

The Role of Universities in Peace and Social Development⁺

DANIEL S SANDERS *

ABSTRACT

The role of universities in peace and social development has to be viewed in the context of pressing global problems and the central issue of human survival in an increasingly interdependent world. We know that concerns such as poverty, homelessness, violence and environmental and developmental crises are no longer confined to one nation. What were once, for example, local incidents of social dislocation or pollution, now involve multiple linkages that transcend national boundaries. It is also presumptuous to think that any one institution or group by itself – be it the United Nations, the non-governmental organisations or the universities – could deal with problems that are unprecedented in terms of increases in rate, scale and complexity.

Given this context, the article advocates a collegial and interdisciplinary role for universities in working towards peace and development in a militaristic, hostile world environment. Sustainable social development is only possible when structural inequalities and exploitative relationships have been exposed and efforts made to remove these inequalities. In the struggle for this new global dispensation, universities have a vital role to play.

Global Context of Issues

It is evident that key peace and social development concerns, such as integrated development, responsible use of environmental resources, humanised development, eradication of poverty, arms control and improved quality of life for all, have global dimensions and defy the limited strategies of individual governments and institutions.

There is also increasing realisation that global issues such as environment, development, peace and quality of life are closely interrelated. The nature of our growth and development activities impact our environment positively or negatively. The depletion of our environmental resources, in turn, affect adversely our developmental efforts. The enormous global military expenditures represent a heavy tax on the social systems of both developed and developing countries, and

+ A paper presented at the International Conference on Media and Our Common Future, Vasteras, Sweden, September 1989.

* Previously Dean and Professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

the threat of nuclear war poses the greatest possible danger to our global environmental resources, social development efforts and life itself.

Amitai Etzioni (the American sociologist), some years ago, made the telling comment that the United States was fast becoming a nation that builds by day and destroys by night (Etzioni, 1976). Today in the international context it could be said that we are fast becoming a global community that builds by day and gears up for destruction by night.

In addition to the nuclear shadow that poses the most awesome threat to life and to global environmental resources, there are serious ecological concerns such as the greenhouse effect, the depletion of the ozone layer and the destruction of tropical forests. Military expenditures, we are aware, involve an enormous pool of capital, human skills and resources. Globally, nations spend almost US\$ 1 trillion a year on military security (MacNeill, 1989).

The world's arms race and excessive military spending are both impediments to development and significant factors in the global economic crisis. A major proportion of these military expenditures could be directed to more productive, life-affirming purposes. This excessive military expenditure is highlighted by the fact that one hour's global military expenditure (it was US\$ 1,7 million a minute in 1986) would be sufficient to immunise the 3,5 million children destined to die annually from preventable infectious diseases. James Grant, the director of UNICEF, compares this predicament of children (mostly in developing countries) to a Hiroshima like disaster – every three days 120,000 die unnecessarily. This continuing violence against the children should shock our collective conscience. As Ruth Sivard, author of *World Military Social Expenditures* points out, the children of the world are already experiencing World War III (Sivard, 1986).

Efforts to deal with these interrelated global issues, social critics point out, call for a broader perspective that notes the basic realities such as world poverty and inequalities. Poverty, for example, is a major cause and a major consequence of global environmental problems, especially in the developing countries. Gro Harlem Brundtland states:

“For developing countries poverty lies at the heart of all issues. The poor are forced to eat next year's seed corn, to cut scarce forests for fuelwood. Although such practices may be rational short-term tactics for survival, in the longer term they can only result in disaster. Yet it is both futile and an insult to the poor to tell them that they must remain in poverty to protect the environment”

(Brundtland, 1989).

The World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by Brundtland, in its report "Our Common Future," calls for a fundamental commitment by all governments and institutions to make sustainable development the guiding principle of the international community (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). There was general agreement by the Commission that, to ensure a common future, it was necessary to foster a new international vision based on cooperation and a new international ethic based on the acknowledgement that the major issues dealt with are globally interconnected.

Universities in Relation to our Common Future

In discussing the role of universities in addressing concerns of our common future, peace and social development, as mentioned earlier, it is presumptuous to think that the universities have a special or separate role. It is at best a shared task. It is clear that governments, several international institutions (especially the United Nations and its specialised agencies), non-governmental organisations, universities and social movements have a collective role in shaping a new international vision, in fostering a new social ethic, and in addressing issues of peace and social development.

Any attempt to identify the potential role of universities in shaping a vision for the future and in dealing with common concerns of peace, environment and development is fraught with difficulties. While universities share some basic common attributes, there is considerable variation between countries and regions. There are also issues related to the mission of universities and how this is viewed in the context of particular societies. Universities vary in terms of level of education; educational philosophy; tradition; and degree of emphasis on research, teaching and service. Universities also vary regarding the extent to which they are international, regional or parochial. Despite these variations and difficulties, it is necessary in the current global context to examine the potential of universities in dealing with the interconnected global issues of peace, environmental protection and sustainable development.

In this task it is necessary first of all to examine the fundamental and distinctive mission of universities. The unique mission of the university (especially the western university) has been the pursuit of truth, "*manifold but finally unitary*", probing the universe and our place in it. An essential aspect of this quest for truth is the commitment to objectivity and an openness to diverse values, interpretations and frames of reference (Lobkowitz, 1983).

