

EDITORIAL

EQUITY: HOW MUCH AT CENTURY'S END?

So often in the latter half of the twentieth century have we heard of the goal of equity for all: from governments, from non-government organizations, from international agencies, from philanthropists, even from corporations: equity of educational opportunity, of health services provision, of employment, of quality of life, equity in everything.

All will confirm that it is the top priority for the present and the future. So, how much equity has been delivered?

As the century closes, amid the celebrations of the affluent may be faintly heard the voices of the poor of the world in answer to the question: very little. At century's end the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle witnessed harsh bargaining between Europe and United States for privileged protection of key industries of the rich. An attempt was made - fortunately in vain - to limit goods produced with cheap labor, the only lifeline to survival of the poorest nations. An attempt to choke the poorest of the poor to satisfy domestic political demands in the United States. It is strange that the failure of the forum to reach any serious agreements could be hailed as a partial victory for the South to hold back the northern tide of pressure. All poor countries need the US/European market for survival, none want it on terms offered by the rich nations and their giant corporations.

Also awaited at century's close is word whether the proposed moratorium on poorest country debt will come to pass, arguably a critical event if equity of opportunity ahead is to have any chance at all of seeing an optimistic sunrise in the twenty first century.

What is not expected at century's end is that the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank will revise their faith in the doctrine of structural readjustment which has so obviously failed to bring justice to the poorest of the poor: this despite the goodwill and eloquent call to fairer action profered by James Wolfensohn, President of the World Bank. He is constrained in applications by the Bank's Board of Directors where the wealthy nations have the loudest voice.

But it is not just money that clouds the landscape. So many poor nations spend what little they

have under the umbrella of instructors from rich western nations, following instructions often already proven to be of false wisdom or following the false wisdom of national advisers trained in the same rich nations. Grand visions, grand projects, foreign control, minimum attention to generations of local wisdom.

Little interest has been paid in the halls of power to the proven simpler pathways such as the Grameen Bank's small loans (Yunus, 1998) to the poorest women of Bangladesh. This remarkable experiment focuses at the micro level which the IMF and Bank disdain to touch as if it were beneath their dignity (Caufield, 1996), the level where the poorest of the poor live and function. It is the mechanisms of the North that do not fit the South, yet the North sees itself as a teacher, not a learner, so missing the lessons that might change the world.

Indeed, much of the problem is the outcome of this failure to listen, failure to realize that listening is as important as talking, that each society, rich or poor, has something to learn and something to teach. Dominance of ownership of technology lies with the North and high technology plays a critical role in management of the financial world. There is some truth in the view that the universal availability of information technology will help to create a more level playing field but without capital to make optimal use of the technology the two worlds remain far apart.

Health and education are two partners in hope. Social justice focuses on these two areas: both depend very much on the global macroeconomic equation, rather than simply on the micro-budgeting procedures that are their preoccupation. As the globalization of the world of commerce proceeds to facilitate the dominance of corporations over governments, trade union strength fades, labor-intensive work fades, real unemployment rises, social needs are greater but social justice is pushed aside. Labor conditions, employment horizons, freedom of low-cost labor-produced products from retaliation in the export market condition the ability of poor people to work, to have income and thus to afford education and health care. To talk of adequate universal health care insurance in the absence of a definable tax base is of limited value. To talk of

extended education for all is meaningless if there is no family income. Yet without education and health the vicious cycle casts the poor aside, casts their children aside and shuts the door even on future equity.

Does the answer rest with unlikely policy changes in the global triumvirate of the IMF, the WTO and the World Bank, or can governments with serious social agendas take back some measure of control? Can the example of the Grameen Bank be multiplied so to place more emphasis on the local, micro level? The historical record of this innovative bank of a 98% loan repayment rate is without precedent but has persuaded others to follow in principle. It has also served to highlight the limited capacity of billion dollar loans by the big banks to create outcomes of lasting value, with equity.

