

Catholic Commission for Social Justice

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Social Justice and Individual Responsibility

Should we let our politics circumscribe our humanity OR should we insist that our humanity direct and dictate our politics? This is a version of a question quoted by the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum in her work, *Cultivating Humanity* – a study in which she examines the critical place of a liberal arts education in the molding and development of “a good citizen”. But it is a question that I think may usefully inform our discussion of social justice and the roles and commitments which we, as members of a single global community, are obliged to undertake in the advancement of this concept.

The UN Secretary General has highlighted the concept of the **Social Protection Floor** in his Message on the 2011 World Day for Social Justice. This concept, which promotes universal access to essential social transfers and services, has always been an important aspect of the social justice discourse.

Indeed, between 2002 and 2004, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), that branch of the United Nations that addresses issues of equity and equality in both the developed and developing world, convened an International Forum for Social Development. The initiative brought together representatives of governments, regional and national organizations, the private sector and civil society. The overview of the discussions, published in the document “Social Justice in an Open World”, includes the very blunt statement: “The failure to actively pursue justice is not without consequences . . . neglect of the pursuit of social justice in all its dimensions translates into de facto acceptance of a future marred by violence, repression and chaos.” The Report goes on to highlight six critical areas of inequality in the distribution of goods, opportunities and rights – all of which evidence a failure to pursue the various dimensions of social justice. These include inequalities in the distribution of income; inequalities in the distribution of

assets; inequalities in the distribution of opportunities for work and remunerated employment; inequalities in the distribution of access to knowledge; inequalities in the distribution of health services, social security and the provision of a safe environment; and finally, inequalities in the distribution of opportunities for civic and political participation.

Let us first consider *inequalities in the distribution of income*. When I was part of the UN community in the nineties, development practitioners were constantly affirming the four elements of sustainable development. Sustainable development, or what the UNDP then called sustainable **human** development is pro-poor, pro-jobs, pro women and pro-nature.

The UNDP insistence on the inclusion of the word “human” was intended to remind us that while economic growth is the engine of development, development must be explicitly and consciously people-centered. Moreover, development must not only seek to satisfy our basic needs. It must also enlarge the choices and opportunities open to us as individuals and, by extension, as members of societies that must interact, ever more closely, within an increasingly interdependent global community. Development recognizes our shared claim to lead worthwhile, fulfilling lives.

Yet, the Report notes, the past two decades have witnessed a rise in inequality in the distribution of income – an occurrence that has affected, and continues to affect, large numbers of countries -- from the poorest to the most affluent. And as we all know, inequalities in the distribution of income are invariably attended by a second area of inequality namely *inequalities in the distribution of assets* such as land and buildings; and inequalities in accessing the various services and benefits available to those who command more substantial resources.

A third area: *inequalities in the distribution of opportunities for work and remunerated employment* is one that is particularly crippling to young people the world over. Witness

the recent events in the Middle East. Yet, as the study observes, distribution of work and employment opportunities is key to economic and social justice.

Inequalities in the distribution of access to knowledge constitute a fourth area of social injustice. In this respect, education–related inequalities are not confined to increasing enrolment of children from different socio-economic groups in schools and universities. Access to technical training and adult education, and access to the various technologies that now foster the dissemination of knowledge and information also form part of the equation.

Inequalities in the distribution of health services, social security and the provision of a safe environment; and *inequalities in the distribution of opportunities for civic and political participation* complete the list of areas of inequality derived from the International Forum. In respect of health issues and social security, the Forum agreed that while these are amenities all societies endeavor to provide for their members, the equal distribution of these benefits within communities remains a major challenge. With regard to security, groups at the lower end of the socio-economic scale are disproportionately affected by the rise in crime. And while rich and poor are alike subject to the ills of a polluted environment, the rich have a greater capacity to ensure a safe environment. And, in terms of the inequalities in the distribution of opportunities for civic and political participation, there was the general acknowledgement that **“the distribution of power and how it is exercised by those who have it are at the core of the different forms and manifestations of inequality and inequity.”**

To deny access to essential services such as water and sanitation, health, education, housing, food and adequate nutrition and other social services such as life and saving asset management (which are all part of the Social Protection Floor) is socially unjust. Social Justice, in the words of the Secretary General, is an underlying principle for peaceful and prosperous co-existence within and among nations. It is based on the values of fairness, equality, respect for diversity, access to social protection, and the application

of human rights in all spheres of life, including the workplace. It includes removing barriers people face because of gender, age, race, ethnicity, religion, culture or disability.

