What in the world is going on?
Strategic trends affecting children

Bryant L. Myers
Vice President
International Program Strategy
World Vision International

Plenary session Sunday 18 March 15:30

Introduction

This assessment is written to support organizations working on behalf of the world's children as they do strategic thinking. This summary of global trends is derived from a scan of the fast-changing world of the first decade of the 21[a] Century.[a] This assessment sets out to describe the world in the way that the world sees itself, because this is the world in which we pursue our respective missions.

For an organization working at the national or local level, this assessment must be used with care. Any global description is so general and broad-brushed that it loses its value and relevance the closer it is applied to a specific national context. The world of Bangladesh is very different from Zambia or Brazil or Germany. Yet, at the same time, much is happening globally that cannot be ignored locally. The future is not determined solely by our immediate context. A national or local entity is encouraged to study the descriptive sections that follow, noting those elements that are also at work locally. To this list of the global forces and trends acting locally, add descriptions of local driving forces, and local trends relevant to your organization and its mission. In this way a local context for action is developed. Then two strategic questions can then be asked: What does this local context mean to you and what should you do in response to it?

Strategic thinking is just that—thinking. It is about analysis and synthesis, about distilling your experience in search of basic models that describe how your business works. Strategic thinking is about wondering how different factors in the world and its changing environment will influence and change each other. Strategic thinking is about preparing your organization so that it can carry out its mission in tomorrow's world. As a founder of scenario-planning wrote: "The real purpose of effective planning is not to make plans, but to change the mental models that decision makers carry in their heads."

The work of developing a review of the global context is not the same as predicting the future. In a world that is changing rapidly, predictions carry little weight. Further, in considering the mix and interplay of driving forces, global trends and likely continuities, we must accept that strategic thinking is hard work, full of ambiguity and always tentative. You and your organization will need to hold its conclusions lightly, ever ready to let them go as your context changes. The only thing we can be sure of is that the changes in our world will be too great for mere tinkering. We will have to take big steps.

Overview

The first decade of the new century is still experiencing the chaotic aftermath of the breakdown of a world order that had been in place since the end of World War II. Early expectations that the post-Cold War period would see reduced levels of conflict and broader economic prosperity have been disappointed. The hope for a better human future seems threatened by a combination of economic, political, cultural and environmental factors over which people feel little control. While warlords exploit ethnicity and religion for power and personal economic well-being in private little wars, the international community struggles to find a framework for global leadership and peace building.

There is good news. Child mortality is down more than 100% since 1960. Fertility rates have declined in all regions since 1945, except in Africa. Life expectancy is on the rise everywhere except in parts of Africa, where AIDS is reversing these increases. There has been an increase in human development, measured by income, education and life expectancy, in all the world's regions since 1960. There have been sharp increases in primary school attendance and in adult literacy, especially among women. Access to safe water has increased from 36% of the world's children in 1965 to 77% today.

Yet, the poverty in which so many of the world's children live remains intractable and growing. While the percentage of people living in extreme poverty – defined as less than one US dollar a day – has fallen somewhat from 1987 to 1998, the number of people living on less than one US dollar a day has increased from 1.2 billion in 1987 to 1.5 billion today.[i] Children under the age of five still die from preventable diseases at the rate of 30,500 a day.[ii] Incomes of rich and poor countries continue to diverge at an alarming rate. Too many countries pay more to debt service than for public service.

There are deep ironies and fundamental changes in direction. The fastest-growing group of malnourished people are those 1.2 billion who are eating too much or too much of the wrong kind of food, a number that almost matches the number of underfed and malnourished.[iii] The three richest people in the world have assets exceeding the combined gross domestic product of the 48 least-developed countries. Everyone agrees that children are the future and yet adults continue to speak for children and, since children are not a political constituency, they too often remain invisible to governments and many others.

Global Trends

1. The Holy Spirit of God. Christians cannot list the trends in human history without affirming with gratitude that, while human action matters, history does not belong to us. History is going somewhere and has a purpose. The sole and most fundamental driving force in history is the Holy Spirit. No other driving force or trend can ultimately divert God from what God has chosen to do. The Lord of History cares for the world's children and surely weeps at their pain and suffering. When history reaches its culmination, one of the tests of judgement will be how we cared for the least of these.