A crucial focus for the immediate future must surely be on agriculture policy throughout the world. The green revolution, a short term success, will likely be a long term failure, as the negative fruits of chemical agriculture serve to destroy the fertility of the land. The aggregation of small plots into meg-farms worked extensively by machine rather than by hand has placed the land-lord system of the feudal past firmly in the saddle again. Small farmers have become contract laborers or have given up and migrated to the city slums. The cohesive community of farming village life has given way to peri-urban instability. If these changes have not yet permeated all rural life they soon will do so. More, the single strain cereal monoculture has replaced the diversity of mixed farming, making the products of the field more vulnerable to plant infectious agents and hence the possibility of epidemic catastrophe closer to hand. Thus the promise of food aplenty sits in reality on a knife-edge. International agribusiness control the seeds and so controls the potential output and the potential for disaster.

The illusion of equity emanating from economic growth is in part the failure of the North to appreciate the value of small scale and partly the propensity of the leadership of the South to dream of great leaps forward along northern pathways. There is grandeur in mega-dreams, in the small solutions there is only satisfaction of feeding a family, of modest education and basic health.

So much effort has gone into health sector reform under the egis of the World Health Organization. The effort is well intentioned to bring better health care to the poor of the world. But WHO leadership is dominated by the North or those well

instilled by northern ethos, so these attempts emphasize the transfer of northern models to southern needs. WHO also needs money, so collusion with the World Bank is widespread and hence to a certain degree there is transfer of Bank policy to Geneva, indirectly through funding contracts and directly through transfer of personnel from the one organization to the other. There is little attempt to listen and to acknowledge the good ideas and practices operating in many developing countries, rather there is a blanket desire to replace them with expensive, irrelevant rich country formulae that give preference to the private sector and to high technology solutions. The goodwill is there but the objective assessment is not. So the inequities of the rich are visited upon the poor.

It is humbling to return to the Grameen Bank type model. This is the upside down model of equity of opportunity, in which the poor need have only ideas and the will to work for them, where the loans are small enough to be repayable in reasonable time, where the fruits are local and visible, where there are no bureaucratic functionaries to take a cut, where community cohesion can be maintained. There is no glamour, only satisfaction for both borrower and lender. There is a high degree of equity, the objective so eagerly sought, so hard won. The Bank was created as a local response to a defined need, not to a Bretton Woods conference of the powerful. Macro financing is important, but so is micro financing on terms that are affordable to the recipients. Macro finance is too easily waylaid by greedy side pockets, micro financing goes directly to the needy for immediate use. Low equity and high equity.

Much as we may wish to do so we cannot escape the reality of global free market economics, the test is whether we can make better use of it, leading to a degree of greater equity at that level. Whether the micro and the macro solutions can function side by side, whether the lords of high finance can see also the virtues of the micro vision. But the tide of history is strong, the dominance of global corporations is outside most public control mechanisms, the power struggles of the rich of rich nations likewise. Equity is not on their agendas, at best lip service. Even the best intentioned leaders of the world are compromised in what good they would sincerely wish to do in their positions of power.

Perhaps there is a faint glimmer of hope emanating from the WTO ministerial meeting in Seattle

that the voices of the developing world were more cohesive, that they were able to stop, at least temporarily, the more severe power thrusts of the rich nations. A debt forgiven developing world, garnering the universally available advantages of the information revolution might just be able to turn the macro corner, encompass the micro opportunities and begin to pave the way for greater equity, internally and externally.

It is perhaps unexpected that a journal devoted to tropical medicine and public health should end the twentieth century in this editorial mode. But is that really so? The health of the tropical world is firmly bound up with equitable economic advance. Endless workshops and meetings are devoted to technologies and strategies to alleviation of tropical diseases. These are regularly identified as being in large measure diseases of poverty, yet the dominant northern çexpertsé who plan many of these gatherings see them in terms of technical challenges - for their hi-tech laboratories rather than as challenges for intrinsic social structure, mobilised by micro financing strategies locally controlled. It is true that poliomyelitis, like smallpox, my succumb to global

vaccination; it is true that leprosy may eventually be subdued by multi-drug therapy; it is true that there is a place for new technology. However, the key element of sustainability in health care will always depend on the ability and willingness to pay, on community support and especially on equity financing.

Health is both a public and a private good. Health indices tend to be better where equity is greatest, somewhat regardless of per capita GDP. Equity is the key, but to fit the barrier locks it can open is a tough challenge.

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