



Toward a Compassionate Society

by Mahbub ul Haq

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Our global society is not a very compassionate society today. We are quite fond of describing ourselves as one world, one planet, one humanity, and one global society. But the blunt reality is that we are at least two worlds, two planets, two humanities, two global societies - one embarrassingly rich and the other desperately poor, and the distance between these two worlds is widening, not narrowing.

Can we really call it a compassionate society when the richest one-fifth of the world consumes 80 percent of the natural resources of this planet and commands an income 78 times higher than the poorest one-fifth of the world? Can we really call it a compassionate society when there is so much wasted food on the table of the world's rich at a time when 800 million people go hungry every night and 160 million children are severely malnourished? Can we really call it a compassionate society when 1.3 billion people do not have access to even a simple necessity like safe drinking water, when about one billion adults grope around in the darkness of illiteracy, and when 1.3 billion people survive in absolute poverty on less than one dollar a day?

It is certainly not a compassionate society when 1.34 million children in South Asia alone work for over 16 hours a day in inhuman conditions for a wage of only eight cents a day and when they lose their very childhoods to feed the greed for higher profits by their indifferent employers, several of them the most powerful multinationals of our world.

It is certainly not a compassionate society when over one half of humanity - the women of this world - are economically marginalized and politically ignored, when their \$11 trillion contribution to household activities is simply forgotten in national income accounts and when they command 50 percent of the vote but are less than 15 percent of the parliaments of the world.

What kind of a compassionate society is it where modern jet fighters are parked on the runways while homeless people are parked on city pavements; where many desperately poor nations spend more on arms than on the education and health of their people; where the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council sell 86 percent of the total arms to poor nations, often giving handsome subsidies to their own arms exporters?

What kind of a compassionate society is it where millions of land mines are strewn all over the world, waiting for their unsuspecting victims; where it takes only three dollars to plant a mine but over a thousand to remove it, and where the international treaty to ban land mines is ready but the US refuses to sign it?

What kind of a compassionate society is it where we all recognize that nuclear weapon should never be used but where world leaders are reluctant to abolish them since they are fond of playing global power games?

What kind of a compassionate society is it where a few powerful nations decide the fate of the entire world and where the supreme irony is that powerful democratic nations themselves rule out democratic governance in global institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF, and the United Nations.



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The truth is that we are still far from the ideal of a compassionate society. But let us be realistic. It is true that we may never be able to create a perfect society. It is true that we may never be able to eliminate all social and economic injustices or to provide equality of opportunity to all the people. But we certainly can take a few practical steps to make our global society a little more compassionate, a little more humane. Let me identify at least **six of these steps** that can become a reality only if all of us start a global civil society movement for their achievement.

First, in a compassionate society, no newborn child should be doomed to a short life or to a miserable one merely because that child happens to be born in the “wrong country”, or in the “wrong class”, or to be of the “wrong sex”. Universalization of life claims is the cornerstone of a compassionate society. Equality of opportunity is its real foundation - not only for the present generation but for future generations as well.

In order to equate the chances of every newborn child, let us take a simple step. Let us treat child immunization and primary education as a birth right of that child - a right to survive and a right to be educated. Let us persuade national governments and the international community to issue birth right vouchers to every new born child that guarantee at least these two investments in their future. The total cost will be modest, hardly three billion dollars a year, but it will provide a new social contract for our future generations, and it will certainly create a compassionate society.

Second, a global compact was reached in March 1995 at the world Social Summit in Copenhagen that the developing nations will devote 20 percent of their existing national budgets and donors will earmark 20 percent of their existing aid budgets to five human priority concerns, namely, universal basic education, primary health care for all, safe drinking water for all, adequate nutrition for severely malnourished children, and family planning services for all willing couples. This was the famous 20:20 compact. It required no new resources, only shifting of priorities in existing budgets. Such a compact will remove the worst human deprivation within a decade. Here is a global compact already made. Let us ensure that it is fully implemented. Let us get organized. Let us monitor the progress of each nation and each donor toward these goals every year and let us publicize it through NGO efforts and through all civil society initiatives so that the world does not forget the commitments it made and which, if implemented, can provide a social safety net to the poorest and the most vulnerable groups in society.

