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PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW OF

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BY

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Upbringing

My family is from Dhaka, which was the second city of pre-partition Bengal, later the capital of East Pakistan, and now the capital of Bangladesh (since its independence in 1971). We lived in the old, historic part of the city of Dhaka (modern Dhaka extends very far beyond that), but like many urban Bengalis, I too saw my "home" as the village from which the family had moved to the city, in my case, two generations earlier. My home village is a tiny one called Matto, in an area called Manikganj, not far from Dhaka, but it used to take a long time to get there, mostly on boats through a network of rivers. These days you can drive there on good roads in a few hours. We used go there once a year or so, just for a few days, but such was the power of the theory of an ancestral "home" that on those rare occasions I would firmly think, as a child, that I was "back at home."

My father, Ashotosh Sen, was a professor of chemistry at Dhaka University, and his father, who was a lawyer, was also closely associated with the university. I wasn't born in Dhaka though—that happened in my mother's family home in Santiniketan, in what is now West Bengal in India. My maternal grandfather, Kshiti Mohan Sen, taught Sanskrit and Indian philosophy in Santiniketan, in the higher education part of what was mainly a school, started by Rabindranath Tagore, the poet. I was born in the campus where my mother's family lived.

One the big influences on my understanding of the world has certainly been Tagore. I must say that, initially I did not recognize that it was a major influence, since it came so implicitly and in so many different ways. Also politically, I was often tempted

to think of Tagore as too tolerant of economic inequality. He certainly wasn't moved by the need for economic equity in the way that many of us instinctively were. He was keen that everyone should have the opportunity of leading a worthwhile life, but he did not grumble much about economic asymmetry in general. It was not so much that he was unmoved by very big asymmetries, and he did raise his voice in protest against them in some of his writings, but he did not devote as much of his energy to it, as he did to combating other social problems.

Tagore concentrated much more in arguing against political inequalities and social divisions, rather than inequality of income or wealth distribution. He was particularly occupied in disputing the narrowness of mind in various forms that he saw around him—from unreasoned traditionalism and dogmatic conservatism to belligerent sectarian attitudes, reflected in religious communalism and intense nationalistic fervour, not to mention the racism that was implicit in imperialist theories (including the theories behind the British Raj in India).

What was, for me, particularly influential in the long run was Tagore's insistence on the priority of reason. He was very well versed in the richness of the inherited traditions of India as well as of many other countries, but he refused to accept any tradition or convention without rational scrutiny. He was also uncompromisingly universalist and totally rejected the insularity and narrowness of parochial thinking in India—or anywhere else. He could admire what he found reasonable about Indian values and admirable about its past, while being very critical of other parts of the established value system. I was greatly impressed by Tagore's insistence that you have to be open to cultural influences from the whole world, that this need not in any way diminish your

appreciation of your own cultural background, and that—as he once put it—anything from anywhere that you come to admire "instantly becomes yours." These ideas had a profound impact on me, even though at that time I did not actually realize that there was anything especially unusual about these universalist beliefs.

I was also helped by my parents' propensity to take a broad and open perspective on Indian culture—not treating it as a fragile object that would split to bits if it came in contact with influences coming from elsewhere. I think my younger sister, Supurna, and I took these understandings to be absolutely natural, whether they came from Tagore's theorization or our parents' practice.

When I was a little over three, we went to Mandalay—my father taught at the agricultural college there. That gave me an exposure to another country when I was very young. In fact, some of my earliest memories are of Burma. It was wonderful to go to another country, with a different culture - and such an interesting culture too, in this case. We were in Burma for three years.

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We came back in 1939, in late 1939. When the Japanese army advanced into Burma and just an inch or two into the extreme east of India, I was going to school in Dhaka - a liberal missionary school, St. Gregory's, in old Dhaka, not far from my home. And then my father, who was back from Burma and teaching again at Dhaka University, got suddenly persuaded then that Dhaka and Calcutta would be both bombed by the Japanese. So I was dispatched to Santiniketan, to my mother’s town, where my maternal

grandfather was still teaching. I went there as a primary school student, and absolutely loved it.

St. Gregory's was academically very distinguished—I expect more than Santiniketan was in terms of hard-nosed education—but I liked the more relaxed and less academic priorities in Santiniketan, and the magnificent combination of focusing on India's own traditions with much opportunity to learn about other countries and their cultures. Santiniketan was a very different kind of school from St. Gregory's, and it was sometimes even described as being a nationalist school.