Ideally then the university is an intellectual and moral community. And the one common purpose is devotion to truth. Truth may be "provisional or definitive". But if the university does not share the conviction that there is truth worth pursuing "for its own sake", that can be taught and learned – that is objective – then it is found wanting (Lobkowitz, 1983).

This pursuit of truth, "a defining characteristic" of universities, is a key element in their potential for preparing youth who would help to shape an international vision, and a social ethic for peace and social development. But critics point out that currently we live in an age of spiritual distress and "psychocultural dissolution". And that societies and societal institutions – including universities – are not in a position to pass on their values to youth. This inability to pass on to the new generation, societies' values, is perhaps indicative of a deeper crisis. Some analysts maintain that we no longer have a common understanding of ourselves, of man, his place in the universe, his nature and destiny (Lobkowitz, 1983). This poses a major challenge to universities and other societal institutions.

Second, universities have the potential role of serving as social critics in shaping a vision of the future – a future committed to peace, environmental preservation and sustainable development. The contribution of research in varying fields is crucial here. Related to this is the opportunity to study and discuss social, political, economic and ethical issues in an atmosphere of tolerance and objectivity. In reality, however, universities are increasingly subject to governmental pressure and are much more vulnerable to political pressure from within and without. Some analysts point out that the university serves society best by "*being itself*" – a place of "*tranquilled, disciplined, objective thinking*" (Lobkowitz, 1983). But the university does not exist for its own sake – it is not an end in itself. It is essential that the university is oriented to what has been termed the "*main human enterprise*" (Nisbet, 1980). Ideally, universities must serve society – without "*accepting its dictates*" and freed from the arrogance of presuming to know what is best for others.

Third, universities, in any effort to contribute to shaping a vision of the future in the global context, have to make a commitment to an education that introduces an international dimension. University education at all levels has an implicit responsibility to deal effectively with the reality of developing a world view (Posvar, 1980). To facilitate a change from an "ethnocentric" to a "globalview," from "my country right or wrong" to "our planet," and from exclusive identification with a group or nation to "*identification with humankind*" (Walsh, 1984). The challenge of global concerns such as poverty, environmental pollution, dilemmas of development, and the nuclear threat have implications for research, teaching and services in universities. There is the challenge of stimulating research, teaching and service in diverse fields in a global perspective and of harnessing the scientific and

technological resources for the benefit of humanity in varying cultural, political and socio-economic contexts.

Fourth, universities have to develop interdisciplinary approaches in dealing with problems. It is necessary to pursue international issues in a global framework from the standpoint of several disciplines and professions, such as international economics, international politics, international law, international sociology and international social work (Posvar, 1980). Universities continue to be the major social institutions with the responsibility of developing advanced knowledge, and interpreting and disseminating it in society. Knowledge development, synthesis, interpretation and use are integral aspects of the university's central role of fostering intellectual development and pursuing truth. Efforts to relate university teaching and research to global concerns of peace and sustained development need to cut across narrow disciplinary lines. Interdisciplinary collaboration and team work involving universities and major research institutions outside the university becomes crucial.

In the universities' contribution to shaping the common future, critics point out that there is no need for scientists who are "*technocratic barbarians*" and for humanists who have "*no appreciation of the significance of science*" (Lobkowitz, 1983). To ensure that scientific efforts contribute to humanising development and to improvements in the quality of life of all people, it is vital that global research and development are guided by improved knowledge and responsiveness to the social conditions in the global community. Here again, the contribution that universities could make along with other institutions of research and development could be significant.

Peace and Social Development Concerns

It is clear that peace and social development constitute the very heart of the new international vision. The fostering of this global vision for the future, as mentioned earlier, is a shared task. It is a shared vision with the potential of contributing to a greater political, social, economic and moral responsibility in the global community. Implied in this vision is a greater social sensitivity to the needs of people-oriented development, environmental protection, justice and promotion of peace in the international context.

There is a vital relationship between the quest for peace and development concerns in the global community. Peace is not simply the absence of war and violence. Peace today has a broader conceptualisation. We are aware that it is a more active, positive concept. The struggle for peace involves the condemnation

of all forms of oppression, discrimination, exploitation and domination. Only by exploring alternate modes of thinking, experimenting with new forms of collaboration and emphasising new priorities that cut across national boundaries (such as ecological issues, peace and development concerns) can we begin to break loose from the current ruthless competition and nuclear mind-set.

The only lasting peace is a just peace based on respect for human rights and mutuality in relationship (Brock-Utne, 1987). The road to a just peace and sustainable development involves, centrally, the establishment of an equitable international order. This brings into question the structural inequalities in the relationship between the industrialised and the developing countries. Critics refer to this unequal relationship between the industrialised and developing countries in the global context of economic and social development as indirect or structural violence (Brock-Utne, 1987 and Kothari, 1987). Indeed the situation of world hunger, excessive military expenditure, unequal trade relations and basic underdevelopment in many parts of the world is viewed as a new form of violence and a threat to world peace.

