



Personal Contribution to the Helsinki Process

Variable Geometry to Design Positive Outcomes

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When many of us joined the Helsinki Process, we were aware, depending on our politics, that it would go too far or not far enough. From the beginning, I was destined to be of the second opinion. Still I consider the outcome of our work neither a surprise nor a disappointment. Its importance, I believe, lies not so much in the reports themselves, as in the definition of the process itself. If it is to work, this process will require—in the obligatory jargon—“multi-stakeholder participation”. In plain language, this means that people from many different backgrounds will sit down together in order to craft concrete solutions to complex problems. The stakeholders, including governments, will recognise that governments are indispensable but they can no longer be expected to tackle the ills of the world by themselves. Other institutions and social forces must be included in what I prefer to call “variable geometry” to design positive outcomes. Different mixes will be required according to the nature of each task.

In my view, variable geometry is the most useful political concept to emerge from the Helsinki Process. It is the recognition that no one institution, or type of institution, can solve by itself the problems we confront today. We need a cooperative framework in which various actors abandon their turf-wars and work together. This is the model that the broad range of participants in the Helsinki Process themselves experienced and found that it could be made to work. I want to thank the governments of Finland and Tanzania for their commitment to the Helsinki Process and for including me in it with a remarkable and stimulating group of colleagues. I hope to remain part of the follow-up phase.

I am confident that future crises will necessarily push the players in more progressive directions, for the simple reason that standard practice has failed. The Millennium Development Goals, while an excellent first step, will not be seen forever as the furthest concerted human effort could take us. I would have liked to see proposals of greater variety, originality and daring in our report, but I am not dismayed by their absence because I know their time will come, probably faster than we can now imagine. For example, in a mere five years, I’ve watched the idea of international taxation move from beyond the realm of reasonable discussion [“utopian”, “unworkable”] to mainstream [“economically rational and technically feasible” as Jacques Chirac has said]. The idea now commands the support of over a hundred governments. The same pattern will apply in other areas.

The synergies and linkages of issues rather arbitrarily heaped in the various “baskets” could have been enhanced by placing them in some sort of hierarchical order, envisioned as concentric circles, with the environment as the all-encompassing circle and the context for all the others. People with no land or damaged; unproductive land; depleted or polluted seas, rivers and fresh water, no energy or only environmentally destructive energy sources like forest clearing, will have little food and

will remain poor, underdeveloped, disease-ridden, at risk and so on. The preservation and enhancement of natural systems conditions the other goals. As we all know, and as the United Nations has now reported in ample detail, a great many planetary systems [climate, atmosphere, oceans and even, increasingly, health] can only be preserved internationally. Thus I wish we had been able to identify the ecological issue as our framework and top priority.

I fear too that simply listing such mammoth items as “poverty and development” or “peace and security” and labelling baskets with those tags begs the question of the reasons for the persistence of deprivation and mal-development or of war and unacceptable risk. Initially, our work was supposed to answer the question “What is wrong with the world and why”, but the “Why” got lost on the road, probably because issues of power would then have had to be confronted. If one avoids examining causes and renounces naming, shaming, or blaming, it seems to me unlikely that one can arrive at meaningful recommendations. But even here, the Helsinki Process leaves considerable room for hope.

Throughout this process, I tagged a good many problems for which “variable geometry” solutions might be found. Please see these on www.tni.org/george. Here is a sampling, covering only the area of the environment: International lending for environmentally destructive energy projects to be replaced by loans for renewable energy schemes. Public control over water should be advocated and aided through information exchange and practical help including legal help. Agricultural yield-enhancing projects should be implemented, in cooperation with interested farmers’ organisations and regional business associations, without recourse to GMOs or costly chemical inputs. Clean and materials-limiting production should be pursued in the North as well as South to replace polluting and depleting production methods. Groups should challenge major corporations to contribute a tiny fraction of their research budgets to such programmes, i.e. petroleum companies to renewable energies or GMO producers to biological low-tech agriculture -- as a test of “corporate social responsibility” -- with free community access to the research results.

Most of the technologies we need to save the planet already exist but remain largely on the shelf or are even prevented from gaining wider currency by those in control of existing technologies. We should promote data banks to make new methods readily available and above all, encourage public investment in them

More aid is clearly needed and just as clearly, the individual country target of 0.7 percent, even if attained, could not do the entire job. This is why we need much more serious commitment to international taxation, debt cancellation, a moratorium on privatisation and reclaiming of public services by the public. A genuine crackdown on tax havens would do more to fill the coffers of governments in both North and South than perhaps any other measure, as well as helping to strangle international crime and terrorism.

The Helsinki Process was rather too timid for my taste in following such avenues towards the eradication of poverty. But whatever the material means eventually obtained, they will not be complete without more democracy in the countries concerned. I remain favourable to “democratic conditionality” and do not believe in handing over large sums to governments and hoping for the best. We need to encourage priority-setting by the people whose lives will be affected. It would concentrate minds wonderfully if the “international community” made sure that any future funds were distributed only on the basis of compliance with set standards of good governance and respect for human rights. Such criteria should also apply to the governments of the North and to the International Financial Institutions.