Yes, in an odd way it was, despite Tagore's intense suspicion of nationalism. It was a Bengali medium school, and we studied a lot about ancient India, medieval India, and Indian culture generally. But Santiniketan was also very open to the world, not just India. Nor did we assume that the world outside India consisted primarily of Britain—an implicit priority that was standard in much of India then. I mean, in those days of the Raj—in fact its very last days—being "international" often meant being thoroughly focused on Britain, really. In contrast, we were involved both with Indian and with world history, rather than only British history. We were aware—more than in most of India—of not only the French, the Italian, the German, the Russians, and so on, but also seized of the huge presence of China in world history, along with the rest of Asia and Africa. Santiniketan had, I think, the first institute of Chinese studies in all of India, the distinguished "China Bhavan" (as it was then called), the Institute of Chinese Studies, directed by the distinguished scholar Dr. Tan Yun-Shan. Then there was a lot about Japan, a lot about Korea, a lot about Indonesia, Thailand, Korea, Malaysia, Indochina,

and so on, and quite a bit about the Middle East, and of course the huge excitement in learning about Africa.

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Well, my maternal uncle and a number of my cousins in the generation ahead of me (they are often generically called "uncles" and "aunts" in India) were in prison. They were in prison under what was called "preventive detention," not that they had done anything dreadful, but the Raj's theory was that they could possibly do something dreadful for the Raj, and the Raj would incarcerate them to prevent future actions, since they had written or said things against the British dominance of India.

My mother's only brother, who belonged to the socialist wing of the Congress Party, was in prison under preventive detention for many years. I liked him a lot and, as a young boy, went to see him often in prison. I was quite amazed that he was in prison. I kept asking him what had he done. He explained he hadn’t done anything much yet other than writing, except the British rulers did think that he might do something damaging to them if he had been let free.

These imprisonments lasted quite a few years. One of the cousins of my father actually died in prison, of tuberculosis, or shortly after being placed in home confinement. This was in the 1930s. There were quite a lot of prisoners at that time. They were involved in different political parties. Among that generation of so-called uncles that is, both my real uncle as well as cousins of my father and mother there were people who were in the mainstream Congress Party, the Congress Socialist Party, and in

the Communist Party. None, I should add, in the right-wing Hindu party, the so-called Hindu Mahasabha—which was the predecessor of Jan Sangh, which in turn was the predecessor of today's BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), which leads the coalition that runs the central government as we speak. But on the secular left or secular center, there was quite a lot of versatility within the family. I quite enjoyed chatting with them on politics. It was very exciting and rather instructive for me.

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In the difficult days of riots, what sticks in my mind most strongly is the sight of violence. The first murder I saw was that of a Muslim labourer outside my home in what was, I think, 1941. I was actually playing in the garden. I was eight then. I was playing in a little shed in the garden, inside our house compound, when I heard a scream. There was a thin man, profusely bleeding, who had been knifed in the stomach. He sought refuge in our garden. He was asking for water, I got him some, while I was also shouting for help. My father was somewhere else, but was soon fetched, and he rushed the person—his name was Kader Mia—to the hospital. And there this guy died.

I had a few minutes of conversation with him, while help was coming. I had not only a profound sense of sadness and of helplessness, but also one of bewilderment. Why would someone—the assailant was clearly one of the local Hindu thugs—have knifed a person he did not know? It seemed incredible at eight. But also, he kept on saying that he was aware that, as a Muslim labourer, he was taking a risk in coming to a mainly Hindu area for a daily laborer's job. It would give him some income, and he did

need the income because there was nothing to eat at home. He had to come and take the risk. As I tried to understand why he did something so risky, it told me something about the extensive reach and overpowering consequences of economic penury—the "unfreedom" in generates.

Aside from going over the brutality and the overwhelming sadness of seeing a person bleed to death, I felt I had to understand things of which I had no understanding earlier. One lesson was that people who fostered and fomented the belligerence of "identities" will kill another without having anything against the person, other than just the identity of his being of another community.

An amazing and incredible thought. But secondly, I also learned something about the nature of economic un-freedom—the fact that Kader Mia had to go out to work, and in a sense was compelled to go to the only place where work was offered to him, which was in a Hindu area, which was dangerous. And he said his wife told him not to go. But he had to go in order to get something for the family to eat. So the idea that economic un-freedom can generate other kinds of un-freedom, including not having the freedom to live, was again a very shocking recognition. In a sense, these were dimly perceived ideas, but they made me think a lot already then and that line of thinking gripped me more clearly over the years.