We must also note that there is another who is at work in human history. The Evil One is working tirelessly to bend those parts of the global context that have potential to work for life and life abundant and make them life-destroying or life-denying. Rebellion is still the rule in the world, and evidence in the form of the exploitation,

abuse and neglect of children is sadly present in every culture.

2. People have changed. One of the most profound changes of the last century is the degree to which ordinary people have changed in terms of their self-understanding.[iv] After two hundred years of modernity and its commitments to personal liberty and universal education, ordinary people have become more analytical and less passive in the face of their socio-political-economic environment. Ordinary people are more involved, less ignorant concerning how their world works, more demanding of their social institutions and less easily controlled by those in power. This change in people's self-understanding combines with the technology and communications revolution in a way that sharply increases the power of ordinary people.

This profound shift has a series of impacts on the lives of children and youth. One consequence is the human rights movement and the Declaration on the Rights of the Child. The Rights of the Child has established "the best interests of children" as a test for policy, and is becoming a tool by which children can hold adults accountable for domestic violence, abuse and neglect. A second consequence is the re-imaging of children, not as incomplete adults whom society does things to, but as subjects of their own development, as potential agents of transformation. There is a growing call for participation of youth -- and there are one billion of them between the ages of 10 and 19[v] -- in decisions affecting children.[vi]

3. Global economy, technology and communications. Global communications, the technology revolution and the unchallenged success of free markets across the globe have created a driving force that some call globalization. [vii] The world is open for business twenty-four hours a day, and information is available anywhere at any time. While globalization has resulted in enormous wealth creation that in turn has created broad general improvement in children's lives, globalization also has a dark side.

Transnational corporations promote, and often create, economic integration as they make investment decisions, move fluidly among multiple currencies and make money by taking advantage of the gaps and inconsistencies between national markets. Ever seeking less expensive labor, 250 million children are exploited for their labor.[viii]

Global communications is a reality. News and information of all sorts -- financial, economic, journalistic, religious, cultural and pornographic -- is available all the time anywhere in the world. News and information are merging with entertainment, with dominating global reach. A global youth culture -- listening to the same music, using the same images, and wearing the same shoes -- is developing, mediated by MTV and the Internet. Children with access to the Internet have access to the best and the worst the world has to offer.   Socially unthinkable only twenty-five years ago, advertising is increasingly targeting children, with the sole objective of turning them into life-long consumers. More disturbing,, the Internet and inexpensive travel have created a whole new world for pedophiles and for the sexual exploitation of children.

There is a cultural impact that accompanies globalization. Western cultural norms become a thin veneer of global culture overlaid on local culture. The MacWorld assumption that having and doing are better than being is broadcast everywhere. Children in rural Indian villages get their images of a better human future by watching*, Do You Want To Be a Millionaire?* beamed by satellite to the only television in the village. The Internet brings development information, crop prices, weather forecasts and calls for ethnic hatred.

Using technology to manipulate information and innovate is the new way to create value, and this is the engine of the new global economy. Those who have the skill, education and intelligence to create value with information will be the core workers of tomorrow. If poor children are not empowered to participate in the global information economy, they face a permanent place outside the world's economic system. Yet, UNICEF estimates that 130 million children are not in school, nearly 60% of them girls.[ix] A far higher number are in schools that rely on colonial educational systems and rote memory, neither of which prepare children for participation in the global information economy.

4. The power of identity and the need for meaning. Global communications, technology and economic integration are centripetal forces, drawing things toward a center, integrating things into a global matrix. Yet, everyone needs a sense of identity that is rooted locally.[x] Identity in the form of ethnicity or religion is a counteracting centrifugal force, working to disperse power, making things more personal and local.

As poor children find themselves with no place in the global economy, the attractiveness of their ethnic and religious identity increases. This adds to the attractiveness of fundamentalisms, and the violence that too often results from the manipulation of ethnic and religious identity. Youth are particularly vulnerable to calls to extremism.

Throughout the world, there is a resurgence of interest in spiritual things.[xi] The hunger for meaning in the human heart remains unmet by economics or technology. Cyberspace is not human space and virtual reality does not provide a substitute for the purpose and identity that people need. People are searching for something spiritual that works. Children and youth still make life-shaping faith decisions before they are in their twenties.

