

AIDS, CONFLICT, POVERTY: THE CHALLENGE FOR CANADA AND THE UN

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Perhaps my curmudgeonly genes are clicking in, but I experienced no pulse of adoration for World Bank President James Wolfensohn when he made his pronouncements during the April 2000 Washington demonstrations against the Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) meetings. He indicated that he would personally ensure there was money available for any worthy AIDS project, anywhere. Finally, the financial log-jam would be broken. This is excellent of course, but it does leave a faintly sour taste in the mouth: after all, AIDS has been around Africa, with a vengeance, for more than 15 years. It might be said that the announcement was bitterly late in coming.

I remember the Mbabane General Hospital in Swaziland in July 1999. I was taking a tour of the wards with the supervising doctor, an angel of a man, who had been performing his role for seven years and was in the terminal stages of despair. We stood at an odd architectural junction of the three medical wards, male, female, and child. If Dante were alive today, he'd recast the inferno. All about us, in virtually every single bed, were the dead and the dying, each and every one AIDS-afflicted. Swaziland is a country of barely 1 million, with an HIV infection rate hovering between 20 and 30 percent. That scene in the hospital is the mirror of hospital after hospital in East and Southern Africa. What startles the visitor is the relative quiet: the children rock noiselessly in their mothers' arms, vacant eyes staring; the adult wards are punctuated by a constant low-level strangled coughing,

accompanied by the quiet shuffling of bare feet as the wives and daughters and mothers hover anxiously, pointlessly, resignedly. The smell is of heat and death, stifling, oppressive. Here a patient trembles in the last throes, there another, shorn of dignity, vomits in his bed. A young child whimpers, a mother offers a withered breast. It's all too much. There's such a sense of desperation and damnation.

The doctor, eyes down, palms up, says there's just nothing he can do—no medicines, no money, no hope.

And that is surely the point. HIV/AIDS is not some recent revelation. Everyone knows the current figures for sub-Saharan Africa: 14 million dead, 23 million infected (90 percent not knowing they're infected), almost 4 million new infections a year, more than 2 million deaths a year, 10 million orphans.

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It is now anticipated that in 2005 there will be 13,000 funerals every single day. Where has the World Bank been? Where have the donors been? Is there no shame? You offer enough money for the pandemic now, after watching for 15 years as economies, social structures, families, the human community are collectively shredded and shattered? You expect accolades for sudden repentance after abiding a catastrophe by default? The world community stood by and watched the slaughter of up to 800,000 during the Rwandan genocide and raised not a finger. What's changed? What hands have been raised against AIDS?

And that's what I was intimating at the outset. Surely the words out of the mouth of James Wolfensohn should have been prefaced with an apology for benighted institutional turpitude. Let's be clear here. In 1997, the total spent on every aspect of AIDS treatment and prevention in Africa was \$165 million, while the developed world was awash in money. Put another way, we've been spending 95 percent of the dollars on 5 percent of the pandemic, and 5 percent of the dollars on 95 percent of the pandemic. If ever there was an example of the growing divide between North and South, HIV/AIDS is it.

What is particularly troubling is the knowledge that we could have launched the process to save millions of lives years ago. While the language of AIDS is invariably apocalyptic, we don't have to fall prey to paralysis: there are a great many interventions, small pilot projects, which, if taken even partially to scale, would make a huge difference.

Consider the question of mother-to-child transmission. It is now beyond dispute that the application of AZT before birth can reduce transmission by up to 46 percent. It is now recognized that the administration of the new, far less costly, drug Nevirapine once to the mother during the birthing process and once to the child within 72 hours of birth can similarly reduce the transmission rate. So where's the money? Why in God's name aren't we doing it?

We know that testing and counseling centres established across Africa to allow women to know their HIV status can make all the difference to the decisions they make and their quality of life. There are models from Rwanda to Botswana. Why aren't they emulated continent-wide?

We know that prevention in the schools is the best key to stalling the infection in its tracks, conceivably initiating a downward decline, as in Uganda or Senegal or Thailand. What's stopping the world?