University Education

I was lucky with my teachers. I came to Trinity not by accident. I chose Trinity College for various reasons. Having done physics and mathematics, I was aware that this

was a college of science and mathematics from Newton and Bacon onwards, and I knew of mathematicians like Hardy, Littlewood, and of course, Ramanujan. Even now, Trinity is as distinguished a centre of mathematics as there ever has been. I knew that it was a distinguished maths and physics college (without overlooking poets like Marvel and Dryden and Byron and Tennyson and Hausman). In physics, J.J. Thompson, Rutherford—I can go on rattling names, and they had touched my limited horizon already in my teen age years, and I was tremendously curious. But I was also interested in economics, since I wanted to be one. So I was interested that Trinity had Maurice Dobb, whose works in Marxian economics I knew well, and Piero Sraffa, a very skeptical economist but with a great humanist and basically radical commitment.

I was also aware that Dennis Robertson, a fine, conservative economist was also at Trinity; he had an absolutely wonderful style of writing, probably the funniest writer among all economists I have read. I was very impressed that they were all in the same college. My little inquiry indicated they got on well with each other, which made me immediately interested in the college, since I had left-wing politics, but felt very stifled by the fact that left-wing politics often went with extreme intolerance of other positions. So Trinity was very attractive to me.

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I think Joan Robinson, who was a wonderfully warm person, was the only one of my teachers who actually ever tried to deflect me from the direction of academic work I wanted to pursue. I wanted to work on welfare economics, and on inequality and poverty

and relative deprivation. Joan was humane enough to worry about people's predicaments, but did not think that I was getting my focus of attention right. She really was a no-nonsense growth person. You know, you have to grow fast, become rich, and then all these problems will take care of themselves.

In one of her remarks, which is not much remembered now (rightly, I think), Joan Robinson criticized the Sri Lankan government for subsidizing food and concentrating so much resources on social welfare. Joan described it as an attempt "to taste the fruit of a tree without growing it." That is an absolutely quintessential growth-only position, which is often associated now with rather right-wing pro-market positions, which of course wasn't Joan's political location at all. She wasn't pro-market, but she was single-mindedly pro-growth. And these two positions, even though they are sometimes congruent in terms of the people who believe entirely in both, are essentially, at a conceptual level, quite separate.

First jobs

The first job that was ever offered to me was offered by the UN. Sidney Dell offered me a job, which I eventually decided not to take. I had barely got my Ph.D., I think. But I was flattered that I was offered that job.

Actually, when he offered me the job, I hadn't met him. I think he had written to Nicky Kaldor and Joan Robinson, and they suggested my name.

But Joan Robinson told me that while she had to mention my name in answer to Sidney's question, she also thought that she must tell me not to go there.

Joan thought that I should do more academic work before I think about anything like the UN. But I must also say that she did not really think that the work being done at the United Nations at that time would be sufficiently interesting or exciting for a theoretically minded young economist. She was tough about what she took to be her kind of excellence which she wanted her students to emulate. Nicky [Kaldor] did too, I think. They had a view of what good economics consisted of, and no matter how worthy the UN work might be, it wasn't a great home for those whom Joan or Nicky expected to work at what they saw as the frontier issues of economics. It was a very different view from the way the comparison would look to me, later on, when I got very closely involved in working at the UN on the foundations of project evaluation for UNIDO (UN Industrial Development Organization) or on human development for UNDP (UN Development Programme) (they were to me very much the frontier issues of economics). But Joan Robinson or Richard Kahn or Nicky Kaldor would not have been very excited by these works either.

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I was very interested in what Sidney Dell wrote to me about the kind of work they did. I read a lot about the UN, of course. I was very interested in what was going on in the General Assembly and Security Council and the events that were occurring in the world, as the Korean War came on. And there were other issues. As far as a UN job is concerned, it is possible—I can't remember the dates with any clarity—that my first formal offer of a UN job came not from Sidney Dell, but from the FAO [Food and

Agriculture Organization] in 1958 or 1959, to go to Rome to work for three months. But that wasn't a long-term thing, as Sidney Dell's was.

I hadn't worked on food and hunger at all at that time. I don't know how these job offers were made.

My work for them [UNIDO] as long-term consultants was much later, in the 1970s. The FAO possibility was in the late 1950s, though in the event, I couldn't go. Also, I was invited, in early 1963, by Hilary Marquand the director of the ILO (International Labour Organization)-related International Labour Institute, to come to a meeting in Cairo. This I did and spent a lovely week there, in this ILO-related conference. It also got me thinking whether I should be more involved in that kind of work. I liked the work Marquand's Institute was then doing. But I was on my way then to India. Soon I joined Delhi University and was teaching economics. I was very happy there and didn't really think of the UN for some time, except that I would sometimes go to work with Surendra Patel in the UNCTAD (UN Conference on Trade and Development), over summer vacations, in Geneva. Those strictly short term visits I greatly enjoyed—Surendra is a great guy to work with.