Third, a practical way to empower people is to provide them with micro credits so that they can find self-employment and self-respect, and it really empowers them and unleashes their creative energies. Access to credit should be treated as a fundamental human right, as Professor Yunus has so brilliantly and convincingly emphasized. The experience of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh has already demonstrated that the poor are good savers and investors and they are eminently creditworthy, so that the banking system should take a chance on the future potential of the people, not on their past wealth. Let us set up such micro credit institutions in each and every country, and in each and every community.

Fourth, it is time to establish a new code of conduct for arms sales to poor nations. There are many punishments today for drug trafficking and for laundering of drug money but not for arms sales. Yet arms kill no more certainly than drugs. Why are generous subsidies given for arms sales in several industrial countries today? Oscar Arias, former president of Costa Rica and Nobel Peace Prize winner, has developed a sensible code of conduct for arms sales, proposing a ban on such sales to authoritarian regions, to potential trouble spots, and to the poorest nations. This code of conduct has the support of many Nobel Peace Prize winners. Yet Oscar Arias has not found a single UN member who is willing to sponsor such a responsible code of conduct for arms sales. Let us generate enough public pressure in our societies for sponsorship of this code. Let us go even further. Let us persuade the rich nations to discontinue their export subsidies for arms sales. This is public tax money. Why should it be spent to subsidize sale of death and destruction to poor nations? Let us at the same time persuade the poor nations to start cutting their existing military expenditure of \$170 billion a year by at least five percent each year - a savings that can yield enough of a peace dividend to finance the entire social agendas for their poor.



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Fifth, let us pledge that global poverty will be abolished in the twenty-first century, much as slavery was abolished a few centuries ago. Poverty is not inevitable. Poverty degrades human dignity and does not belong in a civilized society. It belongs in a museum of history. But let us also recognize that poverty is not a mere flu, but a body cancer. It will take determined policy actions to banish poverty including the redistribution of assets and credits, provision of adequate social services, and generation of pro-poor growth. It will also require a new model of development which enlarges human lives, not just GNP, and whose central purpose is development of the people, for the people and by the people. Let us also remind all nations of this world that abolishing poverty in the twenty - first century must become a collective international responsibility since human life is not safe in the rich nations if human despair travels in the poor nations. Let us recognize the consequences of global poverty traveling across national frontiers without a passport in the form of drugs, AIDS, pollution, and terrorism.

Sixth, let us return the United Nations to the people of the world in whose name it was first created. The preamble of the UN started with the historic words, “We, the People”. Yet the UN was hijacked by governments and has become entirely an intergovernmental body where the voice of the people is seldom heard. Even in international conferences and summits, many clerk curtains separate NGO representatives from real decision-making forums. The time has come, I believe, to raise our voices in favour of a two chamber General Assembly in the UN - one chamber nominated by the governments as at present, and the other chamber elected directly by the people and by institutions of civil society. This will ensure that the voice of the people is heard all the time on all critical issues that affect their future.

There are many more steps one can map out to make our global society more compassionate. I have mentioned only six simple steps which I believe are doable. But let me state quite clearly: building a compassionate society is not a technocratic exercise. It requires solid ethical and moral foundations. It requires an entirely new way of thinking of ourselves as a human family, not just a collection of nation states. It requires a new concept of human security that is founded on human dignity, not on weapons of war.

In the last analyses, human security means a child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, an ethnic tension that did not explode, a dissident who was not silenced, a human spirit that was not crushed. The imperatives of this human security have become universal, indivisible, and truly global today.

The choice before us is simple though stark. We can either learn to live together. Or we can all die together. Robert Frost summed up the challenge before us when he said, “Two roads diverged in the wood and I, I took the one less travelled by. And that has made the all difference”. I hope that we show the courage, and the wisdom, to take the road less travelled as we build a more compassionate society in the twenty-first century.

Mahbub ul Haq was president of the Human Development Research Centre in Islamabad, a policy think tank devoted to research on human development strategies in South Asia. Haq also served as chief economist of the Pakistan Planning Commission 1967-70, director of policy planning in the World Bank (1970-82), Minister of Finance, Planning and Commerce in Pakistan's cabinets (1982-88), special advisor to the UNDP Administrator, and chief architect of the UNDP's annual Human Development Reports (1989-96).