



## Editorial

### *Social Justice: The Ongoing Challenge*

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In a climate where vision, ideals, democracy, participation, justice, responsibility and governance are called for regularly by world leaders, one would hope that we will have some redirection among global decision-making powers. The last issue of *Development*, produced for the five year review of the World Summit for Social Development held in Geneva in June 2000, carried articles that were confidently looking for real commitment and change to ensure poverty eradication, equitable allocation of resources within and between countries and the social and economic 'enabling environment' for sustainable development to proceed. But despite its best efforts, the Geneva meeting seemed hollow. All the doubts were there but little vision or commitment to change. Geneva was decidedly not another Seattle in terms of world attention. There were no heads of states or ministers from G7 countries attending and the proceedings received very little attention in the mainstream press.

Why was the Social Summit such a non-event given the stated ill ease about development and the widespread concern around poverty and inequity? We have to delve below the surface and take a look at the real situation.

One explanation for the Summit's lack of impact is connected to the growing division in the UN and multilateral system. Rosalind Petechesky, in a thoughtful set of reflections on the Summit ([rpeteches@ig.org](mailto:rpeteches@ig.org)), puts this point well. She argues that the hard issues of globalization (macroeconomics and security policies) are the province of the OECD countries and the institutions they lead: the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Security Council. Meanwhile the soft issues of labour, cultural diversity, children's rights, human rights, health, social and gender equality and racial discrimination are continually (and ineffectually) debated in other arenas of the UN. However, as soon as these areas become perceived as crucial to macroeconomic and security matters, these issues also

become the terrain of the dominating group – for example, the World Bank takeover of poverty reduction and health reform. Such agenda takeovers considerably weaken the decision-making potential in forums that include NGOs, developing country governments and in UN agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and ILO.

This divide in global decision-making reflects the shrinking power of the states and the still limited power of the civil society to act as international actors. In the final documents of both the WSSD +5 and the Beijing +5 review there was no suggestion that the negative consequence of globalization could be systemic and structural. Instead, any negative impacts are put down to the ‘problem’ that benefits are unfairly distributed or that policies are badly-designed. Calls for an open challenge to the democracy and openness of the international financial institutions by NGOs received short shrift.

Once can only conclude that the global markets and institutions (despite the all too evident consequence for the majority of the world’s people) are seen as the fast train, and political leaders in the South are uncritically rushing to get on board. They are not trying to slow it down in order to redirect. They see no alternative but to work with the IFIs and security councils, ignoring the voices of the NGOs and the more democratic forums of the UN where civil society can have access. There seems, again as Petchesky perceptively commented, an absence of political will that is deeply linked to a non-critical stance toward the market-driven corporate world, because of the fear that voicing criticism will deny the non-OECD countries a place on the train.

The current form of capitalism (globalism and free trade) has lodged itself in global institutions (WTO, IMF, World Bank and transnational corporations) controlled by the rich countries, which in turn is led by the USA. Meanwhile a barely-noticed battle for national sovereignty over issues such as environmental and labour standards, family life, gender inequity and reproduction goes on, apparently divorced from the big global economic and security issues. Rich governments can safely ignore the Social Summit because the real decision-making forums for macroeconomic concerns and

poverty issues are the WTO, IMF and World Bank meetings.

These are very worrying trends that are placing a false divide between economic and social justice. People working for social justice in their daily lives urgently need to take heed. We cannot leave it that the UN is too weak and powerless, if it is still the only forum where governments can come together. We need democratic, accountable institutions of global governance, particularly in the face of the gross inequities of globalization and in the weakness and complicity of national governments. For now all we have is the UN system and it is being dangerously eroded both from within and without. The strategy of civil society groups to bring directly into the WTO, World Bank and IMF the ‘soft issues’ is a dangerous one that seriously undermines valid national concerns. We need to work strategically and rigorously to build on the political alliances, political ideologies and positions both nationally and globally, opening up the space to bring into macroeconomic and global governance debates new and important thinking on gender, culture, human rights and globalization. Social movements – labour, women, environmental and indigenous – need to work together not only in the national context but also transnationally, pressing for a democratization of IFIs to make them fully accountable to the UN system and all member states, and in the process making civil society an integral part of the decision-making process. Such a structural reform would open up the space needed in these institutions, responding and complementing the strong protest movements outside, to find alternatives to current macroeconomic politics that exacerbate poverty, social and gender inequality, and exploitation of people nationally and globally.

The articles in this Journal suggest that the political will, knowledge and networking can be found among many actors working towards social justice and sustainable development. Given the failure of events such as the Geneva Summit to challenge systemic and structural inequalities or to forge real commitment to change, we have to work much more creatively in order to find democratic fora where transnational reviews of national and international progress can be undertaken by all parties involved and, most

importantly, accompanied by real decision-making power to put them into action.

The Journal reflects a myriad of ways to approach how we assess, do and plan development. As we look for the spaces for reflection and action these are all the major strands of soft issues that need to be brought firmly into the hard issues if we are to create appropriate paths to social justice. The articles give a rich array of how development can be shaped to achieve sustainability, respecting the environment, working together in trust and respect of diversity, how to avoid getting lost in big theory, learning from those working on the ground,

finding local alternatives to grand schemes. The journal aims to cut through the rhetoric by relating experiences from very different contexts – Brazil, Kenya, South Africa, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka – from a wide variety of gender, age and geopolitical positions. They point the way to how we can move into new forms of transnational relations working with the strengths and weaknesses of the institutions we have built learning from the lessons of the past. As the last issue of 2000, we hope they set the tone for the vision and sense of possibility for what we are to find in the 21st century.