There seemed plenty to do at home, in India. My first attempt at grumbling about the neglect of basic education in India—I had not won that battle yet my earliest papers were in the 1950s in *The Statesman*, in Calcutta. Later on, after this Nobel thing happened, *The Statesman* did republish a number of these old articles. It was eerie for me to see how long I had been involved about the neglect of basic education in India, and with what little success.

Be that as it may, I was very involved in India, especially when I was teaching in Delhi in the 1960s, and did not take a tremendous interest in going to the UN. But the UNIDO thing happened then. A couple of summers I went to New York to work for UNIDO, with Hans Singer. There was an Indian economist there called, Prafulla Sanghvi, who was an old friend of mine from my student days in Cambridge and he was working then with Hans. I remember being taken by him to be introduced to Hans Singer, whose work of course I knew. I was very thrilled. And I think Hans also asked me if I'd like to go to Mexico for a month to do some seminars on project evaluation and other things of interest to UNIDO, which is what I did in one of the summers when Delhi University was on vacation. I can't think which summer, but middle 1960s, I would guess. By then I had been trying to do my bit, in the wonderful company of Stephen Marglin, to develop a systematic approach to project evaluation for the UNIDO, and felt quite involved in the cause.

Gradually, the program became rather more ambitious and we started doing a guideline for project evaluation, jointly with Steve Marglin, with whom I was then working a lot. I was very keen on it. The work on project evaluation and cost-benefit analysis, without relying too much on market prices, had really begun in Delhi in 1963, when Steve Marglin was in India, through the academic year os 1963-64. Steve and I, along with Praful Sanghvi, went to Mexico. We were also attached to the Institute of Productivity in Mexico—an institute with a name like that—with which I have had no further association after that, though they were excellent hosts when we were there in Mexico at that time.

Bengal famine and role of media

I think I was nine in the spring of 1943, when the famine began. It finished by the time I was just turning ten, in November. Yes, there were a number of striking aspects of that. One was, of course, I had never seen people dying in such numbers. I had not, in fact, even seen people dying anyway. But then in 1943, I suddenly saw hundreds of thousands of people starving and dying. It was naturally a remarkable and a harrowing experience. It seemed incredible that there could be no way of saving them.

Second, as you say, I was struck by the fact that while so many people—what seemed like millions of people—were roaming the streets, and falling, and perishing, I did not know anyone whatsoever among my circle of friends, or in the school, or anyone connected with the family in any way, who had the slightest difficulty living on. So I was struck by the divisiveness of society—its class character—and the extreme contrast between some people not being able to afford food at all to survive while others were not having any difficulty at all. I was beginning to understand a little about class divisions. And it wasn't class only, in the very broad sense. The divisions were much more detailed and more fine, linked to occupation groups and locations and so on. So later, many years later when I would study famines, that elementary understanding played a big part: that class and occupation groups had to be linked firmly to what one is trying to explain.

Also, there was the oddity of the extreme suddenness of the famine. That was a big surprise. Nothing was being reported, and there were very little discussion of any kind of storm that was coming. Because of censorship that the Raj had imposed over those years, connected mainly with the war, the Indian newspapers were not allowed to

print anything disparaging about the Raj which could inflame criticism. But the main English paper in Calcutta, *The Statesman*, a distinguished daily then, was left uncensored. It was a British-owned paper, edited by an Englishman called Ian Stephens, who later was a Fellow at Kings, whom I came to know—much later—quite well. But at that time, I didn't even know who the editor of that newspaper was. Ian Stephens initially toed the line in not reporting anything much on the famine. The justification was that the Japanese were in Burma and the war was going on, and they did not want to do anything which would undermine the war effort. But it also meant, of course, little notice was taken of—and nothing much was done to save—the millions who perished.

But eventually, Ian Stephens could not keep himself silent any longer. This was in October, by which time the famine had gone on for many months. On October 14 and 16 of 1943, *The Statesman* published agonizing reports and stinging editorials on governmental policy. This, of course, immediately got the attention of Parliament, in Britain, in London. Within a few weeks, relief began.

And within a month the famine was over. The experience brought out clearly the power of the press, and why public discussion is an enormously important way of promoting justice in the world. The idea is not, of course, unrelated to what the UN stands for.