We know that multilateral agencies like UNICEF, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) like Save the Children are struggling valiantly with prototype projects for orphans, perhaps the toughest challenge of all. Here's where the money is desperately needed since it requires dramatic investments in communities. Why wasn't it offered years ago? Millions of orphans don't appear overnight.

I'm not suggesting for a moment that the pervasive culture of denial and the abject failure of many African leaders to break the silence is to be excused or countenanced. But had the World Bank and the donor governments unleashed a torrent of intervention three years ago, five years ago, 10 years ago, hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions would not be infected today.

Am I bitter? You're damn right I'm bitter. Throughout the AIDS pandemic, international official development assistance (ODA) has been falling, calamitously falling. Canada is a perfect example. In 1991, we were at 0.49 percent of our Gross National Product (GNP). By 1999, we had dropped to 0.29 percent, below the average of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donor countries. The target of 0.7 percent of GNP, established by former Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, has never been reached by Canada (unlike Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Holland). In his last budget, Finance Minister Paul Martin spoke glowingly of a \$100 billion surplus over the next five years. There seemed to be increased allocations for everything, except of course, foreign aid. It's truly one of the great ironies

that former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's Tories cared far more for the uprooted and disinherited of the earth than do the contemporary custodians of the Pearsonian dream.

Alas, it's been the same for every other human priority, from universal primary education to poverty itself. It's no accident that, in an outburst of outrage, OXFAM withdrew from the hypocritical meeting of governments and potentates in Dakar in April this year, supposedly gathered to resuscitate education for all. It would require an investment of \$8 billion a year for 10 years—equivalent to four days of global military spending. Will it be forthcoming? Don't hold your breath.

It was the fall of 1996 when the heads of the World Bank and the IMF made a joint commitment to relieve the debts of the poorest countries in the immediate future, under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. The millennium has come and gone. It's 2000 AD. So far, a total of 14 of 41 eligible countries have qualified for (partial) debt relief. The Bank and the IMF are now engaged in an unlovely scramble to approve as many debt reductions as they possibly can by the end of the year. And if it hadn't been for the worldwide campaign by Jubilee 2000, the vast civil society coalition led by the churches, you can be certain that we wouldn't even have this eleventh-hour repentance to boast about.

Meanwhile, in Tanzania, with more than 2 million children not in school, and one textbook for every 30 students, the government is spending six times as much on servicing the debt as on primary education. And Tanzania has a good government; no easy target here for facile Western criticisms to take our inaction off the hook.

The antidote to all of this should be the United Nations of which, in theory if little in practice, the international financial institutions are a part. Alas, it just isn't happening.

The United Nations Secretariat and its Secretary-General are caught in a cruel bind. They want to do the right thing, but like everyone else, they're financially strapped. Mostly, they're flummoxed by the continued

delinquency of the United States in the payment of its dues. But partly because of the financial constraints, partly because of a curious ideological *idée fixe*, there's also something far more insidious, and ultimately poisonous, at work.

The UN has embraced the private sector uncritically. It augurs ill for multilateralism. I have actually sat at a luncheon with the Secretary-General, attended by crown jewels of the corporate establishment and heads of multilateral agencies, and I've heard the corporate representatives say, oozing with solidarity, that their mission statement is a mirror reflection of the United Nations Charter. I choked on my asparagus. No one else choked. Indeed, we all seemed (pretended?) to embrace the preposterous assertion until the Secretary-General himself, right at the end of the meal, warned us not to get carried away.

But carried away the United Nations is. It began with Ted Turner and his billion dollar contribution. It moved to Bill Gates and his greater than billion dollar contributions. And it culminated at Davos in 1999 and 2000, when the Secretary-General made it clear, hand-in-hand with the president of the International Chamber of Commerce (who was, with perfect symmetry, the former CEO of Nestlé, a company arguably in violation of the International Code on the Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes) that the United Nations was open for private business.

