Giving All Nations and Peoples a Voice

A conversation with Bangladeshi diplomat Anwarul K. Chowdhury

Editor's note: Karen Judd Smith, director of the Office of United Nations Relations for IIFWP, interviewed His Excellency Anwarul K. Chowdhury, undersecretary-general for the Office of Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries, and Small Island Developing States. Ambassador Chowdhury was previously Bangladesh's permanent representative to the UN.

VOICES OF PEACE

Mr. Ambassador, this past January, you served as the secretary-general for a small island developing states international conference: Barbados Plus Ten. This conference, meeting in Mauritius, was a follow-up ten years after the Barbados conference on small island developing states. Could you please give us a sense of what you see as some of the most significant developments from that Mauritius conference?

ANWARUL K. CHOWDHURY

The most important elements of the international meeting were its outcome and the atmosphere in which the outcome was adopted. There was a very upbeat mood as the delegations affirmed that these small, vulnerable island states need the support of the international community. I think their conclusion was widely accepted, and that is what prompted a really good outcome of the conference.

The small islands have a given vulnerability, which is basically geographic: the remoteness and smallness that compound their usual development problems. Also, they face the problems of being marginalized in trade issues and of experiencing serious demands on their security structures due to new terrorist threats. They are also facing the serious problem of HIV/AIDS. So all these things have affected their development prospects.

The Mauritius meeting came up with a strategy to address those specific problems and to see how the international community can help. A key element emerging from the meeting was a consensus around the principle of partnership among all the nation-state actors, including, of course, the small island states.

V.O.P. How did the plan produced by the Mauritius meeting differ from the Barbados ten-year plan?

A.K.C. There are 37 member states belonging to this group, out of which 12 are also least developed countries, the poorest of the world. For all these member states, the Barbados program remains valid in its essential elements. There are 14 priorities
incorporated in that program. What the Mauritius meeting did was to adopt a strategy for its further implementation. During the last decade, unfortunately, the Barbados program didn’t make much progress in terms of implementation. That is what we looked into in Mauritius.

**V.O.P.** Could you articulate some of the strategy’s main points that will allow the next ten years to be different?

**A.K.C.** First, I think the most important element has been partnership. We have highlighted this time, in addition to the usual North/South collaboration and partnership, and the usual support from multilateral organizations like the United Nations, the role of civil society and the private sector. We wondered how civil society and the private sector could bolster the efforts being made by the small islands themselves.

**V.O.P.** And they had a more prominent opportunity this time at the conference?

**A.K.C.** Yes, absolutely. I think for the first time we made available the opportunity for civil society organizations to present their reports in the plenary of the main meeting. They also participated in the roundtable of the ministers: the NGOs—the nongovernmental organizations—were given the opportunity, and two seats were made available to them for articulating their points of view.

**V.O.P.** So that, in some ways, is also a development of the United Nations’ own working process?

**A.K.C.** Yes, I believe so. During the nineties, the UN had a series of major summits and conferences. Implementing the outcome of those conferences means we have to involve civil society, for two reasons. First, at the national level, civil society organizations are able to reach out to the poorest of the poor, to the most distant communities at the grassroots level. Second, the global-level NGOs have the opportunity for advocacy and for pushing the agenda on issues that transcend boundaries. For these reasons, NGOs are best suited to promote the agenda of the small island developing states.

**V.O.P.** These views about NGOs are relevant also to two of the high-level UN panels. It seems you are already finding ways within the system to move things forward along the lines suggested by those panels.

"Civil society organizations are able to reach out to the poorest of the poor, to the most distant communities at the grassroots level."
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A.K.C. The time has come for the United Nations to outline its working relations with civil society organizations. It is very important. The UN has changed in terms of its activities in a big way during the last sixty years. NGOs are true partners of international cooperation. Though the United Nations continues to be an intergovernmental organization, we cannot deny the very positive and proactive role of the NGOs.

V.O.P. During this period of the sixtieth anniversary of the United Nations, renewal is a big topic. Certainly one of the biggest challenges facing its member states is the alleviation and eradication of poverty. How is the United Nations helping them do that?

A.K.C. The very essence of the UN’s support to the member states is to assist them in bolstering their own efforts. The member states decide what is good for them and how they would like to see their countries develop and eradicate poverty. The United Nations, particularly its funds and programs, comes in to assist them in as many ways as possible. Over the years, the UN system has been able to support the member states by providing them with technical assistance and help in strategizing how to eradicate poverty.

Second, beyond strategy, the UN has helped countries build capacity toward eradicating poverty.

Third, the UN has contributed in an intellectual way to help the governments elaborate a particular poverty reduction strategy.

And finally, it has helped governments coordinate the international assistance toward poverty eradication that comes in at the national level.

But here you have drawn me into talking about poverty eradication while the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) focus on a first priority of reducing poverty by half by the year 2015. So we are talking only about reduction by half. But then, what happens to the other 50 percent of the poverty-stricken people? So it is a major challenge.

The least developed countries, which are my mandate, are the poorest, the weakest, and the most vulnerable countries of the world. There are 50 of them, 34 of which belong to Africa. So there is a major challenge. But I repeat, the MDGs of the United Nations will not be achieved if we neglect the 50 least of these countries. We have to see that poverty is addressed there in an effective way.