That is, if the newspapers in the developed countries took greater interest in what is going on in the developing countries, there might be more involvement. And we know that attempts to get the public informed and aroused can produce big reactions, big positive reactions, whether you take things like Live Aid and responses connected with that, or you look at more literary involvement with disasters elsewhere. For example, the

Ethiopian famine was completely neglected, then suddenly there is a good report by the BBC (British Broadcasting Company), followed by strong accounts in the newspapers. It aroused immediate interest and concern, because human beings have sympathy for each other.

The issue of public discussion is important also for deprivations in the richer countries themselves. It is not just a question of whether these journalists or broadcasters take an interest in things abroad, but also whether they take an interest in social affairs even at home. I have sometimes tried—as have many other people—to draw public discussion into domestic ills in, say, America or Britain, with little success. Some year ago, I think it was in 1993 (ten years ago, really), I wrote an article in the *Scientific American*, called "The Economics of Life and Death," showing that even in rich countries like the United States, because of various social and economic deprivations (including social inequalities, lack of medical insurance, bad schooling, etc.), life expectancy at birth of large societal groups (such as African Americans living in big U.S. cities) can be lower than that in very poor countries, like China, India, Sri Lanka, not to mention Costa Rica and Jamaica. Others have written on these issues also. But while they generate interest among academics and such, they are hardly ever taken up in more general public discussion in a way that could make a difference to policy.

It is very difficult to get newspapers interested in all this, except to note the point in a low-key item. You would occasionally get one of the higher-brow papers, like *The New York Times*, or the *Los Angeles Times*, or the *Washington Post,* or the *Chicago Tribune*, writing an article on such a problem. But there is no sustained onslaught on what are gigantic deprivations. Even if charity begins at home, it could begin more

firmly than it tends to do. So I think yes, there is a big problem here. It is not just a failure that applies across the borders, dealing with the poorer countries, but even within the borders of a rich country.

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RICHARD JOLLY: Now, soon after that, you started getting involved with the ILO, with the World Employment Programme. I think Louis Emmerij played a role.

AMARTYA SEN: Louis Emmerij did indeed play a very major role. He rekindled an old interest of mine—about thirty years old—which was very alive in my mind but had not led to any serious research action. I had seen the Bengal famine of 1943, in which between two and three million people had died. I always wanted to study it, not only because it was such a big and gruesome happening, but also because there were some peculiar things associated with it, particularly, first, the suddenness of it, second, the intensely class-based nature of the starvation, and third, the fact that the food supply wasn't so bad in that year at all. I had reason to think that pretty much all of the theories of starvation explicitly or implicitly used in standard books on famines, focusing just on the availability of food, were mistaken. The newspapers were often mistaken too in playing up only the food supply situation.

Economists had not taken an adequate interest in this issue. There were nice insights, of course. One from David Ricardo. He made a good statement in the Parliament in London—it was I think around 1825—as to why you could have a famine despite having a lot of food. And Adam Smith gives strong evidence in the *Wealth of*

Nations of being sceptical of the food availability theory of famines. But these were mostly just throwaway remarks, and the subject needed to be seriously researched, with adequate empirical work and theoretical reasoning.

So I did want to work on famine theory as well as famine experience. But through the 1960s I was very involved in social choice theory, including economic measurement, political mechanisms and democratic decisions. By the early 1970s, however, I was ready to get into famine studies. I had just moved to LSE (London School of Economics) in 1971. My social choice book (*Collective Choice and Social Welfare*) had came out in 1970, and I was lucky that lots of people seemed to be working on social choice theory, and in particular on issues that were directly raised in my book. It was a good time to take up my old interest in famines. Louis Emmerij persuaded me that I must not postpone this work any longer. His colleague, Felix Paukert, who became a friend of mine through Louis, was also extremely encouraging.

Of course, I continued to be involved in social choice, and did mostly rather technical and mathematical work in that general field. I also had a number of excellent students working on social choice theory and on related areas, who made foundational contributions to the subject: I think of Rajat Deb, Kaushik Basu, Siddiq Osmani, Ben Fine, Ravi Kanbur, John Wriglesworth, David Kelsey, Matsumoto, and a number of other remarkable students. Some of them had done their first degree in mathematics and then worked on social choice theory and related subjects. So both in terms of my own writings and their works, I remained very involved in social choice theory, mathematical reasoning and technical economics. But from the beginning of the 1970s, I really wanted to get back to my old concerns and puzzles about famines and their causation.

So when I went for a meeting in Geneva with the ILO, I agreed to work with them, first, on a book on employment, which incidentally is quite central to famines as well.

RJ: It was on employment, technology and development.