A primary focus of social justice is tackling poverty, social and economic exclusion and unemployment – a focus which, you will recall, is a significant feature of the Millennium Development Goals. The targets of the MDGs are development targets that all countries undertook to meet by the year 2015. .Yet, despite the fact that the MDGs were agreed to by all 189 member states in 2000, there is a real danger that these targets may not be met because the funding to support them is not readily available. In the words of Poul Nielson, the EU Commissioner for Development, “The raw material of making [the MDGs] possible is basically an input of money. This money is found in one place only, in the pockets of taxpayers of the North. But – with a few exceptions like the UK – the rich countries have given less and less money to international development in recent years.” And John Wolfensohn, the former President of the World Bank, has contrasted the 50 billion dollars that rich countries give to overseas development with the 350 billion dollars they spend on agricultural subsidies. Commenting somewhat ironically on this perceived reluctance of the more affluent countries to provide the level of financial support that would support the Millennium development agenda, Everline Herfkens, the current Director of the Millennium Development Campaign observes: “Even if people would not care, it is important to realize that indeed globalization means diseases travel, crime travels, drugs travel, terrorism travels, so we are all in this together.”

“We are all in this together”

It has been observed that the quality of life enjoyed by a people depends not just on the exercise of individual initiative, but also on social circumstances --- one of these circumstances being the ways in which we come together --- the mechanisms and institutions that we put in place to facilitate the development of an enabling environment based on the principles of human rights and social justice.

Certainly, as a society, it would be very hard to fault Trinbagonians in terms of either our understanding of social justice issues, or in respect of our stated willingness to address the inequalities considered earlier. Every day the media offer us instances of Government's involvement in/commitment to the fight against extreme poverty and its attendant ills. The private sector, too, can point to several areas in which it has sought to break down constraining social barriers and to support the development process. Our trade unions are vocal and visible. Many of us are members of religious or secular organizations devoted to combating one or other of the inequalities examined earlier. And it is my opinion that a general appeal for material support in an emergency or crisis never goes unanswered. Indeed, I think that as a people we are instinctively generous in this respect. So, while we can all identify defects and limitations in the existing systems, the institutions, the organizations, the mechanisms and the understandings are clearly in place. The question then remains, in such a context, what can we as moral, ethical individuals do to advance the establishment of a more just, more humane society?

I would suggest that *our first* responsibility, as individuals, is to insist that in both the public and private sectors, the principles of good governance are valued and embraced. Good governance, we are reminded, is participatory; transparent and accountable. It is effective in making the best use of resources. It is fair and just. It promotes the rule of law.

A *second* responsibility, I would submit, relates to how we perform in the associations to which we belong (be they NGOs, Community-based or Faith-based organizations). As individuals, I think it is our business to ensure that their articulated mission statements do not degenerate into mere rhetoric, but are translated into specific, achievable goals, with measurable outcomes and time-specific results.

But it is the **third** responsibility that I consider the most important from the point of view of the individual. If I may borrow from President Obama's speech delivered at the memorial service for the victims of the shooting at Tucson, Arizona: "We may not be able to stop all evil in the world, but I know that how we treat one another is entirely up

to us.” Exploring the question of how we treat one another and how we treat **with** one another must be, in my view, the uncontested starting point of our individual decisions to involve ourselves in social justice issues.

Ladies and Gentlemen

There is a definition of development that I read years ago, and which I think speaks clearly to the theme of “individual responsibility”. I have never been able to recover the source, but the definition went something like this: “Development is an effort by people themselves to make the most of their resources and opportunities, not only to attain a higher standard of living, but also to achieve an enhanced sense of identity, dignity and self-respect.” In other words, as persons involved in and committed to a socially just development process we cannot only seek to improve our standard of living. Of equal importance must be our *standard of being*. How might we do this?

Professor Howard Gardner, a psychologist and professor of neuroscience from Harvard University developed the theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) in 1983. These intelligences, which we all possess in different combinations, determine the different ways in which we interact with the world. Among the nine intelligences identified, there are two that seem pertinent to this discussion:

The first, *Intrapersonal intelligence*, is defined as “the capacity to understand oneself and one’s thoughts and feelings, and to use such knowledge in planning and giving direction to one’s life. Intrapersonal intelligence involves not only an appreciation of the self, but also of the human condition.”

The second, *Interpersonal Intelligence*, reflects “the ability to understand and interact effectively with others. It involves effective verbal and non-verbal communication, the ability to note distinctions among others, sensitivity to the moods and temperaments of others, and the ability to entertain multiple perspectives.”

