and tourism.

On the ground the author saw the signs even more starkly. The cities of the developing countries, growing at rates never before experienced, are now among the world's most polluted and unhealthy. Yet they continue to attract people from the countryside unable to wrest even a meagre living from lands stressed by the ecological deterioration resulting from continued population growth. This is propelling many developing countries towards economic and social breakdown — and some have already gone over the precipice as we have seen in Africa.

This tragic drama unfolding throughout the developing world threatens an immense human eco-tragedy beyond anything ever before witnessed. The author's own experience during these travels confirmed the massive amount of evidence gathered for the Earth Summit that developing countries face environmental and growth challenges today

on a scale the human community has never before confronted. A recent report on population by the World Bank suggests that the crisis is even larger and more urgent than ever. Whereas it was earlier projected that the Earth's population would double by the middle of the next century, the World Bank is now predicting such a twofold increase, to 8.5 billion people, by the year 2030, just a generation away. Expectations of the incidence of this burgeoning, however, have not changed. Fully 70 per cent of these newcomers will be concentrated in the poorest developing countries. Their place in the sun will be a homeland least able to provide for them.

Our own economic and security interests, as well as our moral responsibilities, will not permit us to divorce ourselves from the deepening crisis of the developing world. We have, after all, built the modern industrial civilization which has, however inadvertently, produced this dilemma. We continue to monopolize its benefits while the people of the developing world must not only share, but indeed bear disproportionately, the global risks for which we are so largely responsible. And even within those disproportionately burdened countries, the greatest impact in terms of hunger, disease and suffering falls on the helpless children.

The author is haunted by the moving encounters he had with children, both in the lead-up to UNCED and in earlier work in famine relief programs. He has seen tens of thousands of children uprooted from their homes. He has seen the evidence of open abuse, such as when the despairing poor are driven to deliberately maim their children to attract sympathy. And he has seen children labouring in fields and factories, even in countries where child-labour laws existed ostensibly to prevent this modern form of serfdom. And he has seen the most insidious and widespread abuse of all — social and economic conditions which deny children the access to basic nutrition, health services

and education which would enable them to grow up in dignity, and take their rightful places in society. Yet in spite of these conditions, even the most frail youngsters he met still had a glow of hope in their eyes.

The most tragic irony is that it is not exotic new diseases that kill children in appalling numbers in the Third World. Their health needs do not require sophisticated and expensive drugs or medical procedures. They are dying — at the rate of 40,000 a day — because they lack of most basic necessities of life: untainted water, subsistence food, and even the most rudimentary health facilities and services.

One of the central themes of UNCED was the close connection between poverty and the environment. Hubert Zandstra, Director General of the International Potato Centre in Lima, Peru, described it this way, "Poverty is demonstrably toxic to the environment, for example as the poor press on forest margins and fragile lands in pursuit of food. And while there are programs focused on health and education for women that have reduced population growth rates, clearly population growth is slowed most effectively by higher incomes." But, he adds, environmental degradation limits income growth through its impact on the resource base.

So the issues of poverty, population growth and the deterioration of the earth's environment from a vicious circle — with the world's children caught in the vortex.

In a very real sense, the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 was a Children's Summit too. It is, because children will be directly affected — and affected more severely than anyone — by what we fail to do about reversing the course of environmental degradation on which the Earth is now set.

Judged on participation and commitment alone, the Earth Summit was a remarkable event. It was unprecedented in the engagement of heads of state and govern-

ment, as well as other world leaders, and in the number of non-governmental groups participating. Despite some shortcomings and disappointments, the Declaration of Rio and Agenda 21 constitute the most comprehensive and far ranging program of action even approved by the world community. And the fact that this approval came at the level of heads of state for governments gives them the highest possible degree of political authority. Together the Declaration and Agenda 21 provide a framework and the essential elements for a new global partnership that can launch us on a new pathway to a more secure and sustainable future.

The blueprint is there — and the bricks and mortar. What is still in doubt is whether the governments of the world have the political will of the continuing commitment to build on the foundations they established at Rio the secure and sustainable future which is both possible and imperative. The short term signs have not been encouraging. There has clearly been a tendency to lapse back to business as usual, particularly in light of the pressing political and economic concerns with which virtually all governments are preoccupied.

The large-scale commitments of new financial resources required for the implementation of Agenda 21 are not going to be easy to come by. And they will not come in response to pleas for more "foreign aid" in traditional terms. What is required is a redeployment of our existing resources which in turn, requires reorientation of our priorities. We must now be prepared to give to securing the future of our planet as a sustainable home for present and future generations the same kind of priority we have always been willing to accord to military security.

There has been much talk, in these recent years of arms reduction activities, of a "peace dividend," but it has shown itself, so far, to be a chimera. And a world no longer echoing to the nuclear sabre-rattling of super-

powers is little comfort to sick, starving and abused children whose only hope of personal peace and serenity is an early death.

The author believes the great promise of Rio — if it is followed up with a re-ordering of our political and economic priorities — is the promise of an "environment dividend" — a tangible return on our investment in planet earth and its people.

The moral and spiritual laws which have guided civilized behaviour throughout history provide the best theoretical protection for children. But we know that, unfortunately, it is not easy for children to invoke these laws in their own defense. Nor are they adequately protected by the systems of civil law which exist in most countries. And even in those jurisdictions where specific laws exist to safeguard the rights of the young, the ability to exercise them depends on the initiatives or whims of others.

There are at the international level some very positive "soft laws," or legal instruments which do not carry the force of law. Principal among them is the Convention on the Rights of the Child, prepared by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and approved by the General Assembly in 1989. With near-

ly 160 country signatories to date, the Convention holds great promise for an improvement in the condition of children. If, as it is hoped, the Convention is ratified by all the world's countries by 1995, it will have an unprecedented political weight, but it will still need to be translated into enforceable laws at the national levels.

Ultimately, however, human rights, including the fragile ones of children, can only be partially protected by official law. Legislation needs to be reinforced by the mores of society, by instincts, habits and behaviour which give a priority to Earth's most precious resources, and which make the young the beneficiaries rather than the victims of society's values.

What we are facing is not a political crisis, or health crisis, or a poverty crisis, or a population crisis. It is a moral crisis. In our technologically advanced society, we have the capacity to relieve suffering, to diminish want. The question is, do we have the moral resolve? Do we have the will to change our priorities and objectives, and the steadfastness to pursue them until widespread change is manifest?