5. What better future? One's vision of a better human future is a driver that shapes what people and institutions work for and how they choose to get there. For the international community, the better human future is peaceful, materially prosperous and democratic. This engenders support for peacekeeping and eradication of material poverty through neo-liberal economics. This is the dominant agenda of most governments, the UN System, the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO.

The global media describes a better human future that has lots of good things, few worries and little responsibility. This message is shamelessly promoted to children and youth. The market system engenders a belief that a better human future is a product of self-interest and limited greed. Sadly, both media and the market have a high tolerance for poverty. Poverty is acceptable as long as it does not affect us.

No one seems to be able to articulate a compelling vision of a better human future that points to the idea of loving God and neighbor, or promotes the idea that being is better than having. One wonders why the Christian community seems unable to articulate a compelling vision of the best human future -- the kingdom of God and a world that is safe for children.

6. Growing gap between the rich and poor. One of the flaws in the free market system is that it is very uneven in terms of who enjoy its benefits. Those who cannot participate in the market for whatever reason—structural hindrances, cultural values, physical handicaps, or lack of education or skill -- risk becoming an underclass falling further and further behind.[xii]

Rich countries have been growing faster than poor countries since the Industrial Revolution, with a recent estimate that the ratio of per capita income between the richest and the poorest countries has increased six-fold between 1870 and 1985.[xiii] Between 1980 and today, some 15 countries have enjoyed remarkable economic growth, and their 1.5 billion citizens have seen their situation improve. During the same period, more than 100 countries experienced economic decline, and their 1.6 billion people, over half of whom are children and youth, have suffered through recessions, currency devaluations, abuse by their own governments and structural adjustment.[xiv]

The poor and their children often live in the unofficial shadow economy that is estimated at US$9 trillion, in comparison to the 1998 global GDP tabulated by the IMF at US$39 trillion. The shadow economy is the rawest expression of capitalism, existing on barter, bribes and illegal activities, devoid of the protections of regulation and law.[xv] Illicit drugs, street children, child labor and sexual exploitation of children find their haven in this shadow economy.

7. Invisible poor and the lost. The poor and the lost are often invisible to the Christian church, and children even more so. Within a band reaching across North Africa, including most of the Sahel, through the Middle East, and into the Central Asian provinces of the former USSR, the Indian subcontinent, southeast Asia and western China, live 1.3 billion people who have little chance to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ unless someone goes to tell them.[xvi] Eighty-five percent of the world's poorest countries are located in this same part of the world and over 40% of their population are children and youth. Yet, only 1.2% of Christian mission giving is being invested there,[xvii] and what efforts there are to reach these areas are largely adults planning to reach other adults.

8. Increasing internal violence and conflict. With the end of the Cold War, some hoped that world peace was at hand, and, certainly, the threat of global nuclear destruction has receded. However, it is painfully obvious that conflict and war are still a significant part of the context in which child-focused agencies work. In 1997, there were 52 civil conflicts and wars going on around the world.[xviii] More than 540 million children are estimated to live in unstable or violent contexts.[xix] When warlords cannot find adults to serve as soldiers, they turn to young people, deliberately brutalizing them into cold killers; there are some 300,000 child soldiers in the world today. More than two million children died as a result of armed conflict in the 1990s, and more than six million were seriously injured or permanently disabled.[xx]

Reactions against the results of global market integration, an unbridled free-market system and technological change take several forms. In some cases, grassroots movements react violently across borders in the form of terrorism and assassination. In other cases, authoritarian states promise greater economic and social security in exchange for relinquishing political freedoms. This leads to violent grassroots reactions that often are organized along religious or ethnic lines. A more recent phenomenon is civil wars driven not by grievance or ideology, but by greed.[xxi] Local warlords, unable to extract money from superpowers or governments, turn to exporting local natural resources to pay for their armies and turn to children for their soldiers. The long effects of traumatized young men and women for the social good of these nations is a tragic future reality. These local upheavals are a major contributing factor to increasing numbers of internally displaced people and refugees, the majority of whom are women and children.