As Caribbean people we know what it means to grow up in small, culturally and racially diverse societies with serious enough differences in socio-economic status to make maintaining social cohesion an ever-present challenge. It has been said that the imperatives of survival encourage us to think and act in the short term. But what in terms of the individual may be perceived as rational behavior becomes, when expanded, a collective disaster. I would like to add that what we perceive to be the imperatives of our aspirations and needs also encourage us to think and act in the short term. But what in terms of the individual, the community or the nation may be viewed as rational behavior, too often gives birth to the uncontrolled individualism, the moral indifference, the prejudices and stereotyping that foster social injustice, social disaffection and conflict.

It is for these reasons that I consider it important that we, as responsible individuals, should strive to cultivate our intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences; to explore the relationship between our rights and our responsibilities; to bring a thoughtful, intelligent, compassionate perspective to bear on the crises that confront us as individuals, as members of a particular community, or nation, or international alliance. President Obama's observations, made in reference to the Tucson tragedy, may be applied as appropriately to many, many other instances of social injustice that we can all recall: "[instances that] force us to reflect on the present and the future, on the manner in which we live our lives and nurture our relationships with those who are still with us. We may ask ourselves if we have shown enough kindness and generosity and compassion to the people in our lives. Perhaps we question whether we are doing right by our children, or our community, and whether our priorities are in order. We recognize our own mortality, and are reminded that in the fleeting time we have on this earth, what matters is not wealth, or status, or power, or fame – but rather, how well we have loved, and what small part we have played in bettering the lives of others". I repeat, "how well we have loved, and what small part we have played in bettering the lives of others"

Ladies and Gentlemen, the tests that we face now and in the years head are not only political and economic, they are moral and spiritual as well. They challenge us to enrich the outer life without impoverishing the inner life. Or, as I said, they require us to attend

not only to standards of living, but also to standards of being. Whether we are acting as individuals, as members of a particular sector, or as partners in an economic bloc, they demand that we subject our actions and reactions to critical examination, daring us to use our awareness of our own fears and our own dreams to gain an enhanced appreciation of the fears and dreams of others, so that in the process we may achieve a vision that is at once grander and more sustainable.

Establishing a new spirit of solidarity and cooperation is not an easy undertaking. Old perceptions will have to be examined; old patterns of response discarded. In sum, we will all have to change. And we know that change does not begin as a positive experience but as a profound disturbance attended by doubt and anxiety. It is the overcoming of these apprehensions and doubts that make it into a positive experience. Or, as one commentator on the change process has observed: “The transforming power of the transition process lies not in the arrival at a certain destination, but in the experience of the process itself . . . [the experience of] turning a period of breakdown into a period of breakthrough” (Brumet)

And, in the end, this all takes courage -- courage to rebuild and repair; courage to denounce inequities; courage to espouse what is ethical in our professional and personal lives, to be in all our interactions advocates of what is fair and honorable; or, if I may return to the Nussbaum essay, courage “to package “our politics in our humanity; to see ourselves “not simply as citizens of some local region or group but also, and above all, as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern”.

“Justice will build peace if in practice everyone respects the rights of others and actually fulfills his/her duties toward them.” This quotation, from Pope John Paul II 2003 Peace Message, appears on the 2011 calendar of the Catholic Commission for Social Justice. It speaks, I think, to that very special expression of courage -- the courage which enables us to keep faith with ourselves as individuals and as a society; the courage to remain true to the vision of ourselves as a people possessing the intellectual and creative energy, the

power, the compassion and the discipline to make a unique and valuable contribution to the creation of a more just, more equitable global society. *I thank You*

Typography of Nine Intelligences (extracted from UWI Institute of Critical Thinking brochure)

Linguistic Intelligence: the capacity to express what is on your mind and to understand other people.

Logical/Mathematical Intelligence: the capacity to understand the underlying principles of some kind of causal system, the way a scientist or logician does; or to manipulate numbers, quantities, and operations the way a mathematician does.

Musical/Rhythmic Intelligence: the capacity to think in music; to be able to hear patterns, recognize them, and perhaps manipulate them.

Bodily/Kinesthetic Intelligence: the capacity to use your whole body or parts of your body (your hands, your fingers, your arms) to solve a problem, make something, or put on some kind of production. (People in athletics, or the performing arts, particularly dancing or acting).

Spatial Intelligence: the ability to represent the spatial world internally in your mind the way a sailor or airplane pilot navigates the large spatial world, or the way a chess player or sculptor represents a more circumscribed spatial world.

Naturalist Intelligence: the ability to discriminate among living things (plants, animals) and sensitivity to other features of the natural worlds (clouds, rock configurations)

Existential Intelligence: the ability and proclivity to pose (and ponder) questions about life, death and ultimate realities.