Since then, the espousal of private sector partnerships is all the rage, including the recent decision, on the part of five pharmaceutical companies, to sign a letter of "intent" with the UN to contribute drugs at low cost to fight the AIDS pandemic. It will, of course, plant the delicious imprimatur of legitimacy on the pharmaceuticals. However, it is not at all clear that the drugs will be sufficiently low cost or, indeed, that the pharmaceutical companies haven't cleverly surrounded the offer with prohibitive conditions. The problem is that the consuming obsession for partnership with the private sector causes a suspension of critical acumen. In this case, one of the companies is Bristol Myers, a major manufacturer of infant formula, identified over the years as a violator of the Code. There is no conceivable

reason why the UN should embrace a company that breaches international norms, and certainly not a company that compromises breastfeeding. Even with the pressure of HIV/AIDS, this wouldn't be happening were it not for the incestuous liaison with the corporate world.

I'm happy to recognize that there is a legion of companies from whom the UN could benefit financially, and without the slightest conflict of interest. But when the UN is in financial heat, it suspends judgement and accepts funds from all comers.

And the critics are watching. They're watching when the United Nations Development Programme initiates a complex corporate relationship, gives it the name the Global Sustainable Development Facility, and invites a number of corporations with questionable records to join, including Dow Chemical ("Agent Orange"), Rio Tinto (controversial mining multinational), Ericsson Cellular (had investments in Burma), the ABB Group (the Three Gorges Dam in China) and Shell Oil (implicated in the events that led to the death of the famed Nigerian environmentalist Ken Saro-Wiwa). Admittedly, there's a new administrator at UNDP who has fashioned a creative and valuable relationship with Cisco Systems, but the damage has been done.

The critics were also watching when the UN website was graced, startlingly enough, with this quote from the Secretary-General: "Only the private sector has the money, the skills and the management to address the development issues." *Only* the private sector? What happened to the United Nations agencies?

The critics were also watching when the UN fashioned a so-called Global Compact, a set of corporate "guidelines" so superficial, generalized, and voluntary as to bring a smile to the most beleaguered entrepreneur. Even so, as of this writing, no significant corporate entity has felt it necessary to sign.

Above all, the critics are watching when, in the great debate on globalization, the UN appears to come down on the wrong side despite protestations of concern by the Secretary-General about widening poverty and grotesque disparity. It all tends to ring hollow because the early wholesale embrace of the corporate world, and the early

response to the World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle, suggest a relationship with transnationals too cozy by half.

These are not marginal items. The UN risks the wrath of the growing body of dissent, particularly young dissent, as the escalating global coalition of protestors makes its muscle felt. I believe that the Secretary-General is not well advised. There is a powerful movement emerging, and the United Nations can ill afford to be on the wrong side. If one genuinely believes in "civil society," as the UN volubly protests it does, then it's time to re-think the mindless entente with the private sector.

But there's more, much more. It's time, as well, for the member states to take their jobs more seriously. What passes for monitoring, supervision, and participation in the United Nations family is more often than not a travesty. Take the way in which abysmal leadership was tolerated for so many years. Let me say what one is never supposed to say, certainly not in public.

The Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) for 10 years, Hiroshi Nakajima, was so limited as to be the subject of unhappy ridicule. He may have been the nicest chap in the world, but he simply wasn't up to the job. As a result, WHO ground down in internal acrimony and external irrelevance at a time when its expertise was desperately needed. The nations of the world were comfortably complicit: very few were prepared to offend the Government of Japan by attacking one of its nationals. It has taken the new Director-General, former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, a significant time simply to restore confidence and to get things working again. It should never have happened.

The Director-General of UNESCO for 10 years, Federico Mayor, gave new meaning to self-aggrandizement. He began life as a pharmacist-poet, and should have stuck with poetry. He was a charming rhetorician, but during his tenure his reputation was that of a master manipulator, enhancing very little the role and worth of UNESCO. As a result, for example, UNESCO's work in the field of

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primary education ground to a virtual halt. Even today, the prospect of involving UNESCO in areas of its own mandate brings sighs of exasperation. The point is that the nations of the world knew exactly what was going on and with the exception of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Singapore, they just put up with it. I'll never understand the agreed conspiracy of silence.

