

Theme 5 – The Cost of War

Presentation: Identifying Economic Needs

Presenter: Mark Malloch Brown

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is something of a secular church. There are 6,000 of us, stretched across the world in 136 offices, committed to the often difficult task of development. For us, the key issue, whether it is dealing with the Danube or any of the other development challenges that we face around the world, is how to engage people in their own development. The conundrums and difficulties involved in this task are illustrated sharply by the Danube and what has happened to it in recent months, and indeed by its whole history.

The development potential of this extraordinary river relates closely to the common inter-dependence of the people who live along it and whose livelihoods are related to it, and the considerable opportunities for co-operation that this presents.

The Danube is not an exception. For example, ten countries have come together in a Nile River Basin coalition to try to agree on equitable use of the Nile. The river's importance to the economic development of its region stretches back at least three millennia and the politics of that whole region have been consistently shaped by the anxious desire on the part of many to control the headwaters of that river.

The resources of the Mekong River in South-East Asia have been shared by four countries, which, even when divided by ideology and by war, have found ways to come together to try to agree on its common uses. Now that there is peace in South-East Asia and there is no longer an ideological divide between the neighbours bordering the Mekong, there is the prospect of improvement in terms of a common approach.

Common inter-dependence must of course lead to a common future. This is where the work of the UNDP in the Danube region, carried out over many years in partnership with the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and others, trying to develop a strategy for a common use of resources, is so important. The millions of dollars that we have put into it are not enough to clean up much of this fine river, but it is quite enough to help develop a common approach as to how it should be cleaned up.

If one considers the wars that have consumed the former Yugoslavia, the 250,000 who have been killed during this decade and the three million who have been displaced, one recognises that the challenges and difficulties have only become worse.

UNDP has said for a long time that it believes in people-centred development. For us the key issue, whether it is dealing with the Danube or any of the other development challenges that we face around the world, is how to engage people in their own development. I hope now that the challenge of operating within such a very different environment will allow us to take hold of this guiding principle. Ideological barriers have for the most part fallen away. Sources of funding have changed dramatically, with a much greater role for private capital and a lesser role for official development assistance. Under these changing circumstances, it has become even more important for UNDP to determine where to put its resources in order to be a real agent for change in development.

My vision for UNDP is that we will be the first post-project development agency. We will not be the agency that funds the clean-up of the Danube. We will not be able to mobilise the \$5 billion dollars that have been estimated as the likely cost of the clean-up. What we will do is help the people of this river take the solutions into their own hands. We will lead them to those who can fund the clean-up. However, that clean-up will only come when people have created the basis for donors to offer support. This means modification in fishing, sanitation and industrial pollution.

It is that vision of an organisation devoted to empowering people that I hope will be the new UNDP, whether it is in the Danube, the Mekong, or the Nile. It comes from a very straightforward view of what our clients - the developing countries of the world - face today: more global change than they have ever had to deal with. This change comes from a globalisation of economies and culture, and has dramatic effects, whether it involves a transition economy in this region or a country in Africa.

I have just come from Southern Africa and the message in even the most benighted and poorest of Southern African countries began: "How can you help us make sure that we're protected in the next world trade agreement; that this time we get our share in terms of the increase in world trade". The next topic was likely to be: "If we've got all this change pressing down on us from above, it's nothing like the change that is coming up from below. Our economies have become market economies, our political systems have become more or less perfect democracies, we are struggling with forces of decentralisation".

These countries now face the problem of how to deal with these new pressures. They say: "We are told we have to mainstream human rights legislation through our national parliaments; we are told that we have to write codes for foreign investment; we are told we have to find new ways to organise participation in local decision-making over environmental and other development matters. How do we do all of this?"

The glory for UNDP is that it does not cost a great deal of money to advise them how to do it. What it requires is a dedicated network of people who empathise with these challenges and who can give the best advice on policy and institution building so that they develop political systems which respect human rights, which delegate power to the people and which put a people-based agenda at the centre of their national development.

You cannot go, as I am privileged and lucky enough to do, across the whole of the developing world and not see an extraordinary generation of new national leaders. This is not a moment for despair; this really is an extraordinary moment in which to consolidate a global shift towards democracy and towards market economies. If this moment can now be underpinned by the moral basis of a faith and an environmental sensibility that harnesses science in its employ, it can bring great opportunities for sustainable development. This is not a time to be alarmed by the dirty river beside us. Instead we should be excited by the possibility of bringing together the peoples of this river not just to share its resources, but to build extraordinary democracies which respect people and take us in into a new millennium of opportunity.