An example: UN programs have supported empowerment...
women in a strong way. Poverty has a feminine face; it cannot be eradicated without real empowerment and involvement of women.

**V.O.P.** Poverty has a feminine face. I think you are accurate in that, Mr. Ambassador. I have heard you mention on some other occasion that when you educate a girl...

**A.K.C.** You may say it this way: “When you educate a boy, you educate the individual, but when you educate a girl, you educate the whole family.” Or, maybe, “you educate parts of the society and the community.”

**V.O.P.** Does the United Nations have a plan for the eradication of poverty, or is it still grappling with the first stages of its strategy?

**A.K.C.** Poverty reduction is the first phase. Starting with the Millennium Summit in 2000, there are 15 years for reducing poverty by half. Many of the same initiatives will continue thereafter. But remember one really important element. Once a society is able to eradicate half of its poverty, there is so much enthusiasm, high spirits, and entrepreneurship. With so much human capital involved, I believe, the second 50 percent will be achieved much faster than the first.

**V.O.P.** What is one of the most obvious barriers, at this time, to reaching the goals established for the first phase?

**A.K.C.** The most important element in poverty reduction, as I said, is involvement of the total population, and 50 percent of the world’s population are women. So it is really important to involve women and provide them with opportunities to contribute to the national economic activities. This can be done in very simple ways including providing microcredit to women and women’s groups. It has been shown that poverty over the last six or seven years has been tremendously reduced in many of the countries that have adopted a microcredit program. Globally, nearly 16 million families have come out of poverty through microcredit.

So while we talk about poverty-reduction strategy, about plans and programs such as direct poverty investment, small-scale efforts also can give very good results in these poorer countries.

**V.O.P.** For those small-scale efforts, who are the most important partners or initiators of that work at the grassroots level?

**A.K.C.** As many as 60 countries already have a microcredit system, and in most of them the microcredit programs are being run by civil society organizations such as women’s groups and social development groups. Although a number of governments have initiated microcredit programs, they basically are being run by private voluntary organizations. I think that is very important.

**V.O.P.** Talking about microcredit is easy because it is measurable and tangible. An almost-silent partner to that is an educational component—even the how-to of conducting a small business. Is the UN involved in the educational component, or is it encouraging civil society to develop the curricular side?

**A.K.C.** You are absolutely right: education is a key element, and the UN system as a whole has focused on education in a big way. One of the MDGs, in fact, focuses on primary and universal education. UNICEF, for example, has been actively involved in promoting education, particularly girls’ education.

I believe that girls’ education is an area where you get the best results out of your investment. I see no other investment giving you that kind of result. So it is really important that this focus continues to be supported by the United Nations.

For education to be meaningful, it should have a direct link with the life that we lead. So it cannot just be textbook knowledge; it has to be practical. You have to learn life skills; you have to learn about the values of life. Through education, you have to become a good citizen of your own country, a good person in your own community, and a global citizen. The world has become so small. All of us need to feel strongly about moving forward together.

**V.O.P.** Empowering women would certainly seem to be a good strategy, but on the ground it must raise certain challenges for the local communities. Is that something the UN has dealt with?

**A.K.C.** I believe that local communities have been able to evolve, working together with the United Nations, working among themselves to take up programs
"These least-developed countries are being sidetracked; they have no way of getting their point of view out to the world’s dominant countries."

V.O.P. It seems that you are a great believer in the individual capacity to be creative and the drive that comes from the individual. That is wonderful. You have also drawn attention to the plight of the terribly poor or voiceless. How are you working to give these people a voice? How can civil society give a voice to the abject poor?

A.K.C. Thank you for mentioning that. As I stated at the meeting of the Commission on Social Development in February, we need to create a space to listen to the voices of the poor. Here I have in mind both the poor people within countries and also the poorest countries of the world. As I mentioned, these least developed countries do not have any contrasting power or any leverage in the international dialogue that is defining global economic, social, and political relations. These countries are being sidetracked; they have no way of getting their point of view out to the world’s dominant countries.

At the same time, within even the dominant countries there should be an opportunity for the poorest of the poor to be heard. Unfortunately, the current system does not give them the opportunity to speak up unless there is...
large-scale debt or hunger. I want the system to reach out to the poorest people, the communities at the grassroots level. There should be an opportunity to achieve this, with civil society playing a major role in this direction.

V.O.P. As the undersecretary-general of the Office of Least Developed Countries, and one endeavoring to give a voice to the voiceless, is there anything you would like to ask of those of us who may not know about these unseen poor?

A.K.C. First of all, thank you for giving me this opportunity to share my thoughts and for asking very valuable questions. The Voices of Peace program needs to carry the agenda for these vulnerable countries to the grassroots level, and I request that your programs be available so the people can view them. Also, we need to help these people stand up on their own feet, to feel confident to take charge of their own destiny. It is very important that they should speak up. It is time to do that.

V.O.P. Mr. Ambassador, you have given us a good understanding of what your work has been in the three short years since your office was established. As we go beyond the sixtieth anniversary of the United Nations, we know that this work of yours will need to continue. Thank you very much for your time.