Back in the 1980s when I was representing Canada at the United Nations, Maurice Strong, the high-octane, world-regarded Canadian multilateralist, tried to put an end to the rule (an appropriate word) of one Edouard Saouma, the then Director-General of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). Canada put up a strong fight to have him overthrown. We lost. He won. But it was a victory for a man who viewed the FAO as a personal fiefdom, who lived like royalty, and who abdicated responsibility for his portfolio. Again, the world was complicit.

Have things changed? Well, not entirely, but they're certainly changing. Madame Brundtland is everywhere regarded as a great catch for multilateralism. The new Director-General of the International Labour Organization (his predecessor was secretive and hierarchical), Juan Samovia of Chile, is an open, inclusive visionary. Within the appointments governed by Secretary-General Kofi Annan, several have been inspired. Mary Robinson, as High Commissioner, has given a new face to the mandate of Human Rights. Mark Malloch Brown will do more for the UNDP than has been done in years. Sergio Vierra de Mello is a highly accomplished Undersecretary-General of Humanitarian Affairs.

One of the fascinating and excellent things that has happened is the emergence of a new multilateral club—a group of women heads of agencies who have developed close friendships and intense camaraderie. It consists of Sadako Ogata as High Commissioner for Refugees; Carol Bellamy, Executive-Director of UNICEF; Catherine Bertini of the World Food Programme; Nafis Sadik, who is near to stepping-down after a distinguished tenure as chief of the Fund for Population Activities; Madame Brundtland

and Mary Robinson. They like each other; they're in constant contact; they're enormously effective. It's an excellent mix.

I cannot emphasize strongly enough the need for individual governments to take UN appointments and policies more seriously. There is now a network of Special Representatives of the Secretary-General (SRSGs) who vary greatly in quality. And yet, their work is indispensable; they must not be appointed through some twisted process of political influence. Bernard Kouchner of France, the SRSG for Kosovo, raises eyes heavenward wherever he goes. In contrast, the choice of Ambassador Kemal Morjane of Tunisia for the Democratic Republic of the Congo is a strong ray of hope.

Over the last year and a half, I've been involved in an Organization of African Unity-appointed panel investigating the roots and causes of the genocide in Rwanda. I remember how shocked I was when Jacques-Roger Booh Booh, the then Special Representative for Rwanda of the then Secretary-General, testified before us. Suddenly I understood why the role of General Romeo Dallaire had been so much more tortured than it should have been. Here was a man, Booh Booh, whose capacity to understand, to report insightfully, and to provide leadership was palpably inadequate. Yet he remained in his fateful post for almost the entire period. Unforgiveable.

But it's by no means just a matter of senior appointments. Policies also get short shrift. Let me provide two examples.

About a year after I formally joined UNICEF in 1995, the Secretary-General launched an ambitious UN reform project. It was overseen by Maurice Strong who pursued the mandate with notable vigour. Along the way, a major difference of opinion developed between Strong and UNICEF. It was his view that all the agencies on the development side should be gradually rolled into one, while attempting still to maintain an individual profile wherever possible for purposes of programs, media, fundraising, etc. It was UNICEF's view that our intrinsic *raison d'être* and significant fundraising capacity would erode disastrously in a very short time.

A quite unaccustomed, almost titanic, battle ensued. Carol Bellamy, UNICEF's Executive-Director made a speech to her Executive Board meeting in June 1997 disavowing in unequivocal language the reform objectives that were underway. Bellamy made it clear that it wasn't reform as such that UNICEF resisted; it was reform that was self-immolating.

