

Lesson for Public Health Leaders: A Lesser Developed Country Perspective

Mathura P. Shrestha,

Chairperson,

Resource Center for Primary Health Care, Kathmandu, Nepal

Health and Development: Missed Opportunity for LDC?

In the mid-seventies, the “New Economic Order” offered hope to many developing nations and their people. The promise was that capacity development of countries and people in the third world, especially in the less developed countries, would occur. Programs would focus on improving equity and fostering social justice. Several development programs of technical cooperation among Developing Countries, South-South Cooperation, and North-South Cooperation were envisioned; expectations for the “New Economic Order” were high. Unfortunately, much of the promise remains unfulfilled: significant change requires the serious commitment of world leaders, including those in developing countries. With such a commitment, we might now have a different world with major problems solved, gaps diminished, and many conflicts prevented or resolved. As an example, the Alma-Ata Declaration was a landmark in health, rallying massive support and political commitment worldwide. However, as of today, the painful fact is that most LDCs have not met a single goal in Health for All.

Now is a good time for our leaders, including public health leaders in the East, to look back and learn from the lessons from history, and also to look forward to assess emerging threats and opportunities for future development of strategy. We have to question whether we missed an opportunity and, also, what the consequences of further missed opportunities might be.

Health, Development and Globalization

Instead of the promised “New Economic Order,” we now have a poorly organized and characterized globalization. Globalization is the free flow of

capital, goods, ideas and services throughout the world. However, the globalization process is aggressively pushed and used by advocates of economic liberalization and free markets largely to serve the interests of multinational companies and western power centers. These groups have been successful in conditioning the ruling class around the world, especially its bureaucrats and technocrats, to believe that globalization is the key to economic development. Similarly, reform is said to be possible only after foreign direct investment (FDI) is attracted, and globalization will pave the way for FDI. This paradigm has had a powerful impact on the lives of people all over the world. Sponsored study results by Bretton Wood Institutions have been enforced as the development model in developing countries, Eastern Europe, Yugoslavia, and the former Soviet Union. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) prescribed such a model in the form of “macro-economic stabilization” and “structural adjustment programs” (SAP) as *economic medicine* for their development. However, these programs have brought devastating economic and social consequences.¹ The LDCs and those countries that moved from a socialist economy to a capitalist economy suffered most. In Caracas, the anti-SAP uprising (inspired by the rhetoric of President Carlos Andres Perez who denounced the IMF as practicing “an economic totalitarianism, which kills, not with bullets, but with famine,”) was brutally suppressed. The real cause of famine in Somalia may be attributed to ‘economic genocide’ brought about by SAP.

In Nepal, as a result of the liberalization practices of the eighties, the industrial base collapsed, industrial production declined, and most of the 70,000 small-scale industries crumbled. Unemployment and poverty increased rapidly, and remarkable

growth occurred in the privatization of public enterprises, foreign debt, corrupt practices, and the politicization of the bureaucracy. The size of foreign debt increased to over 50 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in the mid-nineties (from 16 percent in the mid-eighties).² This year, it is estimated to be 60 percent.

Since the structural adjustment programs of the eighties, the IMF and WB have become increasingly harsh and unyielding in imposing so-called poverty alleviation programs. Countries that do not conform to IMF's targets are blacklisted.

Globalization today exposes human populations, especially in our region, to more risk than opportunity. The term 'globalization' is used to impose unjust and unequal relations among nations and peoples. "It is a mere episode in the history of dominance of the rich industrialized [nations] over the poor ones..., [and an] unethical justification of unequal relationship."³ Today, global opportunities are unevenly distributed – between countries and people. The opportunities often reported to be associated with globalization are not related to its process but to the knowledge industry and to rapid information networks, science, and technology. In this age of high-speed information technology and services development, health and health services have a higher quality for those who are in the golden circle of affluence (the so-called "haves"), and costlier, less accessible and poorer quality for those who are "have-nots" and deprived.^{4,5} The same is true with other services. More than 80 countries have per capita incomes lower than they were a decade or more ago. The income gap between the fifth of the world's people living in the richest countries and the fifth in the poorest was 3 to 1 in 1960, 60 to 1 in 1990 and 74 to 1 in 1997.

Even OECD countries registered a large increase in inequality after the 1980s.⁶ The Human Development Report of 1999 lists a number of revealing statistics. By the late 1990s, the fifth of the world's people living in the highest-income countries controlled:

- 86% of world GDP – the bottom fifth just 1%,
- 82% of world export markets – the bottom fifth just 1%,

- 68% of foreign direct investment – the bottom fifth just 1%,
- 74% of world telephone lines – the bottom fifth just 1.5%.

