

Faith and Development - The Link Yet Tapped for Global Poverty Reduction

by

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Introduction by Jean-Louis Sarbib, Regional Vice-President for Middle East North Africa Region: This initiative was borne out of the thought that wouldn't it be wonderful to replace a network of terror by a network of mutual understanding? It took us a little while to use the many contacts that many people in the region have and to invite all of you to come here for what is really going to be more brainstorming than anything else.

As you will see, we don't have a format with prepared speeches. We ask you to come with your thoughts, with your experience, to see also that what is often perceived on many sides as very monolithic is, in fact, full of diversity, that there are people everywhere in the world who, as we are, are yearning for this mutual understanding.

So I would like very much to thank you for being with us and to ask you to participate in what we see from the point of view of the World Bank as a bit of an experiment, which is that in order for us to be more effective in what is our mandate - which is fighting poverty and increasing the speed of development in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa - we can be only as effective as our understanding of the people, the cultures, and the histories of the countries we deal with allows us to be.

So what I hope to see in this next day and a half is a first step on what might be a long and I hope a rich journey together of discovering this mutual understanding and of continuing the process in the way that you all will decide makes sense. We don't want to own the process as the World Bank, we just want to provide a forum to which many of you will make a contribution and which, hopefully, will be a way for us to start this deepening of our mutual understanding and, from a narrow business perspective, increase our effectiveness as a development institution.

So those are the thoughts that brought us to this day, and I would like to ask our President, Jim Wolfensohn, who has done more than anyone to underline the links between cultural and development, between history and development, between religion and development, to say a few words and to launch us on our process.

Mr. Wolfensohn: Thank you very much, Jean-Louis, and let me, first of all, thank you and Shaha Riza [Senior Gender Specialist, Middle East North Africa Region] for the work that you've done in bringing this

together, but most importantly to add my own welcome to all of you to this gathering.

This is, for us, something that we approach with, I hope, a sense of professionalism, but also with a sense of emotion and a sense of uncertainty. The Bank is usually perceived as being a very confident organization, maybe overconfident organization, that has all of the outlines for how people can do better, live better, work better, prosper better, and that those answers are all in this building and in the other buildings of our offices. That is not true, but it is surely not true that we have an adequate experience base in the subjects that we hope will be explored in the next day and a half.

Let me give you a little background on our activities in this area before September 11th - because our interests in the cultural dimension and in the religious dimension are deeper than that. About seven years ago the Archbishop of Canterbury and I came together and decided that there was little or no understanding between the Bank and religious organizations, and this was particularly true in relation to that aspect of religious organizations which related to development, to the caring of people.

I went to him, and I said, "My Lord Archbishop, we are a great development institution, but it is clear to us that the religious organizations have gotten us beaten. They are in every village. All of our studies show that people in villages trust most their religious leaders. They surely don't know us, and you are also caring not only for their beliefs, but sustaining them in many other ways, in education, in food, and health, and in so many ways that affect their daily lives." And so with the assistance of supporters of the Catholic Church and other religions, we had 30 different leaders of religions come together in a conference. It was quite a turnout. The two days felt more like two minutes because of the intensity of the discussions and the way in which we were drawn together, not at the level of individual religions, but at the level of humanity and at the level of people. Then we had a second conference here in Washington, and we are assured we'll have a third conference back in Canterbury before the Archbishop retires. We've made some progress on this, and we've started to build a preliminary understanding of how development institutions and religions can work together.

I might tell you that it has also brought home to us the things that I didn't understand, which were the rivalries between certain religious groups, the rivalries within religious groups and the sensitivities that we had to understand, even in the selection of the people that were to be invited. So I am somewhat humbled by that experience, but I know it's in the right direction.

The other initiative that we had was based on a very simple proposition that if you go to a country and you are trying to develop development programs, you better understand the culture and history of that country before you try and do anything. That, also, is something in which our experience was not very rich and in which the interest, in some cases, was not very great.

