

Future Positive

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By Michael Edwards

I. Introduction

The following essay is by Michael Edwards, Director of the Governance and Civil Society Program of The Ford Foundation. Edwards argues that a renewed commitment to building democracy and equity into international institutions is essential in the aftermath of September 11th. To Edwards, Americans have two choices: pursue a narrow definition of "national interests" or embark on a new era of global collective action.

II. By Michael Edwards

"Future Positive"

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"True freedom is only attainable through relations with others, since in an interconnected world I can never be safe unless you are secure." These words, from my book Future Positive, have been widely quoted in the aftermath of September 11th and its terrible events. If ever we doubted before, now we surely know what it's like to live in an increasingly interconnected world, where problems and solutions stretch across national borders and no one has a future unless we learn to work together. Our welfare is affected by events from Mexico to Thailand, decisions made in distant capitals, and threats from enemies we may not see until it is too late - like global warming, new diseases, and international networks of terrorists and criminals. In this scenario, global cooperation is essential, not an optional extra. Either we pursue a narrow definition of our "national interests" against the background of growing inequality, insecurity and environmental degradation, or we embark on a new era of collective action, much as the international community agreed to do in the aftermath of World War Two. At times like this, it's difficult to talk about a "Future Positive", but what happened on September 11th makes it even more important to rebuild support for international cooperation. What might that mean in practice?

First, deal much more forcefully with violent threats to human life. The New York Police Department

spends as much money each year as the UN does on intelligence-gathering and peacekeeping, and (contrary to popular opinion) there are more permanent employees at Disneyland than in the UN Secretariat - a good illustration, perhaps, of a world with its priorities turned upside down. Now is the time for a standing United Nations army and police force to back Security Council resolutions, and an International Criminal Court to hold the abusers to account. With those institutions in place we'd have a better chance of preventing tragedies like the attack on World Trade Center, or genocide in Rwanda where 800,000 people lost their lives as Western governments watched, waited and sat on their hands.

Second, reduce the inequalities and insecurities that encourage people to turn to violence, for example, by pooling all foreign aid in a network of "National Development Funds" governed by - and accountable to - a partnership between government, business and civil society on the ground. That would encourage societies to take responsibility for their own development, not beg, borrow or steal from the West. Yes, mistakes would be made, but that is how people learn and institutions grow stronger - and any negative consequences would be far less traumatic than the damage done to Russia, for example, by ten years of heavy-handed foreign meddling and a forced march to crony Capitalism.

Few Americans are interested in wearing clothes made by workers who are exploited, and those who campaign on their behalf are already mobilizing the muscle of consumers, investors and employers to generate reforms. Multinational corporations themselves are writing codes of conduct that make globalization work for the poor - by purchasing coffee produced by cooperatives that guarantee workers a fair share of the proceeds, for example, or making sure that soccer balls are not stitched by children working as slave laborers.

Third, give all countries a voice in decision making so that they support the coalitions we need. We won't find lasting solutions to global problems until everyone has a say in the answers and a stake in the outcomes. We need a democratic constitution for a globalizing world - a set of rules and agreements that can protect the equal rights and entitlements of all its citizens. And that means increasing poor countries' voice in the World Trade Organization and other international bodies (voting weighted by population as well as Gross National Product), and more space for citizens' groups, labor unions and churches in the corridors of power.

This is an ambitious agenda for reform, and who will lead it? In democracies, the bottom line is always a constituency willing to make difficult issues matter in the political process - all politicians need permission from their constituents to do things differently. Regardless of who sits in the White House, we desperately need a new social movement in favor of international cooperation. Who will join it when most people (even in the rich world) have pressing domestic problems of their own?

The best way forward, I think, is a joint appeal to self-interest and social conscience, convincing people that their future, and the future of their children, is best provided for in a world that cooperates to manage the costs and opportunities of global integration. That process should start in schools (no education without a global dimension), and extend through colleges and universities, political parties and civic associations, and into our own workplaces and homes. As citizens of an increasingly internationally minded polity, we don't need to switch off our citizenship when we go shopping, or face difficult issues at work, or have the opportunity to be active in politics. We can all be an advertisement for the virtues of cooperation in every walk of life, and look for connections between problems and solutions at home and abroad.

In the 21st Century, we will prosper only as members of a global community of active citizens. Is that the kind of world we want to live in and bequeath to those we love? If so, our responsibilities are clear, and the work starts now.

For more information, see www.futurepositive.org

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