

## THE RIGHT LIVELIHOOD AWARD 1983

Acceptance Speech by Manfred A. Max-Neef

December 9th, 1983

I wish to dedicate this speech firstly and foremost to the memory of Hermann Max, my father. I know that he would have been very happy today, because he induced me to become the unorthodox type of economist I am; and also because he convinced me that human stupidity is the greatest threat to the survival of the world as we know it. Since the award with which I am being honoured is - as I interpret it - mainly addressed to those who fight and labour in order to minimize the devastating effects of many forms of applied human stupidity, Hermann Max would have had both personal as well as more universal reasons to feel satisfied today. For granting this posthumous satisfaction to my beloved old man, I express my deepest gratitude to Jakob von Uexkull and the Right Livelihood Award Foundation. I also wish to dedicate my remarks and thoughts to the love of three women - Magdalene Sophie Neef, my mother; Gabriela de Amesti, my wife who has come with me to Stockholm and Magdalena Max-Neef, my daughter - without whose inspiration, solidarity, strength and faith in what I was trying to do, I would have been unable to withstand those periods of darkness and despair that were the toll we had to pay in the active pursuit of a dream that has given meaning to our lives. My thoughts go to my brother Norbert without whose help and counsel my future would look quite uncertain, and to those friends who in sharing with me their wisdom, their understanding, their battles and their hopes, enriched my life. My gratitude goes to the members of the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, my Uppsala family, as I like to call them - for having given me the opportunity to spread my experiences and my ideas. And last, but certainly not least, I dedicate this occasion to Isabel Perez, our family's dear Nanny, who has been telling me for over twenty years that the day would come in which I would receive a prize like this. My thanks to all, because I owe them all so much.

Since in the note on the presentation of this award to me, reference is made to my being a "barefoot economist", I should devote some minutes to the story of my metamorphosis. It all began - as I have told it in my book "From the Outside looking In" - when I went through a deep personal crisis as an economist. At a certain stage, almost two decades ago, I realized that economists had become dangerous people. Their discipline - despite Lord Keynes warning to the effect that the importance of economic problems should not be overestimated with the result that matters of higher and more permanent significance are sacrificed to its supposed necessities - suddenly became the magic science: the one to provide the answers to most of the pressing problems affecting humanity. Its practitioners, newly endowed with this unexpected power to exercise their influence over enterprises, interest groups and governments, swiftly and proudly took for granted their new role as inaccessible and powerful sorcerers. It soon followed that economics, originally the offspring of moral philosophy, lost a good deal of its human

dimension, to see it replaced by fancy theories and technical trivialities that are incomprehensible to most and useful to none, except to their authors who sometimes win prizes with them.

After a number of years, the enthusiasm and optimism with which I had worked as an economist for several international organizations, gave way to a growing uneasiness. To continue being engaged, whether as a witness or as a direct participant, in efforts to diagnose poverty, to measure it and to devise indicators in order to set up a statistical or conceptual threshold beyond which a percentage may reveal the numerical magnitude of those to be classified as the extremely poor; and then to participate in costly seminars and even costlier conferences in order to communicate the findings, interpret the meaning of the findings (my God!!), criticize the methodologies behind the findings, express our deep concern (often during cocktails) for what the findings show, and, finally, end up with recommendations to the effect that what must urgently be done is to allocate more funds for further research into the subject to be discussed again in other meetings - made me feel at a certain point that I was happily participating in a rather obscene ritual.

Furthermore, my awareness about the fact that I was living in a world in which, despite all kinds of transcendental conferences, accumulated knowledge and information, grand economic and social plans and 'development decades', increasing poverty - both in relative as well as in absolute terms - is as indisputable a statistical trend as it is an obvious and conspicuous fact to anyone just willing to look around and see, induced me to re-evaluate my role as an economist. The critical exercise - to put it in a nutshell - led me to the identification of four areas of personal concern: our unlimited admiration for gigantism and 'big' solutions; our obsession with abstract measurements and quantifiers; our mechanistic approach to the solution of economic problems; and our tendency to oversimplify, as reflected by our efforts to favour an assumed 'technical objectivity' at the expense of losing a moral vision, a sense of history and a feeling for social complexity.

It is only fair to say that some economists were not afflicted by the malady. My contacts with a few of them proved to be decisive, in as much as the conclusions I drew from the critical incursions into which I ventured under their influence, were enough to change the course of my life, not only as a professional, but as a human being as well.

I must say that I am extremely happy that one of those truly great economists - one whom I have always considered as the "Maestro" - is also being honoured today: Professor Leopold Kohr from Austria.

Well, it so happened that I severed my ties with the trends imposed by the economic establishment, disengaged myself from "objective abstractions" and decided to "step into the

mud". Thus I became, and still remain, a "barefoot economist".