In North-South terms, the response was fascinating. The developing countries on the Board identified strongly with Bellamy, understanding that any loss to UNICEF was a loss for programs in their respective countries. If there's any agency which is embraced by the South, it's UNICEF. Indeed, as this particular debate unfolded, President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda sent an unprecedented letter to the Secretary-General objecting to the treatment that seemed to be in store for UNICEF. The developed countries on the Board, on the other hand, were far less sympathetic to UNICEF's dilemma. For reasons of what they assumed to be cost, an end to duplication, and greater efficiency, they cautiously chided the Executive Director (that's about as extreme as it gets in the UN system), and pressed on with the reform agenda. What I found dispiriting in the position of a number of the donor countries was its abject intellectual poverty. They neither understood nor cared about the programmatic implications. They talked in Olympian fatuities about the benefits of integration. They were rigidly ideological and disgracefully uninformed. Nor did they seem to care about the North-South tension that was developing.

In the end, they lost and UNICEF prevailed. The Secretary-General did not press the integration argument. It turned out all to the good because many of the best elements of reform, without the process of homogenization, have followed. There is far greater coordination at country levels, far greater use of shared resources and partnerships, and the emerging United Nations Development Assistance Framework, or UNDAF (which is what the reform construct is called), has proved first-rate. In many ways, Maurice Strong should be pleased. The truth is that robbing UNICEF of even a shred of its identity would have done great

damage to the delivery of programs on the ground, and the compromise which developed in practice is a benefit to all. (Regrettably, during the course of the reform debate, Maurice Strong and I exchanged heated words in a private meeting. It was sad because we had been friends for years. Maurice felt that UNICEF had overstepped the bounds of internal UN propriety in taking the debate public before the Secretary-General had issued his report. I attempted to argue that it was precisely in advance of the report, in an attempt to influence the report, that we had to make our views known because so much was at stake. We agreed to disagree. I make mention of this episode because the fracas was and is widely known, and I'm happy to report that Maurice and I have restored our friendship in the aftermath.)

All of which brings me to the second example. The Executive Board meetings of the various UN agencies are the forum in which policies are explored and programs scrutinized. Unhappily, not many of the debates were, in my experience, terribly useful. Member states grind their axes and pursue avenues of argument that are frequently extraneous.

The developing world is at a great disadvantage. They have very small missions to the United Nations, there's an intimidating amount of reading to be done in advance, and they often have several significant meetings to cover simultaneously. It's an impossible state of affairs. But they also have one considerable advantage: they have UNICEF programs in their countries about which they can speak knowledgeably. Thus it was that the South was often more telling and relevant than the North.

The industrial world simply doesn't take the proceedings seriously enough, although it has the resources and the personnel to do so. There is a surprising tendency to send representatives who are untutored in the debates and who are likely to read, without so much as the change of a comma, the text which has been sent from the capital, regardless the tenor or direction of the ongoing discussion. Worse, there are often instances where a donor country will throw its weight around, pursuing a position at

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once eccentric and absurdist. I recollect this pattern vividly in a recent case of the representatives of France and Switzerland who tenaciously, and at length, advanced an alternative critique of the budget which was, frankly, incomprehensible. It mattered not. They kept at it, even though one got the distinct impression that they thought a balance sheet had something to do with drywall.

Alright, I make light of a serious subject. But what I'm attempting to say is that the United Nations would function far more admirably, in the interests of all, if governments played their parts by involving people who knew what they were talking about.

The agencies, in my limited experience, do know what they're talking about. And that raises yet another matter that I'd like briefly to address.

There is, within the UN system, a strange divide between the political and the humanitarian. Simply put, and so far as I can divine, the political has little time for the humanitarian. I recognize, of course, that the political is vastly more glamorous; after all, one bitter conflict after another demands political solutions, and the Security Council reigns supreme.

But there's a terrible flaw at work. Even though the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) have carriage of most of the world's trouble spots, the failure to consult or more seriously to involve the humanitarian agencies—UNDP, UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF—is a dreadful mistake. The reason is simple: the agencies have an elaborate apparatus on the ground, 24 hours a day, before the conflict, during the conflict, and after the conflict. Their staff members often know more about the circumstances of the country than any political artisan, no matter how well-intentioned. This is true whether it's Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Sri Lanka, or a host of other countries. But by and large, the agencies are treated with a surly and exasperated impatience. When the first draft of the UN "Strategic Framework" for Afghanistan was circulated, there was barely a mention of gender! Given that gender is almost the only basis on which a

rational framework for Afghanistan can be based, how is that possible? Because the political side of the house paid virtually no attention to the humanitarian, and it was only by indefatigable pestering that gender was given a more appropriate place.

