

# Blaming the Victim, Globally

By George Kent

In the mid-1970s, William Ryan wrote a nice little book called *Blaming the Victim*, which showed how people on welfare were regularly characterized as being lazy or ignorant and their sorry conditions were their fault. It was assumed that anyone could pull oneself up by one's "own bootstraps" if he or she only tried hard enough. It was not recognized that for many the opportunity was just not there; their bootstraps just kept ripping off. Ryan was one of the few to see what we now call structural violence—the fact that some harms result from the nature of the social system itself.

Perhaps the appreciation of structural violence has not been just another passing fad; perhaps it has been pushed aside. For those who are well served by existing social systems, it is more comforting to see bad outcomes as resulting from bad agents: individuals remain poor because they are lazy or ignorant; AIDS is caused solely by sexual behaviour; market failures result from misbehaving corporations; and countries remain poor because they are not sufficiently engaged with the market. These can be fixed by structural adjustment, with the international financial institutions as global chiropractors.

"Give a man a fish and he eats for today, but teach a man to fish and he eats for a lifetime." We will teach the poor and powerless how to grow food, plan families, be entrepreneurs and democrats. We know how and they don't. Never mind that the fish may have been taken by others or destroyed by pollution, and that the fishing waters may have been fenced off. Never mind that the peasant already knows how to farm, but doesn't have a bit of land to call his own. The assumption always is that individuals and countries everywhere are surrounded by abundant opportunities.

Sometimes we focus on individuals as victims, and sometimes as perpetrators when, for example, human rights workers focus on specific violations. Bad things presumably happen because of bad governments. If the wrongdoers are rooted out, everything will be fine. In the violations orientation to human rights work, the central task is to identify violations and violators, collect evidence and "bring the violator to justice" through some sort of court procedure. War crimes tribunals are of this nature. The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide is emphatic, even in its title, about the need to punish violators.

Those who focus on violations tend to focus on specific events. Wrongs are seen to result from wrongdoing, from specific acts, while bad outcomes are seen as resulting from bad people, bad leaders or bad corporations.

From this perspective, it is difficult to see or critically assess chronic conditions, such as discrimination, poverty or hunger, as human rights issues. The violations approach, and thus the issue of justiciability, is oriented more to addressing direct violence than structural violence. Violations, in general, are understood in terms of specific acts, not chronic conditions.

The difficulty with focusing on individuals, whether as victims or as perpetrators, is that it is harder to see the social system in which both are embedded. It is important to see that the social structures can produce bad consequences such as widening economic gaps, even if there is no specific wrongdoing by any of the individual players.

Adjudication is not the only important mechanism of accountability. United Nations human rights treaty bodies have no power of adjudication. Instead, they use "constructive dialogue"—a softer approach intended to encourage errant States to take the right direction—which may be the most realistic and appropriate approach to dealing with the widespread resistance to anything that looks like global governance.

We need to see and acknowledge that the world does not work well for most of its people. Given modern capacities for producing food, there is no good reason for anyone anywhere to go hungry, but not less than 800 million people are malnourished. Every year, more than 10 million children die before their fifth birthday. Why do so many die? Many have the misfortune of being born in poor countries, but they are not born in a poor world. Perhaps it has something to do with the skew in the economic system. Poor people are paid less than rich people for the same work and for producing the same products. They also pay more for purchasing the same products, and for credit, for example. They tend to pay more for just about everything else.

The major international agencies should not only continue helping individuals and countries, but should also acknowledge that such local tinkering is not going to solve systemic problems. They need to see and acknowledge the functioning of the system. To illustrate, a recent joint study by the World Health Organization and the World Trade Organization on *WTO Agreements & Public Health* pointed out some specific health issues associated with trade, such as pathogens in goods. However, it did not grasp the "big picture" of the preponderant flow of food from poor to rich countries. The system is that the poor feed the rich. Surely, in a large-scale study on trade and health, that should be worth a look. Shouldn't someone be asking who benefits from the current trading system?

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☞ What should be the role of the educational system in reaching out to the communities—mainly parents and by informal education—and working to change the difficult reality?