I could tell you stories of what I have done in the past, but I shall refrain from doing so. Since I interpret this award not as the coronation of a life work, but as a stimuli to continue along the path I have chosen, I shall refer to the challenges peoples and groups like us- the awardees - are facing in the future as I see it.

Let me start with a general diagnosis.

Three decades in which a technocratic, mechanistic and top-down development paradigm has been predominant have produced a kind of global crisis that has no precedent in history. The characteristics of the crisis, as it affects the Third World, can be synthesized in terms of a disturbing paradox: that the utmost absurdity may be and in most cases already is - that the economic benefits accruing from the dominant development model are used in the solution of those acute problems and contradictions created by the same development model. In short, a self-defeating process: the serpent devouring its own tail.

In almost any Third World country we may grossly divide the population into two main groups. Firstly, are those people who are directly or indirectly linked to a "development strategy" and, secondly, are those people most often the majority - who are left to design their own "survival strategy". The fact that both groups still coexist the world over and that, furthermore, the increase of the latter group is indisputable, should be proof enough that the mechanistic possibilities of the so called "trickle down effect" originally attributed to global development models, did not work.

The accumulated experience and frustrations have allowed for an alternative development paradigm to surface. Generally identified as the bottom-up approach - although much older than the former - it has only in recent years gained sufficient "respectability" to become the object of increasing attention among experts, policy makers and concerned public in general. The 1975 "What Now" Dag Hammarskjöld Report, while proclaiming the urgency as well as the philosophy for "Another Development", was a decisive step in raising public and specialized consciousness with respect to the need to unleash new processes where the overriding goals of development and equity might truly converge. Yet we must be careful because, at this point, we are standing at a cross-roads. If the orthodox paradigm generated development without equity, the new one should escape the risk of turning into a promoter of equity without development. Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that paradigms can be dangerous, especially if they become "fashionable". Slogans must not replace facts and evidences, and emotions must not overrun the hard work necessary to construct a solid and coherent humanistic theory.

If understood as an alternative process, the new emerging paradigm can be envisaged, at this

stage, as a chain with several loose links. As a body in search of its consolidation it still leaves much to be desired. We do know the body's principal components, but we still don't know how they are supposed to interrelate for the whole to function harmoniously. A return to the human scale, active and creative public participation, satisfaction of fundamental human needs, ecological constraints, local self reliance; are some of its basic goals. Size of systems (or critical systems size) and efficiency as a quality (not quantity) are two of its parameters. Subversion of centralized power and authority, of bureaucratic structures, of mechanistic models and of other technocratic instrumentalities are cornerstones of its philosophico-political foundations. The heart seems to be in the right place. All the pieces seem to be there. The grand question is how to put them all together.

If we reflect about the essence of both paradigms, we may conclude that the former, being essentially simple, has been artificially complicated. The new one, being essentially complex and sensitive, is running the risk of being artificially oversimplified. Evidences of the latter are already at work. In fact, one sometimes gets the impression when discussing with adherents to the new alternative, that a frequent belief seems to be that promoters and activists alone can take care of the entire process. One remains with the sensation that an aspired stronger focus on practical aspects, often seems to imply an aspired stronger focus on the disengagement from the thinker. Such a situation is dangerous. It reveals the existence of potential seeds of self-destruction that this paradigm - as every paradigm - carries within itself. If those insipient seeds are not promptly sterilized, and the already emerging malaise is not urgently cured, the new paradigm - its undisputable merits notwithstanding - may decay before having had the chance of proving its worthiness. The risk, right now, is real. Hence, one should keep in mind that action alienated from theory is as dangerous as theory alienated from reality. Theory and praxis are both indispensable; none can substituted for the other. While practitioners and promoters of alternative processes are legion already, the number of those dedicated to the systematization of accumulated knowledge and experiences is small. Moreover, those few groups who are dedicated to the task work mostly in isolation and are, hence, devoid of the benefits of cross-fertilization that a dynamic network of horizontal communication can bring about.

However important the systematization towards the construction of a coherent humanistic alternative theory (or theories) may be, it is only a part of the problem to be solved. The fact remains that both paradigms will - and most probably must - continue to coexist even if in a dialectical struggle with one another. Continued coexistence seems to be inevitable for the simple reason that the macro is not the sum of the micro processes, nor can the latter be interpreted as the disaggregation of the former. Both processes are interdependent rather than independent. How such an interdependence may be rationally articulated is the second part of the problem to be solved. In short, the situation - and the challenge - may be summarized as follows: while the many deficiencies and limitations of the theory that supports the old paradigm

must be overcome (mechanistic interpretations and inadequate indicators among others), a theoretical body for the new paradigm must still be constructed. But let me make it very clear - I could not stress this point enough - that I am not advocating theory for the sake of theorizing. Of that we have had enough! What I am proposing instead is the coherent systematization of the experience acquired by all those of us who have been working for years in the alternative solutions of the real problems affecting our world today; especially the poorest and most vulnerable sectors of humanity.