In addition:

- The assets of the top three billionaires are greater than the combined gross national product (GNP) of all of the least developed countries and their 600 million people.
- Poverty is widespread. Measured by the human poverty index (HPI-1), more than a billion people in developing countries still do not have some minimum needs met – survival beyond age 40, access to knowledge and basic private and public services.
- Nearly 1.3 billion people do not have access to clean water.
- One in seven children of primary school age do not go to school.
- About 840 million people are malnourished.
- An estimated 1.3 billion people live on less than \$1 a day (1987 PPP \$).
- In developing countries, the literacy rate for women is 60% higher than for men.

The report warns of threats to human security, in general, because of widespread inequalities in the following areas:

- Economics
- Access to food
- Health status
- Personal safety
- Environmental conditions
- Community and cultural attitudes
- Political systems

The report further exposes the ever-widening global gap between “haves” and “have-nots,” between “knows” and “know-nots” in the following terms:

- In the private research agenda, money influences more than needs.
- Tightened intellectual property rights keep developing countries out of the knowledge sector.
- Patent laws do not recognize traditional knowledge and systems of ownership.
- The rush and push of commercial interests protect profits, not people.

Existing Notions and the Need for a New Paradigm of Globalization ^{7,8}

Globalization is not a new or modern phenomenon. Historically, three different trends have influenced the globalization process throughout the course of human civilization. One trend is related to the “dominance cult”- a product of a paradigm based on “*Might is Right*.” Many empires and colonies were founded as a result of this belief, and it has proven to be the prime determinant of violence in this and previous millennia. This same cult is responsible for much environmental degradation, as it directly and indirectly encourages exploitation of nature, humans and systems. Quite recently, the cold war and hegemonistic overtures were based on this cult, and the same cult continues to nurture unilateral power games. Today’s exploiters collude with multinational companies and other financial giants to dominate people, along with their minds and environment. The power bosses of today subvert even religion, politics, and economy. Another strategy used is to glamorize and mystify any process related to living, in order to make people into willing victims of globalization. The players of this paradigm tend to restrict and even imprison knowledge, reason, conscience, and technology. They also manipulate and “regulate” norms and cultural values to colonize humans along with their minds, bodies and surroundings. They suppress human ingenuity, and control creativity and thinking, putting our greatest wealth in the rigid and narrow frames of corporations, laboratories and institutions (even universities) that are increas-

ingly controlled by vested power centers. They develop regulations, codes or contracts to ensure their control over people, nature, processes, knowledge, science, and technology.

The second is “subservient mentality,” which rewards the “lackeys” and agents of the power structure. This mentality serves the power in two ways. First, these agents serve as intermediaries through which those in power can exercise their dominance. Second, this mentality subdues or dilutes the resistance against dominance by effectively propagating the “culture of silence” and non-resistance.

The third trend is the inherent desire and dream of all humans *to be free and liberated*. People aspire to live in a global village where communities of peoples and nations live and prosper together.⁹ They want to be free to move without boundaries between nations and without walls or restrictions around human good - education, health, security, and other social and welfare-related services. In order to protect human development, ecosystems, and peace, our primary duty is to redefine globalization in this spirit. The globalization of exploitation, monopolized advantage, disparity, and deprivation should be replaced by the globalization of social justice, and equal access to knowledge, information, science and technology, global resources, and human good, without restriction or monopolistic bondage. All humans, including those on the lowest rungs of the social ladder, should have an opportunity to mature politically, socially, culturally, economically, and spiritually.¹⁰ Our social responsibility is to resist the present misdirected globalization process fueled by dominance – the dependence relationship between the privileged echelon and the vast masses of exploited and deprived people – and work together to develop a new paradigm of globalization. In this new paradigm, the primacy of people will be recognized and accepted as the guiding principle.

It is natural that the exploited and deprived should want to fight back, and many revolutions have been born from the desire to seek justice. Many revolutions have also fallen prey to the same cult against which they were founded. People need to take politics into their own hands and participate actively in the social process, relying on the people’s power. They need to develop solidarity

to defuse all aspects of the “dominance cult” and make it obsolete. With this new paradigm, it would be possible to live a satisfying and productive life without exploiting or being exploited. Living would become a mutually responsible and interdependent enterprise, but free of guilt. The leaders of the LDC, if sincere, must learn from the lessons of the past to ensure the just future.

