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Unheard voices: Inequalities in social justice

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President Walesa, distinguished laureates, dear friends of peace

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1970 I had just left high school. I wanted to earn some money and experience something different. In those days it was quite easy in England to get some casual labour for a few weeks. I found a position working for Guinness, the firm who make beer. It's the only job I've ever had where you got a glass of beer for your morning break! Well among the other workers there were some Polish students about my age. They taught me to say *cześć* and *do widzenia* and they said one day you must come to Poland. It was the middle of the Cold War, so the chances seemed rather low. Well finally -----here I am, 43 years later.....Better late than never. And I am delighted to have made the trip at last. But those student friends are probably about to retire now. It's a pity I lost touch with them.

1. UNHEARD VOICES?

In the cacophony of the internet and other forms of media saturation we have the impression of having the opportunity to hear everyone. But of course it is untrue. The mass media are far from being a level playing field - while the participatory Web 2.0 has opened doors for millions, some have much greater access to the media than others.

Those whose voices are rarely heard fall into many categories. There are so many who do not or cannot participate to any great extent in public life, and in the debates about the future of our countries, or the world. Let's think about it..

There are the poor, the oppressed, those whose lands are occupied or colonized. The unemployed, victims of violence, prisoners, the mentally or physically ill or handicapped, minorities of every kind (racial, religious, sexual, the very old and the very young). In the case of women, it is even the majority. At the bottom of the social pyramid we have the beggars, child labourers, child soldiers, prostitutes, refugees and undocumented migrants. People living with HIV-AIDS, squatters and shanty town dwellers, indigenous peoples everywhere. Political dissidents, the uneducated, the

illiterate. Shall I go on? Those who have no trade union to protect them, who live in remote places or work in dangerous trades or in the shadows. Who cleans our offices, even this very Palace, in the dark hours of the very early morning? Let's not forget that there are those who suffer what the sociologists call 'multiple disadvantage' by being in more than one of these categories. We don't hear from them so often. Yet each of us knows some people like these. How to help this vast mass of humanity express their views? It is a big challenge. Of course some journalists and researchers have attempted this. By way of example, I commend to you the work of the wonderful American radio journalist [Studs Terkel](#), who had a rare gift of reaching out to ordinary people in all their tremendous variety and literally offering them a microphone to use.

2. THE WEALTH GAP

But being able to tell your story is one thing, it is quite another to change the underlying social conditions. Our economic and political system - I think we can nowadays really talk about a single global system - generates enormous disparities of income and assets, of opportunities and disadvantages.

This wealth gap should really be called the wealth chasm, so huge has become the differential over these last 20-30 years between "the 1% and the 99%", as the Occupy protestors have termed it. Probably everyone here will have a view about what should be done and I don't propose that we debate the different models of society that have led to so much blood and suffering in Europe over the last 100 years.

3. ON SOLIDARITY

Given Poland's recent history it was inevitable that the title of this Summit should include the word 'solidarity'. This, and the accompanying term 'social justice', is an extremely broad concept. But in my view neither of them are the same as 'charity'. Yes, helping people is important. But it is not the same as standing with them when they struggle for their rights. Some of you will have read Charles Dickens, the great novelist from my own country. He described the appalling conditions in the London of the mid-19th century: the slums, the workhouses, the domineering overlords - and at the same time those rich people who wanted to make things better while not changing the system that generated these horrors. When I read Dickens I now think of it as a kind of foretelling of our own time. The surface may look different but the way things are for rich and poor is much the same.

There is much talk about the "globalization of solidarity" - but what does it mean? Each of us must decide where our loyalties lie. Can we really live and work in solidarity with the entire human race? With the prisoners in Russia or Burma, with the exploited workers of Bangladesh, with the indigenous of the Amazon? We cannot act on all these situations, but we can include them in the world of peace and human rights that we dream of. I would go further and say that there is a duty of solidarity also with future generations, which implies a responsibility to manage sustainably

the resources of the planet. There is a duty of solidarity with the animal and plant world, not only because we depend on them for our sustenance, but also since they too have an intrinsic right to life. As the English poet William Blake, said: "Everything that lives is holy". It's a superb statement. But more difficult to assume when we consider that it must also include the Adolf Hitlers and the Jozef Stalins.

I remember writing in a school notebook after a history class: How does tolerance deal with intolerance? How does nonviolence deal with violence ? and now I would add: how does solidarity deal with its opposite, which is perhaps indifference ? Tough questions.

4. WARFARE OR WELFARE?

Having said all that, I want to put before you one simple proposition, based on the main programme of the International Peace Bureau, my organisation, which we have called Disarmament for Sustainable Development :

Can we afford to go on misusing the world's resources on preparing for warfare, when the basic needs of so many millions of people are not met? When the planet is need of an urgent and massive rescue operation to save our biosphere from the ravages of climate change and species loss?

In 2012 the total spending by governments on the military sector amounted to \$1.7 trillion. That's 1700 billion dollars - every year. Can you imagine that much money? Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has a very simple message that he repeats on every occasion he can: *"Our world is over-armed and peace is under-funded"*.

Not only peace is under-funded. Development and humanitarian assistance are under-funded. Efforts to cope with our shrinking bio-diversity are under-funded. Employment for young people is under-funded. This is an absurd and self-destructive set of priorities. So we have to find a way to change it. Move the Money. Take a stand.

Thank you.