All those of us - and we are many indeed - who have put their efforts in the search for more humane development alternatives, share common goals and common philosophical principles. Yet we still don't share a common language. The construction of that language through solid theoretical contributions based - and only based - on our concrete experiences, is one of the great tasks we must yet fulfill.

But let me say at this point that whatever tasks we are facing, the tools from which we may choose to carry out our labour are part of a culturally impoverished environment. Of an environment in which the cultural wealth of diversity and variety has been substituted by the economic efficiency of monotony and uniformity. In order to illustrate my point I shall refer to the cultural impoverishment brought about by the economically dominated developmental process. Let me simply refer to language.

In its widest sense language is the product as well as the representation of a culture. To the extent that it grows or diminishes, become enriched or impoverished, the same occurs with the culture to which it belongs and which it represents. As our language expands in the direction demanded by an increasingly technocratic culture, its rhetorical possibilities for the eloquent exaltation and presentation of alternative cultural routes becomes atrophied. If we consider it appropriate to refer to development in terms of figures and quantities, then figures and quantities will make up the language of development, which in turn implies that what remains outside that language, remains outside of our development. Now, it should be clear that if the language used is poor, incomplete and insufficient, the development will also be poor, incomplete and insufficient. We have become so fascinated with numbers and so obsessed with quantifiers in our ludicrous effort to construct a value-free economic development theory, that in our over-enthusiasm we no longer realize that we have turned logic upside-down. In fact, instead of learning how to interpret what is really important, we grant importance to that which can be measured. We should not be surprised, therefore, that probably nothing is more important than income which, according to our development language, is the measure of measures. If our language knows how to measure income better than most quantifiers, we should venerate such quantifier above many other considerations. Development is measured by income, well-being becomes a function of income, inflation is income wrongly generated and unemployment is income not generated. Just like that, all cut and dried.

The fact that many of us insist that development is something more, and that inflation is something less, and that well-being implies some transcendental things and that unemployment is many tragedies with name and face, with anguish and pain; seems to have no echo in systems whose discourse is based on the assumed solidity and strength of abstract and dehumanized statistics. This makes us, who search for more humane alternatives, a humanistic subset of a technocratically dehumanized set. In trying to enrichen and improve our language we become the victims of a hostile environment in which the impoverished language is the language of power, of greed and of domination.

No matter how hostile the environment in which we are working is, we must never cease to insist that development is about people and not about objects. That the aim of development must be neither producerism nor consumerism, but the satisfaction of fundamental human needs, which are not only needs of humanity, but needs of being as well. We will never deny that subsistence is a fundamental human need which must be satisfied through adequate income, nutrition, housing and work for all. But we will also insist that protection, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, creation, identity and freedom are extremely fundamental human needs as well.

Our impoverished development models have been mainly concerned with subsistence. But dominated as such models are by the religion of economic efficiency and the magic of the market, they have over-saturated the satisfaction of some at the expense of the misery of the majority of mankind. And what about the rest of the fundamental human needs? Well, our dominant models work nicely and very efficiently against their satisfaction.

What protection can we talk about in the midst of growing militarization and the arms race? What affection can grow under the prevalence of patriarchal and authoritarian structures? How can true human understanding grow from educational systems disengaged from the real problems of the world? How can we talk of participation where women, minorities and even majorities are discriminated against? What leisure can be meaningful where silly gadgets and an alienating electronic media bombard us day and night? How can human creativity really flourish where, for the sake of economic efficiency, people who are potentially creative subjects are turned into efficient objects? And what about identity in a world full of political exiles and of groups who have to suffer the imposition of means and ways that are alien to their culture?

And freedom? Where is freedom? It has gone into hiding because it wants to survive. It shows us its face here and there, like in this corner called Sweden that is awarding a group of crazy but very active romantics today. We know where it hides, and we shall never tell the enemy. But in the meantime we will carry on our work. We will recover the wealth of our language, and give meaning again to what is really meaningful and call all things and actions by their real name.

All those of us - and let me repeat that we are many who work at the human scale for human solutions where human beings really are, form a group that is powerful because it lacks all greed for power. We are - like in ancient times of generalized crisis - the new "monasteries" where the wealth of our cultural variety and diversity shall be preserved, until the hordes of uniformity, of power, of depletion and of greed collapse under the unsustainable weight of their own gigantic stupidity.

Tonight I call on Goethe's Faust, for him to tell us that: "Die Kunst ist lang, das Leben kurz" (The art is long, and life is short). Let us, through our deeds, remain always as parts of the art, and in that manner help life to remain on the earth

Thank you all for sharing with us tonight.