

ELSE ØYEN

Today I am wearing four hats. First, I am announced as a professor of social policy from Norway. Second, I am introduced as representing the North, whatever that may mean. Third, I am currently Vice President of the International Social Science Council. Fourth, I am Chair of the Comparative Research Program on Poverty (CROP), an international and interdisciplinary research program on poverty in developed and developing countries. CROP held its Round Table with UNESCO here two days ago. The topic was "Poverty and Participation in Civil Society." I am not certain which hat is the prettiest, so you can choose yourself since they are all invisible.

Let me start with a statement, which really should not be addressed to the group present here. I have been wandering around in the Social Summit forums, attending NGO programs, visiting as many as I possibly could, and listening to the formal and informal deliberations on what is going to be the outcome of the Social Summit. The major impression I have is that the Social Summit lacks a comprehensive intellectual input to guide its course towards poverty alleviation and social development.

At the UNCED in 1992 a very comprehensive report was prepared ahead of the Conference by the Brundtland Commission. (I am not saying this only because Gro Harlem Brundtland is the very talented Norwegian Prime Minister!) The report was a well-thought-through document which was distributed and discussed worldwide before the Rio Conference. All the participants—the different delegations, NGOs and the media—shared a set of definitions, arguments and problems to which they could relate. They had a common framework to ease their communication.

At the Social Summit no similar document has been prepared. There is little material available, only a number of fragmented papers. The lack of a basic document creates confusion as to which problems the Summit is facing. What, for example, are the strategies available for the poor countries and for the poor people? The two kinds of strategies are very different, but in discussions at the Summit the two issues are being mixed together again and again, thereby creating confusion. There is little agreement among the speakers on what is poverty, what is social development, what are the causes of poverty and what are the consequences of the enormous poverty problems the world is facing. The best inputs to the Social Summit, such as those from the U.N. Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), UNDP and ILO, have largely been neglected in the discussions.

The impression is that most of the participants in the Summit seem to be talking to their own pet ideas. The Social Summit is being used as an arena to bring forward

the participants' ideas about what they believe should be done to the world in general and to their own community in particular. They speak more to their local media, brought out from the home country, rather than discussing poverty and social development. As a result, the different participants in the Social Summit do not communicate well. This is one of the reasons why I am grateful for this symposium, which is trying to provide an intellectual approach to the kind of problems the Summit is facing.

Given the very short time allocated, I shall touch on one topic only: the role of the state in civil society and poverty alleviation.

At least four different definitions of civil society have been brought forward in the previous presentations. One definition is that of the civil society as synonymous with the grassroots. The grassroots are defined either as the ordinary people, deprived people represented through the NGOs or those people who manifest themselves through social movements. A second definition is a civil society as opposed to a military society. A third definition is a society which extends certain social rights to all its members. Examples of such rights are access to clean water, basic education and health service and, for some countries such as the welfare states, also extended social rights. As mentioned earlier today, the right of access to courts and justice should likewise be included. A fourth definition is a society which provides public space for discussion and dialogue and respects the beliefs of all others.

The analysis of the role of the state in poverty alleviation will vary according to which of the four definitions one chooses. In military dictatorships, for example, a definition of a civil society as opposed to a military society provides a very powerful and political analysis which would be irrelevant in most Western countries. Indeed, access to clean water and basic education and health services would be considered irrelevant in a North European welfare state.

But despite different definitions, there are some basic elements in the role of the state on which there seems to be agreement. Management of peace and order is one basic function. This can be done in many different ways, as we know. First, some kind of social order must rule if all members of a society are to fit in and accommodate each other. This job has more or less been given to the state. Second is to organize macroeconomic policies, including taxing. Third is to provide services like schools, roads, communications and different kinds of infrastructure. Fourth is to distribute rights and duties among citizens and provide information to citizens about these rights and duties. Fifth is to secure some kind of redistribution as a buffer against the market. The range of measures include toll barriers to protect national production and social security transfers.

If the different definitions of a civil society are combined with the different functions of the state, we are faced with a whole set of combinations. Some of these are not going to be in harmony. A civil society, defined as the grassroots, NGOs and social

movements, is aimed at changing the role of the state. Dissatisfaction with the present role of the state is the very reason for their existence. The state may not be able to absorb the pressure from an expanding civil society and accommodate within the same framework the demands of the grassroots activists, NGOs and social movements. A full-fledged civil society of this kind will threaten the stability of the state and challenge the present model of basic functions, thereby undermining the position of those in power.

However, it may be of interest to you to know that the development of the Scandinavian welfare state started from an expanding civil society where humanitarian organizations formed to alleviate injustice and poverty. Grassroots movements organized services for the destitute and put pressure on the municipality and the state to take over. But it took a century or more before the welfare state was formed. So it may be a long road to go for states, governments and civil society in the global South. But maybe there is light at the end of the tunnel.

The 20/20 Initiative put forward at the Social Summit can be seen as an attempt to change the role of state towards more poverty alleviation in those countries which receive foreign aid. As you may know, the idea is to earmark 20 percent of foreign aid for "social purposes" (whatever that may mean), while the country receiving foreign aid earmarks 20 percent of its GNP for social purposes. It may not come as a surprise that the proposal is considered controversial. Officially, it is introduced as an instrument for poverty alleviation. As such, it could be very powerful. But the 20/20 Initiative also conceals a deep reluctance and skepticism on the part of the donor countries regarding the role of the state in many Southern countries. The 20/20 Initiative is a way of forcing the state to redistribute its resources in such a way that the poorest part of the population benefits. If Southern governments were willing to take over some of the basic functions mentioned earlier, the 20/20 Initiative would be less of a threat. However rudimentary, service organizations would already be geared to social purposes, as would some of the political thinking. If these issues had been analyzed and set in a larger context before the 20/20 Initiative was tabled, a fruitful discussion might have emerged to make the proposal less threatening.

By now I have used up my allotted time. But the discussion will be followed up in other arenas. CROP, for example, will arrange a conference in Nairobi in 1996, the U.N. Year of Poverty Eradication. The topic will be "The Role of the State in Civil Society and Poverty Alleviation." You are all most welcome to participate.