AS: Yes, it was the first work I did for the World Employment Programme. I think both Louis Emmerij and Felix Paukert were involved. Louis Emmerij was an absolutely inspiring figure. Felix Paukert was a wonderful person, too, to know and to work with. I did that work on employment and technology for the World Employment Programme, but it was not a particularly original work—it consolidated what we had done in the field of choice of techniques and project evaluation.

UN and Measurement

As far as measurement is concerned, it's quite different, isn't it, because the UN had been at the centre of it all. It was at the centre of refining the measurement and standardization of the GNP (gross national product). Richard Stone and James Meade were both involved in that. UN was later on at the centre of criticising and challenging the on-going reliance on the GNP. The critique came mainly through the *Human Development Reports* in particular, and trying to replace the GNP by the Human Development Index, led by Mahbub ul Haq. There were also other voices of criticism for which the UN made room, for example Keith Griffin and John Knight outlined an influential case for relying on human capabilities rather than on economic affluence only, and the UNICEF of course had been much involved in focusing on "the state of the

world's children," rather than on any measure of GNP or GDP (gross domestic product). This was all in the UN. So in the measurement field, the UN had an enormous lead, and many Cambridge economists were involved in that. But the leading Cambridge economists in my time—that is between 1953 and 1963—were not very interested at all in what has now become the focal points of concentration of the UN, particularly under Kofi Annan, such as advancing human security, reducing global poverty and inequality, preserving the environment. The Cambridge economists through the 1960s and the 1970s were much more concerned with high growth rates.

Basic Needs

First of all, let me say two positive things about basic needs. One is that it often makes excellent and immediate sense. Consider the idea that if you are dying of starvation, what you basically need is some food. This is surely an absolutely elementary point. So underlying the basic needs approach, there is a tremendous foundation of common sense. Not surprisingly, even though the term as such hadn't been used, the idea of minimum needs was very extensively written about by Pigou in his 1920s book, *The Economics of Welfare*.

Yes, Pitamber in the 1950s, but Pigou in 1920. The second point to note is that the basic needs approach did a great deal in challenging both the focus of many theorists on something very abstract, like utility, and the focus of many worldly wise guys on something very concrete but very inadequate in coverage, namely just income and wealth. Of course, utility and income both can be very important in social analysis. But

the basic needs approach told the world to focus on something more immediate, more elementary, and more directly relevant.

All these approaches make good sense, up to a point. Think of a famine. Obviously people suffer from starvation and may die, and a utility theorist may wish to see this all in terms of lack of utility. It is a possible view, but the basic needs approach asks us to be more specific. A famine is not only an epidemic of disutility; it is an epidemic of starvation. Similarly, income is central to famines. We know from the studies of famines that many of us have done that lack of income is often the basic reason underlying starvation. So the income approach does make sense too—indeed very good sense as well. And yet the basic needs approach is right to take us beyond the pre-eminence of income as a general purpose means to more specific needs for food, clothing, shelter, medicine, and so on. While the income approach works well up to a point in famine theory (my own work on famines is very concerned with the generation of income, particularly through employment), we have to go beyond it, in dealing with health care, medical arrangements, and ultimately ways and means of recreating a healthy economy with good educational and health services.

The basic needs approach does, therefore, take us in the right direction. But we have to go beyond it as well, and in particular move away from its focus on commodities towards taking note of capabilities. Two person may have exactly the same goods (same amounts of food, clothing, etc.), and yet one may have a physical disability or a proneness to illness, which can make him or her more deprived than the person who is not thus handicapped. The things we are able to do and be—our capabilities—depend both on the commodity basket that we can manage to get, but also on our physical

problems, our genetic differences, our environmental situations (related for example to local crimes and the presence or absence of epidemics in the region, in addition to physical climates), and so on. Also, the basic needs approach tends to see people as "needy" beings - it is the view of human beings as "patients"—rather than as people whose "freedoms" matter—the view of human beings as "agents" who can do things. So we have to go beyond the commodity-centred basic needs approach, without denying the important contribution it has made in advancing the public dialogues on social assessment and political priorities.

Mahbub ul Haq and the HDR

The *Human Development Report*s, under Mahbub ul Haq's visionary leadership, consolidated the criticisms that had emerged in the literature on heavy reliance on the GNP and such commodity-based indicators, which was standard practice when Mahbub got going. I remember his first phone call to me on this in 1989. We had to focus instead, Mahbub argued, on the lives of human beings—their freedoms and well-being, their capabilities. I had starting work on capabilities from the late 1970s - my first formal statement on that was in my Tanner Lectures in Standard in 1979, under the title "Equality of What?" Mahbub was very kind to my book *Commodities and Capabilities*, published in 1985. He wanted me to abandon pure theory and join him in making a perspective based on human lives, rather than on commodities and incomes, the central approach to evaluating social progress and a powerful weapon for demanding more attention on people's deprivations and unfreedoms.