☞ What shall be the criteria for renewing textbooks; who is in charge of monitoring them and at what frequency?

Any peace process, even if just at the stage of a ceasefire, must recognize the role of those who stand at the forefront of society day in and day out: the educators. The questions outlined above require strategic discussion as well as policy decisions. These cannot be taken at the grass-roots level only. If we demand that the educational system work for the implementation of a peace agreement, including a detoxification of society from hate and animosity and enhancing skills for non-violent conflict resolution, it is necessary to provide the leaders of that system with the mandate to do so.

The Middle East Children's Association (MECA), a joint Palestinian-Israeli educational organization, has decided not to wait for the political leaders to start implementing this educational track. MECA has been working for the past six years, including during the last two years of violence, with over 400 teachers throughout Israel and the Palestinian Authority in subject matters such as math, history, pre-school education, etc. In each of these areas, the teachers work together to infuse concepts of responsibility, understanding and tolerance while adapting these ideas to the specific needs of their communities. We have worked in full recognition of the critical role of teachers and schools. Serious educational initiatives such as these should be motivated, in order to enable and help both communities to overcome daily challenges and difficulties. The many teachers who in times like these must overcome physical and educational barriers are living proof of the willingness and capacity that exists within the educational community. This potential, however, can only be fully realized if enhanced and encouraged, as a matter of policy, by all members of the international community and local governments who are interested in changing the current miserable reality and lead our region towards stability and prosperity. □

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*Ghassan Abdullah and Adina Shapiro are co-Directors of the Middle East Children's Association (MECA).*

*Dr. Abdullah, a lecturer at Al Quds University, has been involved in Palestinian-Israeli dialogue since the mid-1980s and spent many years as Director of the Center for Applied Research in Education, a Palestinian organization that develops curricula for Palestinian schools.*

*Ms. Shapiro has served as Acting Director of the Institute for State Attorneys and Legal Advisors at the Israeli Ministry of Justice. She began working on the Israeli-Palestinian education eight years ago when she started teaching Hebrew at the first school in the Palestinian Authority that offered it as a mandatory class. Her experience there eventually led to the founding of MECA. She is currently finishing her law degree.*

In many places, the most serious problem at the local level is the lack of opportunities to do meaningful, productive work. Too many people with high potential are pulling rickshaws or doing mind-numbing mechanical work on assembly lines. At the global level, the steadily widening gap between rich and poor is far more terrifying than terrorism. But, of course, those who are at the top end find it more useful to not see it; they simply call across the chasm for those on the other side to work even harder.

International agencies recognize that many people are embedded in social systems that limit their possibilities, but they tend to emphasize the role of the individual (low income) rather than of the social context (high prices). We need to see that countries too are embedded in a global system that systematically keeps most poor and powerless countries in their sorry condition.

The global marketplace is not an equal-opportunity marketplace. Many countries stay on the bottom no matter how much outsiders try to help them because, in many cases, of internal forces such as armed conflicts, rapid population growth and corrupt leaders. To some extent, it is also the results of international political and economic forces that keep them down. For example, massive subsidies of agricultural products in the United States, Japan and Europe result in their dumping large quantities of these products in poor countries, undermining their agricultural sectors. Poor countries cannot seem to get access to the markets of rich countries to sell their export products. It is not only individuals but also entire countries that have, in effect, become completely unemployed, totally marginalized by the global economic system. Those who are employed work on unfavourable terms, giving them no prospect of ever catching up.

Yes, poor countries should take responsibility and try to pull themselves up; however, with the playing field tilted so sharply against them, it becomes a Sisyphean struggle. They climb a bit and then some natural disaster, or more predictably inflation, overtakes and pushes them back. What's wrong with this picture? We will never know if we do not look at it. Before we argue about whether the system is deliberately tilted in favour of the powerful, we should plainly acknowledge that it is. When will the international agencies begin to look at the massive, pervasive system of structural violence in which we are all embedded? □

*George Kent is professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Hawaii. He is the coordinator of the Task Force on Children's Nutrition Rights and co-convenor of the Commission on International Human Rights of the International Peace Research Association.*



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