The Concerns of Developing Countries

In the Third World countries, development has been the central core of peace thinking. This is against the reality of one billion people in the Third World (approximately one in five of the global population) living below the poverty line. The interest in most Third World countries is on people-centered development which has the potential of contributing to social and economic well-being (Korten and Klauss, 1984).

Social development efforts that by definition are people-centered, hold the promise – especially in developing countries – of unleashing forces of positive change and of contributing to growth, improved standards of living and enhanced quality of life for all. People-oriented development expresses development objectives in ethical and humane terms, focusing on concerns such as: quality of life; education; adequate income; improved health services; and people's participation and conservation of natural resources. In this quality of life emphasis, consideration is given to a combination of factors, such as: increase in *per capita* goods and services; consideration of possible decrease in *per capita* natural amenities; distribution of income; and likely negative effects of expanding economic activity, especially on marginalised people (Brown, 1973).

The extension of peace concerns to include arms control in Third World countries has come largely from the belief that arms production was utilising

resources that could instead be devoted to development. A small fraction of the world military expenditures is sufficient to provide the global community with the necessary food, water supply, housing, health care, and education so vital for people-centered development.

It is a matter of concern that military expenditures in developing countries have increased five-fold since 1960 and that the arms trade, especially with Third World countries, is a factor in the economic growth of some of the major industrialised countries. The industrialised countries are increasingly selling weapons to the Third World, which in turn provides valuable raw materials.

We know that efforts toward a sustainable and peaceful world have to go far beyond the reduction of pollution and waste in the developing countries. It is vital that international agencies geared to "*economic development, exploitation of resources and international trade*" make a commitment to sustainable development as a central goal (Ruckelshaus, 1989).

Additionally, development assistance to Third World countries needs to be more substantial and geared to their own needs. There is the criticism that development assistance has often been the mechanism of the rich and the powerful to pursue their special interests. Currently, (in 1989) the total development assistance from developed to developing countries is around US\$ 35 billion a year. Ruckelshaus points out that the annual foreign aid from the US alone would be \$127 billion, if it spent the same proportion of its Gross National Product on foreign aid as it did during the height of the Marshall Plan (Ruckelshaus, 1989). He and other analysts emphasise the need to create a "*sustainability consciousness*" in the quest for a peaceful and sustainable world. This would require, at a minimum, three essential conditions:

1. the understanding that the human species is part of nature
2. the acknowledgement that economic development must account for the environmental costs of production, and
3. the realisation that to ensure a livable peaceful global environment, it is necessary to pursue the goal of sustainable development of the entire human family.

It is clear that if 80 percent of the global community is poor, it is not possible to live in a world of peace (Ruckelshaus, 1989). What is called for is a new social vision, a social vision of what society could be like, guided by considerations of human values and enhancement of the quality of life of all people (Brown, 1973).

Conclusion

The universities, along with other international institutions, especially the United Nations and its specialised agencies, non-governmental organisations, mass media, and social movements, have the potential of contributing to shaping the development of a new social vision and a new social ethic that will foster respect for life, appreciation of diversity, commitment to sustainable development, social justice, and participation of people in shaping their own destiny and peace. This emerging social ethic and the values that are likely to undergird peace and sustainable development efforts represent a positive force and a strong collective impetus to the fostering of a just and humane global society.

References

- Brock-Utne, Birgit (1987) **Educating for Peace – A Feminist Perspective**, Pergamon Press, New York.
- Brown, Lester R (1973) **World Without Borders**, Vintage Books, New York.
- Brundtland, Gro Harlem (1989) "How to Secure our Common Future", in **Scientific American**, Sept, p109.
- Etzioni, Amitai (1976) Keynote Address at the University of Hawaii School of Social Work, May, 40th Anniversary Symposium in Honolulu, Hawaii.
- Korten, David C & Klauss, Rudi (1984) **People Centred Development**, Kumarian Press, Connecticut.
- Kothari, Rajni (1987) "Peace, Development and Life", in **Preparation of Societies for Life in Peace**, Thee Marak (ed) The UN University Bulletin of Peace Proposals, Vol 18, No 3, Norwegian University Press, Oslo.
- Lobkowitz, Nikolaus (1983) "Man, Pursuit of Truth and the University", in **The Western University on Trial**, John W Chapman (ed) University of California Press, Berkeley.
- MacNeill, Jim (1989) "Strategies for Sustainable Economic Development", in **Scientific American**, September, pp 155-165.
- Nisbet, Robert (1980) "The Future of the University," in **The Third Century: America as a Post Industrial Society**, Lipset, Seymour, Martin (eds) University of Chicago Press, pp 304-325.
- Posvar, Wesley W (1980). "Toward an Academic Response: Expending International Dimensions", in **Change**, May-June.
- Ruckelshaus, William D (1989 September) "Toward a Sustainable World", in **Scientific American**, pp 166-174.
- Sivard, Ruth L (1986) **World Military and Social Expenditures**, World Priorities, Washington, p3.
- Walsh, R (1984) **Staying Alive**, New Science Library, Boulder.
- World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) **Our Common Future**, Oxford University Press, New York.