9. Movement of people. When one looks at the world in terms of where its people

are located, the South is the dominant feature. When one looks at the world in terms of where wealth is created and concentrated, the North dominates.[xxii] Just as people have moved to the city from the country in search of jobs and opportunity, migration of people to the North for economic reasons will continue to be a significant feature of this century. These new immigrant populations have higher birthrates than many of the receiving populations, creating pressures on school and social welfare systems. Those who migrate bring their ethnic links and religions with them and this can create social strain in their new culture. As an example, Islam's potent anti-Westernism and its fundamentalist movement have their roots among Muslims who migrated to the West and are appalled by the world in which they now find themselves living.

Conflict, disasters and environmental collapse have dramatically increased the number of refugees from 2.5 million in 1975 to 22 million in 1998, although it is encouraging to note that this is down from a high of 27 million in 1995.[xxiii] To this one must add the 21 million internally displaced people who have migrated to another part of their own country.[xxiv] The great majority of refugees are women and children.[xxv] These refugee movements raise a range of human rights issues, including the right of protection for women and children. Semi-permanent refugee settlements can promote chronic political instability as they have in Congo, Pakistan and the Middle East.[xxvi]

10. Changing demographics. The world's population growth rate is decreasing, yet its total population is growing, mostly in the South.[xxvii] The North is experiencing close to zero population growth, and is struggling to find social policies that make sense in the face of aging populations.[xxviii] For the first time, Japan has more elderly people than people under the age of 15.[xxix] This creates a politics of the elderly, and one wonders what impact a shortage of adults will have on the social and psychological development of children.

While the West, China and Japan are graying, much of the rest of the world is incredibly young. One-third of the world's population is under the age of 15, and 8 percent of these young people live in the Third World. In a world often inhospitable to them, large numbers of these young people live on the streets, are used to fight wars or are exploited for their labor, sex or body parts. These children need an education, a place in society, a way to become productive. Without these, children and youth represent a latent threat for future violence and social unrest.

The generation of youth now in their teens and early twenties (called Millennial Kids, Generation X, Busters and other uncharitable names) may be a new cohort group with as much world-changing impact as the post-World War II generation, "the Boomers." While there are less of these young people in each country than the Boomer generation that preceded them, there are an awful lot of twenty-something folk in the world and, with MTV and the Internet, they are getting connected. There will be two billion of these teenagers in the world by the year 2001. Several scenario-planning groups are wondering if the global teenager is not a new driving force in the making.[xxx]

11. *Changing world of children's health*. Infectious diseases kill more people every year than natural disasters. Since 1945, it is estimated that 150 million people died from AIDS-related illnesses, tuberculosis and malaria, in contrast to the 23 million who died in wars over the same period.[xxxi] Children are especially vulnerable.

The extent of HIV/AIDS in Africa and Southeast Asia threatens millions of lives and the social well-being of whole nations. Unless a radical new medical option emerges, Africa will lose one-fifth of its adult population or more during this decade.[xxxii] The social impact is already catastrophic, as teachers, doctors and civil servants are dying. More than 15 million children under the age of 15 have lost their mothers or both parents to HIV/AIDS, and this figure is expected to double by 2010.[xxxiii] Too many African and Thai teenagers are heads of families. The girl child is especially vulnerable because of the influence of culture and tradition, stigma and discrimination, and land rights issues.[xxxiv]

Malaria, once on its way to containment, is a growing risk again. Malaria kills 3,000 people every day, mostly children. Debt burdens, environmental concerns and poor economic performance result in malaria eradication efforts being under-funded. The gene sequence for the malaria virus is known, but no work is being done to create a vaccine because the market for the vaccine is only in the Third World. [xxxv] Global warming means more mosquitoes and malaria in more places, including areas of the world where malaria has not been a threat.[xxxvi]

Tuberculosis for a time was in full decline. Now tuberculosis is increasing, partly as a result of the weakening that results from HIV/AIDS infection, and partly due to increasing poverty worldwide, especially in urban areas. It is estimated that 50 million people have developed strains of tuberculosis that are resistant to treatment by existing drugs.[xxxvii]

At the same time, global efforts at immunization have resulted in polio being on the brink of extinction. A great deal of progress has been made in promotion of breastfeeding. Broader use of iodized salt has resulted in reducing iodine disorders, the world's single greatest cause of preventable mental retardation.[xxxviii]

12. *The emerging power and place of women*. Those who study human development now know that women—their education, involvement and leadership— are unarguably linked to much of the good that results from transformational development. Female literacy correlates highly with reduced child mortality, lower fertility rates, improved nutrition,[xxxix] better children's education and successful microenterprise development. Particularly among the poor, women do much of the work, produce most of the food and raise the children. No agency can escape the demand that women be taken seriously and their needs addressed, particularly if change is to be sustainable. What is new is that more and more women are coming to this new self-understanding and are beginning to find their voice. No longer are women in development satisfied with a paternalistic hand-out because they need to be "empowered."