I had a small personal experience which was illustrative. Just last April, I was sent to Botswana by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to assist former President Ketumile Masire in his role as "Facilitator" in the inter-Congolese Peace Dialogue. He had been appointed in January, and then pretty well abandoned for a period of three months by the UN, the OAU, and those countries that had pledged financial assistance. Since the Peace Dialogue is the centrepiece of the "Lusaka Agreement," which was signed in July 1999 and was designed to end the fighting in the Congo, there was something pretty outrageous in leaving President Masire to his own devices. Indeed, almost the only way he was able to function at all was by using his personal private secretary and receiving cash advances from the Botswana government.

What I found so revealing when I got there was that no one in New York had thought of using the UN agencies resident in Botswana (or for that matter in the Congo). It was truly absurd because Botswana has a particularly effective UN Resident Coordinator who was happy to help, and a quite respectable family of UN agency personnel. But it would almost never strike the political operatives to turn to the humanitarian operatives. And who loses? The country—invariably a developing or transitional country—where the conflict is raging or peace is stalled for want of intervention.

I loved my work at UNICEF. There's nothing in this world quite like seeing a child reunited with her mother, or a young girl who finally gets to go to school, or a child soldier who returns home unarmed, or an orphanage which is rehabilitated, or a community health centre with vaccines and medicines, or a newly turned faucet signifying clean water for an entire village. So, too, did I love my years as a diplomat. One day, calling upon the mountain of material which I've gathered, I intend to write about

both. I'm a complete patsy for multilateralism, and much as I feel achingly frustrated on occasion, I believe that the UN is the best we could possibly have, and I believe equally—even though I obviously have differences of opinion—that we're blessed by the current Secretary-General.

However, there is a caveat. It seems to me that the consuming challenge for the UN—and that includes both the member states and the secretariat—is not, as is widely held, peacekeeping and conflict. The challenge for the United Nations is to defeat poverty and to introduce a profoundly altered measure of equality into the agenda of this suffering planet. The Secretary-General has begun this process with his imaginative Millennium Proposal.

But on its own, it will never succeed. It needs protagonists, activists, articulate and courageous advocates. And one of those advocates must be Canada.

I sometimes feel like a sentimental romantic putting the case that Canada is special. But as the world knows we belong to the Commonwealth, the Francophonie, and the G-7: indeed, we're the one and only country that belongs to all three. We have the peacekeeping inheritance and we're a cherubic middle power. Curiously, our active participation in NATO seems not to weigh against us.

There was a time, with all these attributes, and enlightened foreign policy to boot, that we were *primus inter pares* in the eyes of the developing world. We've squandered a lot of our moral capital because of declining aid and a generally tepid international performance. We pride ourselves on the landmines treaty, on our critique of the trade in small arms and light weapons, on the seminal work in the diamond trade handled so ably by Robert Fowler, our UN Ambassador, and on our human security agenda before the Security Council. But there's something missing: it's all too easy. It requires very few dollars (something that does not go unnoticed), and it lacks the passionate advocacy for the South.

What Canada should be doing, through CIDA and the Department of Foreign Affairs, is to fashion a handful of interventions—immunization, AIDS orphans, the elimination of polio, girls' education, reproductive health, child labour—which, like our championing of vitamin A, saves or salvages huge numbers of lives. We should pursue all of it in single-minded frenzy. Our voice should be the voice of the developing world, taking on the World Bank when it's out of line, blasting the IMF when it oversteps the bounds, pressing our partners to mobilize around the crushing debt, energizing the United Nations when its spirit flags. Canada should become the unorthodox herald of a new world order which sees justice in dissent, equity in human rights, and economic progress in development without strings attached. We should taunt our former allies and prick their shabby complacency. We should make ourselves the most valued friend of the full constellation of developing countries.

It's not too late. We still have our reputation with which to start.