Redefining globalization in the latter spirit may appear impossible. But, with recent advances in our knowledge base, global capacity, and human networking potential, it may be possible at some point in the future. If we reflect on the history of evolution, we witness a revolutionary transition from evolution governed by spontaneous biological factors (the period of biogenesis) to evolution governed by human mind, and now, to the period of noogenesis.¹¹ Noogenics is a science of logic that can guide thought and behavior to more rationally and intelligently manage the interrelations between humans and nature.^{10,12,13} The ‘thinking layer’ is to be blended with responsible behavior “to mix science with senses,” in order to replace harmful technology and an inadequate social contract with better technology and an improved social system. As Aristotle wrote: “... the most guiding of all sciences ... learns for what each thing is to be done; and this final goal in each case is the good and, in general, the best in all nature.”¹⁴ People all over the world should be able to participate in this development. However, the people themselves should work towards this end rather than hope that somebody will rescue them or something will take care of them.¹⁵

Future Health Strategies and Priorities: Lessons for Public Health Leaders

The world is constantly changing and evolving. Public health leaders, especially those in developing countries, should reevaluate their thinking and behavior based on the following trends and developments:

A. Health as a Human Right: Policy Implications and Responsibilities of Policy Makers

Health is an integral component of human life, as it is for all members of the biotic community.¹⁶

Health is thus a basic human right and is also everybody’s responsibility.

The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizens of 1789 was the first document of its kind to refer to what we now call social, economic, and cultural rights: the right to education, work, property and social protection. In 1941, the Atlantic Charter was drafted and, in the period from 1942-45, the International Bill of Rights was developed. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted and proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948. Article 25.1 states :

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care, and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.¹⁷

The preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization states that:

“The enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, and economic or social condition ...”

Informed opinion and active cooperation on the part of the public are of the utmost importance in the improvement of the health of the people.

Governments have a responsibility for the health of their peoples, which can be fulfilled only by the provision of adequate health and social measures.¹⁸

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights [ICCPR] of 1976, including its optional protocols of 1976 and 1991, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights [ICESCR] in 1976 obligates nations to ensure the health of their peoples.¹⁹

The Alma Ata Declaration reaffirms the above principles and provisions, and obligates participating governments to work towards and measure the health of their population by the year 2000.

The above discussion illustrates what has already been done to develop the new paradigm. Policy-

and decision-makers should be sensitive to these issues and recognize that it is their legal, social, and ethical responsibility to abide by international treaty obligations. Governments who are party to these international treaties, declarations, and conventions have a responsibility to enact and enforce provisions in them, as they do with their own national laws and legal provisions. Unfortunately, an absurd situation prevails wherein the governments of developing countries, especially weaker ones, are forced to abide by unequal and irrational treaties (bilateral or multilateral) or provisions imposed in colonial days or, more recently, by stronger nations. These provisions are followed to the letter at the expense of their own people, because the governments fear sanctions or isolation if they do not do so. The same governments tend to skip or neglect the national and international provisions related to social justice and equity. Here, we need to question their ethics and sanity.

Given the new challenges of emerging and reemerging diseases and health problems, genetic manipulation, health ethics, environmental degradation, and climate changes, we need to have a fresh look at the above said health and human rights. Traditional public health problems, as well as those involving new biotechnologies, must today be addressed with specific attention to human rights.²⁰

B. Increasing Concern and Capacity of the People to Assert Their Health and Other Rights

The people are becoming more aware and concerned, more organized, and more empowered to assert their rights, including rights to health. This trend will require governments, power centers, policy- and decision-makers, and other members of the dominant group to take greater responsibility for their actions. Gone are the days when people were disorganized and willing to accept whatever prescriptions or controls the dominant class placed on them. People are no longer the blind followers of leaders who are often self-appointed and who come to power by opportunistically exploiting circumstances. Also, gone are the days when people were content to accept, without question, glorified or mystified dreams or make-

believe paradigms deliberately pushed and aggressively promoted by vested interests in and around power centers. In this quickly changing world, all responsible sectors, including ours, should have a sense of urgency and a sincere desire to do the right thing. A trend is already beginning in the following areas of human development:

- People are becoming more capable of making informed decisions. Advancing communication systems will help close the gaps between peoples, especially between “knows” and “know-nots”. The latter group will have an increased ability to evaluate the processes, as well as the results, of their life choices and modes of living. They will be less likely to become the victims of mistaken beliefs and will become more active in exploding myths.
- People want quality services and products. They want to be able to choose from a variety of options to solve their problems and meet their needs. *Adequacy, appropriateness, accessibility, acceptability, and affordability* are their immediate concerns. They are more involved now than ever before in quality assurance activities and ensuring good practices by providers.
- People are becoming more sensitive to the importance of ethical standards and the need to conduct themselves responsibly. The social impact of the decisions of policy-makers, executives, producers, and providers are a concern of the general population. Transparency in all and accountability for all are of greater public interest and demand.
- Consumer rights and the human rights movement are becoming stronger and more widespread. Health services users’ rights are a component of these movements.
- People are looking for independently viable, multiple regulatory systems – legal, social, professional, work-place procedures, occupational etc. – to assure their safety and well-being.
- People are now organizing around issues, rather than traditional power relations. They are more conscious than ever before of the

power of a unified voice. This opens the possibility of a better and more people-oriented civil society. Wars, torture and violence, including state- and group-led terrorism, which are presently widespread and are a very preventable human and social tragedy, may not have any meaning in the future. If these events did not occur, the large proportion of national budgets currently devoted to military expenditures would be freed up for welfare-related social uses or human good. However, policy-makers and decision-makers should continue to be prepared to combat these man-made calamities. In the developing world, governments' capacities for managing these situations may be so diminished that they seek out international assistance. A new kind of problem of overt or covert dominance has been created.