But about two and a half years ago we decided that we should have a conference on culture and development, which we called in Florence, expecting first 100 or 200 people. We planned for 400, but 700 people turned up, and it was an absolutely amazing success. Again, it went like two minutes. No one ever went to bed, so far as I could see. Everyone was talking bilaterally and a huge number of contacts were made, and so it reaffirmed, for those of us that needed a reaffirmation, that you can't really do effective development unless you understand the history and cultural base of a country.

I've certainly understood, in the 100-plus countries I've visited, that if you can engage on a local cultural level, it just opens all the doors. I just got a picture of myself with President Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan at his home in the country, with him playing an instrument much like a guitar, and me playing a cello surrounded by local instrumentalists. I didn't need too many more discussions with Nazarbayev after that to establish an understanding that was positive.

These two ideas about religion and culture are not new to us, but what took us totally by surprise was the interconnection and our lack of knowledge on September 11th. We realized that we somehow understood the interconnections at a superficial level - at a sort of peaceful level; but we were trying to avoid the difficult underlying questions. We were looking for areas where we could knock off good understandings and somehow try and push into the background some of the more provocative and difficult issues. Well, come September 11th and came September the 12th, when we started to try and reassess what's happened and what we are doing. We discovered a number of things:

First, that our knowledge was not deep enough; secondly, that if things get out of hand and if you turn your back on problems, then, so far as our institution was concerned, we were caught really unprepared.

When we looked at Afghanistan as a single country, we had had what was known as a "watching brief" on Afghanistan. A watching brief meant that we weren't lending because of some economic performance issues, and some political performance issues, and security issues.

We also recognized that our work in Central Asia, from which I've just returned, was important work, but that in terms of putting the whole thing together and viewing the region as a region, we simply had not taken the thrust of the culture, and the underlying politics, and beliefs, and stresses and put it all together. We were trying to deal with individual countries outside the context of the whole cultural environment in which they are operating.

I have just come back from a trip to Russia, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. On Monday I leave for Pakistan, Afghanistan, Mongolia, China, and Turkey and hope I also will be able to visit Iran. What we have all concluded is that, quite apart from the individual national questions, there are underlying and overlaying cultural and political issues that will inevitably affect any domestic activity we take in any single country. So, just for the region,

we are now far more aware of the complexity, historically, economically, and politically, of those areas.

Then we take it another level up, and we look at our relationships, particularly in relation to the world of Islam after September the 11th. We discover that it's not just Central Asia, but it is a much greater movement and that the underlying stresses take you through the Middle East, through to Africa, and the one billion 200 people who follow Islam, who themselves were probably the first globalizers, in terms of an extension around the world - now we find that again we have a lack in our understanding at yet a third level of abstraction.

But for us, it is no longer a theoretical issue, it's a very practical issue because we are talking now about peace, we're talking about development, we're talking about poverty, and we've been confronted with the reality that no amount of work on governance, no amount of work on economic planning is adequate if we don't understand these underlying forces of culture and history.

The reason that we are so anxious to have this meeting with you is to help us try and get some sense of integration of these things and some approach that can allow us to face the practical issues that we are facing as the Bank which relate to poverty and to development, and position them somehow and give some sort of sequencing of how we deal with the cultural issues, the historic issues, even some political issues, as we try and address the issues of the Bank, which are essentially those of poverty and development.

When I say that we come to this conference without our usual sense of certainty and assurance, you can understand that I have some ideas of the framework, but very little ideas of the details. What we are hoping will happen at these meetings is that in the general discussions that you have and in the specific round tables, we can just throw ideas on the table. We can try and see if, after a day and a half, we have a set of ideas or principles or approaches that we can follow.

I want to assure you that if you find this day and a half interesting, as indeed it must be, given the group of people that are here, we would love, in whatever way seems appropriate, without dominating the next steps, to provide the facilities and resources to make whatever ideas come out of it move forward so that we can participate and learn.

That is the approach with which we are coming to this. It is with humility, it's with an understanding I think of the broad framework, but with the hope that in the next day and a half, you'll give us the sort of guidance we need, and ideas will emerge that we can then follow together.

Again, thank you for being with us, and I'm sure it will be a great day and a half.

Thank you