All of this creates an interesting irony when it comes to the issue of the girl child. Girls still receive less food, less healthcare and less education than boys. Girls are still subject to harmful traditional practices. If women are the key to transformation, a greater emphasis on the care, nurture and development of girl children must become a priority.

13. *Environmental limits*. At the end of this century, the world will be experiencing limits in terms of what our environment will allow. According to Worldwatch, the world's future will be shaped by the facts of population growth, rising temperature, falling water tables, shrinking cropland per person, collapsing fisheries, shrinking forests and loss of plant and animal species. The three parallel trends of falling water tables, shrinking cropland per person and leveling off of fish production from oceans combine as a serious threat to meeting the world's demand for food, especially if population continues to climb as currently forecast.[xl] Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia are forecast to have 70 percent of the world's food-insecure people in 2010.[xli]

Population growth is high in regions least able to provide for more people. Poverty is leading to environmental degradation (deforestation, soil erosion and misuse of chemical additives), which creates more poverty. Environmental refugees, estimated by some to be as high as 25 million, are going to the cities and across borders.[xlii] The European Union is including an exodus of environmental refugees from Africa in their long-term planning.

Fifty-five countries with almost one billion people do not have access to the basic water requirement necessary to meet basic human needs.[xliii] Furthermore, unless new and better ways of water management are developed, fresh water may emerge as the key limitation to global food production. The food supply of 500 million people today is being produced by an unsustainable use of water. The largest water deficits are in India and China, the two largest nations on earth. Some predict that future major wars will be over access to water.[xliv] Yet the UN notes that we are currently only able to exploit one-sixth of the renewable water resources that are available.[xlv]

Consumption patterns in the North make a far higher per capita impact on the environment than that of the rest of the world. A child born in the industrialized world adds more to consumption and pollution over his or her lifetime than 30-50 children born in the developing world.[xlvi] The remnant waste of nuclear arms reminds us that we are better at building things than disposing of them safely. Fast growing economies in newly developing parts of the world are ignoring the environmental cost accompanying this growth. Some see the environmental system as a zero sum game, while others believe that science and human ingenuity will create answers and solutions. Some believe that environmental concern is something done after development, while others argue that drawing on the current state of environmental knowledge will speed development.[xlvii] This variety of views combine for a confused and contradictory context for public policy on the environment.

Concluding Thoughts

Children and youth are moving onto the global stage. In 2001 there will be two major international meetings focusing on issues affecting children: The UN General Assembly Special Session on Children and the Second World Congress on the Commercial Exploitation of Children. Carol Bellamy of UNICEF is heavily engaged with NGOS in attempts to create a Global Movement for Children as a way to try and move the world beyond meetings and position papers toward simple, measurable targets of a world that is safer for children.

Children as agents of change and participants in their own development is an emerging avenue of new thinking in the development community.[xlviii] Children's movements for peace in Colombia and for better governance in the Philippines demonstrate the growing power of children and youth as a political constituency. The many dimensions of children's rights are heavily supported by NGOs concerned for children at risk. All this is well and good and Christian needs to make their contribution.

But do Christians have anything unique to say? What is our vision for a better world for children? Does the kingdom of God include the idea of a world that is a safe place for children to play, grow, develop and contribute? Could we take a lead in modeling Christ's admonition to welcome the children by creating a place and a voice for children and youth to speak for themselves? Is there a way to think about the spirituality of children in a way that affirms that children have a spirituality of their own and that God is already at work in their lives,[xlix] in contrast to "empty heads and hearts" metaphor of children's spirituality that gives adults permission to pour in the gospel message? Does our vision for child rights stand on the foundation of the Western enlightenment or on a kingdom foundation of children created in the image of the triune God who welcomes children and threatens those who mislead them with a millstone and a deep ocean? Are we willing to risk our lives to fight the evil in the world that works to diminish and destroy the lives of children?

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