I did work with Mahbub from the first *Human Development Report*. It came out in 1990. No one could tell the world, and had the ear of the world, with the kind of adeptness and success that Mahbub had. It certainly made those neglected issues very prominent. Mahbub was also a wonderful leader, who always gave credit to others. He was a very generous man, and I was extremely privileged to have him as a life-long friend. I remember his commitments and kindness from very early days, when we were undergraduates together in Cambridge. Aside from Mahbub's powerful intellect, his personality was exactly right for someone to serve as the leader of the team to which we were all (including Paul Streeten, Meghnad Desai, Keith Griffin, Gus Ranis, Frances Stewart, Sudhir Anand and many others) proud to belong.

One slightly negative side of this approach, which relied heavily on public relations, was that in order to win the attention of the public, Mahbub had to simplify tremendously. He went on to do things which were exactly right for his purpose, but also generated a good deal of problems for the intellectual respectability of the "human development approach." One of them was his insistence on having one very simple "Human Development Index" or the HDI.

This is an index which has three complements, namely literacy and basic education, longevity, and a minimum level of income. These three were chosen out of many other concerns, and of these three, two—basic literacy and longevity—are more directly connected with capability than income is. But there are a lot of other capabilities that one can think of. So this selection involved considerable neglect as well. Secondly, these three were then merged into one index on the basis of weighting. And Mahbub was persuaded that the public would not be ready to accept any weight other than one, one,

and one—all others would appear to them (Mahbub told me) as "arbitrary." But the equal weighting is itself basically arbitrary: its effects depend on the units in which each of the three variables is measured. Since I was given the charge of developing this compound index, I had to worry a great deal about all this.

Any way the HDI which we devised did become quite popular, despite its arbitrariness. Mahbub was immensely skilled in getting the attention of the world. He was out to "get the GNP," and he did. Even though I had been very opposed to having one simple Human Development Index, I ended up gladly helping him to develop it, since he persuaded me that there was no way of replacing the GNP unless we had another similarly simple index. But this index will be better in the sense that it will focus on human lives, and not just on commodities.

After Mahbub was satisfied with the Human Development Index, he got countries into competition with each other to score a high HDI mark. The Canadians vied with Norwegians on whether they had a higher HDI or not. Pakistan worried how its number compared with India's. And so on. Mahbub played them up. It was a great international success. While we were losing much in the sophistication of the underlying theory, the human development index was gaining practical ground. But Mahbub also made sure that the HDI would be treated as the entry point into a dialogue on human developments, and put tremendous emphasis on supplementing that one lean number with a fat book of tables, giving the world a massive amount of information on different aspects of human lives. That wonderful tradition has been carried on in the work of the UNDP's Human Development Research Office, with Mahbub's efforts being supplemented by those of

Inga Kaul and others, and followed by you yourself, Richard, and of course presently by Sakiko Fukuda-Parr.

Ideas in the UN

The UN is, of course, a practical body, and it is right that it would be mainly concerned with the urgent and the immediate. Yet, it is also necessary not to be boorish in ignoring the ancestry of many of the ideas that UN stands for and tries to promote. I think the UN has, taking the rough with the smooth, made good use of ideas, generally. But it varies a little between different parts of the UN system. As I have worked, over the decades, with different parts of the UN system, I have been impressed how some of them have been more explicit and more keenly aware of the sophisticated ideas that lie behind the day to day work and commitments of the UN. This can make a difference in giving intellectual depth to practical strategies.

One of the reasons for my joy in working, say, with Mahbub in the context of the *Human Development Reports* was related to his sensitivity to these larger concerns. This was true of some of the other parts of the UN also, like the World Employment Programme of the ILO, or the work of the UNICEF under the leadership of James Grant. I can give many other positive examples. In the early period, I think UNIDO too was very moved by solidly grounded foundational ideas, especially under the leadership of Hans Singer. But as UNIDO sort of redefined itself, I think to some extent it became much more of an engineering establishment—perfectly fine within its structure, but less interested in grander perspectives. However, in general I can’t say that I would like to

make an overall criticism of the UN in this respect. The UN has not lacked perspective, right from its origin, when it moved quickly to the grand declaration of "Universal Human Rights," reviving the visions of Tom Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft, among others.