- Sensitivity to gender issues has become a major item on national and global agendas. Women's share of human activities and the burdens they bear represent more than "half the sky" from both demographic and social points of views.²¹ Women carry much more significant economic and social responsibilities for the family and community than is commonly recognized.²²
- People are determined to wipe out corruption, misinformation, and attempts to subvert systems as well as any covert aspects of management.
- People are more sensitive to the importance of their cultural identity and to the need to respect the identity of others. Independence, along with interdependence and plural cultural environment ("unity in diversity") are better accepted today than ever before. Cultural colonialism, along with cultural belligerence, the swallowing of smaller cultures by larger ones in the name of development integration, will continue to be resisted with vigor.
- There is widespread concern over the growing damage to the environment: the misuse of biotechnology, the indiscriminate use of pesticides and harmful chemicals, the menace of ecological catastrophes, and ill-conceived man-made climatic changes. Ecological con-

siderations should be high on the agenda for strategy development and the prioritization process.

- Similarly, people are questioning the traditional management of natural calamities including predictive technology, early warning systems, preventive actions, rescue and relief operations, and rehabilitation. The ability of poorer nations to benefit from these technologies is being looked at with increasing concern.
- Monopoly or artificial restrictions on access to knowledge or welfare-related services will not be tolerated in the future. Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) will only be restricted to certain specific processes and products. IPR in knowledge, science and technology will be considered absurd, and will become a thing of the past.

Strategy Development Process:

a) Culture of informed or evidence-based decision

As decision-makers come to act in a more transparent manner and become increasingly responsive to their constituents and accountable for their actions, they will have to take a more rational approach to the development of policy. They will need to create programs that have a high degree of success and lead to visible results, with few social or political complications. To be optimal, such programs will also require a minimal investment of time and money. Given recent developments in information support technology, this is possible even in the LDC countries. However, a strong commitment will have to be made to link research with rational development. Both researchers and decision-makers will need to learn to be sensitive to each other's needs and perspectives, and an environment conducive to working together in an integrated and participatory manner will have to be created. All concerned sectors, including politicians and people with ENHR process, should be involved. This will allow LDC countries to voice their needs when international priorities and agendas are set. This process becomes still more important in the face of powerful interests who impose "convenient data" or the findings of pre-mediated research to advance their own interests.

b) Need-based, problem-based, or demand-based

There is an urgent need – as urgent as the question of life and death for LDCs like Nepal – to accelerate the process of human development and improve standards for health and the environment. We must find more effective ways to achieve a higher standard of living and better health for all the people, especially those at the bottom of the social ladder.

It is unethical and irresponsible to continue to do the things that:

- Are not likely to produce desired results and solve problems, or that will fail because of misguided policies or strategies
- Are not cost-effective and cost-efficient in human terms, and that lead to the development of inadequate, inappropriate, inaccessible, unacceptable, or unaffordable products or services. (Remember that the so-called “Best Buy” technique, if prescribed as the model and imposed without consideration of local environmental or social conditions, may not be a “good buy” after all.)
- Will never be sustainable
- Are divorced from equity and our commitment towards “Health for All”
- Are discriminatory.²³

Prioritization Process

When prioritizing a research agenda and strategy, emphasis is often placed on logistics, cost, and even demand. I would like to stress two things here. In prioritizing, the most important elements to consider are our own international, national, and professional obligations and responsibilities. Second, demand should be real and not an artifact of aggressive and *unethical promotion* or *glorification and mystification* of products or conditions.²⁴

Conclusion

Health is to be developed *by* and *with* people, and not *on* or *to* people.²⁵ Rather than risking our people’s health and our nation’s future by blindly going with the imposed *rat race* in the name of globalization, we will have to use our intelligence to respond to our country’s and people’s needs and environment. This will require a new or alternate paradigm. We, and our nation, are integral parts of the global community. We have to be a part of global efforts and development to make a positive difference in the health status of all people, especially those who are poor and deprived. A bold step in this direction would be to replace the present misguided definition of globalization with a new paradigm.

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