Human Security

Though the Human Security Commission was set up at the initiative of the Japanese government, the UN has joined hands in bolstering its work. Mrs. Ogata and I, who have been serving as co-chairs of the Commission, have both been much encouraged by the support we have received from the UN, led by the Secretary-General himself. Kofi Annan is one of the visionary leaders of the world today, and it is very encouraging that he has taken such a strong interest in our work.

There are perhaps three different reasons why the work on human security is so important today. One concerns economics. The world has been too captivated by the rhetoric of just economic growth, or more broadly of economic growth and equity. Growth with equity is fine as far as it goes, but quite often we have to face the reality of an economic downfall. So, in addition to "growth with equity," we have to worry seriously about "downturn with security," when a downturn cannot be avoided. The focus purely on growth with equity did not help the economies in East Asia and South-east Asia when the economic crisis and slump came in 1998. The protective system was altogether lacking in these countries even though they have had such great economic

success. Those who lost their jobs and were thrown to the wall, hit the wall hard, with nothing to protect them from sudden penury.

For example, South Korea was indeed very successful in economic growth, along with maintaining equity, but it had very little arrangement for social safety nets. That became a top priority only when Kim Dae-Jung came to office as President during the economic crisis. Nor did the Republic of Korea have all the basic features of a functioning democracy. We do know that democracy is extremely important in order to be able to place the case of the underdogs in the active political picture, and in order to make the government accountable. In fact, we do know that famines do not occur in functioning democracies, and something a little similar applies to the predicament of the less extreme but still very badly off victims of sudden downturn (like those in the "Asian economic crisis"). Not surprisingly, with the crisis, people who had not worried much about democracy in the past became very involved in promoting it, in East and South-east Asia. A veteran democratic campaigner like Kim Dae-Jung suddenly had much more support; in fact he won his election mainly on that ticket in South Korea. Democracy became a big issue in Indonesia, a bigger issue in Thailand, and in many other countries. This was not unconnected with the recognition that democracy is not only important in itself; it has a functional role in giving voice to the victims of economic insecurity. This is, I believe, an important issue in the contemporary world. We have to worry about human security and not be too captured by the slogan of growth with equity.

Secondly, in the world in which we live, with 9/11 and with many other atrocities committed across the world, it has become absolutely clear that people can suffer from insecurity even when in their normal day-to-day life they are quite well off. It is not the

case that only the poor are insecure. The poor are, of course, quintessentially insecure (we must not lose sight of that basic fact), but insecurity can blast the lives of very rich people too. Some of the people who were killed in the financial offices in the Twin Towers were typically rich. Insecurity can invade the lives of even very well-placed people. That's an important recognition. We have to recognise the fact that insecurity is not just concerned with poverty. The insecurity in the lives of human beings caused by violence and conflict deserves a fuller recognition, going beyond the concentration on just military security or defence expenditure. It is the insecurity of the people rather than the state on which we have to focus, in the approach that we have tried to follow.

The third reason for the importance of the subject of human insecurity is the interconnection between different sources of insecurity. That war and terrorism can disrupt production systems, political arrangements, health services, schools and other educational institutions, and so on is obvious enough. But the causal connections go in the other way as well. Economic and social insecurity does have a role in generating violence. We should not think only in terms of simple slogans like: "economic insecurity creates violence and war." It is not an immediate or a mechanical relation like that. But it would be hard to deny that economic suffering and fear can actually cause violence in the long run. Just to give an example, the 1840s in Ireland, during the Irish famines, constituted one of the quietest periods in Irish history, for a population not known to be particularly docile. But the famine-stricken Irish were indeed relatively docile through the famine period. Even when food was being shipped from starving Ireland to well-fed England, none of the boats laden with food sailing down the Shannon was subjected to attempted robbery or seizure. It was all very quiet in a famine devastated and debilitated

country. But, for a hundred years—indeed much longer—after that, the famine dominated the thinking of the Irish, their understanding of neglect and callousness or worse, their grumble about English rule, their desire to be thoroughly independent. And the sense of grievance fed violence and terrorism, which has rocked Ireland and England over more than a century. Similarly the economic and social insecurities in the contemporary world can have very far-reaching destabilizing consequences, in addition to being terrible in themselves.

The subject of human security does need serious attention for all these reasons. Insecurity can take several different forms and they do interrelate. Along with Sadako Ogata, and also the other Commissioners, I strongly believe that this is a perspective that ought to receive much more attention. We have discussed some of the concrete steps that we should urgently take to try to reduce human insecurity in the world today. As always, I very much hope the UN system will be our big ally here.