

The Threat of Growing Inequalities

Chiara Mannarino (January 29, 2014)



THE THREAT OF GROWING INEQUALITIES
Building More Just And Equitable Societies To Support Growth And Sustainable Development
A UN Roundtable with Joseph Stiglitz
In cooperation with the UN Department of Public Information (UNDPI)

Interactive debate among UN Permanent Representatives, international agencies, foundations and civil society.

January 20, 2014
UN Headquarters ECOSOC Chamber
3:00pm – 5:30pm

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UN Roundtable with Joseph Stiglitz. Interactive debate among UN Permanent Representatives, international agencies, foundations and civil society. [Event hosted by the Permanent Mission of Italy to the United Nations, with the Italian Cultural Institute and the International Development Law Organization, in cooperation with the UN Department of Public Information]

Professor [Joseph Stiglitz](#) [2] Nobel Prize Winner, Professor at Columbia University, Co-Chair of Columbia University's Committee on Global Thought, and Co-President of the Initiative for Policy Dialogue at Columbia, spoke about the issues of inequalities in our world at the United Nations ECOSOC Chamber (Economic Social Chamber) at United Nation Headquarters on, very appropriately, [Martin Luther King Jr. Day](#) [3]. (on demand video [>>>](#)) [4]

After the introduction by Sebastiano Cardi, Permanent Representative of Italy to the UN, Stiglitz was joined by several other influential members, such as the following: Professor [Riccardo Viale](#) [5], Director of the Italian Cultural Institute; Michael Doyle, Professor of U.S., Foreign, and Security Policy at Columbia University; [Fabrizio Barca](#) [6], Director General of the Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance; Jose Antonio Ocampo, Chair of the UN Committee on Development Policy; Victoria de Grazia, Moore Collegiate Professor of History at Columbia University; [Nadia Urbinati](#) [7], Professor of Political Theory at Columbia University; and Irene Kahn, Director General of International Development Law Organization.

Several thought-provoking points were brought up, but the ones that I would like to focus on are the following: Nadia Urbinati concentrated on the idea of democracy, what she defined when she spoke as the power of making decisions and being heard.

However, she raised the point that the majority of people do not have the ability to make themselves be heard. They do not have a voice, the ability to participate in making opinions, and so have to rely upon other people to make their condition known.

Not having a voice or being given the chance to speak is a factor that further impoverishes someone. Recognition is an important part of democracy and the only way to achieve political equality is to listen to requests.

Victoria De Grazia raised some important issues. We must formulate a new definition of what is the “middle” based on how our world is evolving. This requires answering some questions that are in a more gray area but are nevertheless integral to minimizing inequality.

What is considered rich? How about excessively rich? What is considered below 20%? We cannot answer these questions without considering what particular country they relate to. We must create a global relationship that allows for dialogue between countries so that we can paint a truer picture of inequality for ourselves.

I completely agree with De Grazia’s questioning of how the project for sustainable development will ever be able to help the poor if we cannot even empower the middle classes. The solution she poses is to have every country define the meaning of inequality for itself and then to discuss this reality with everyone else.

The broad and fluctuating spectrum of reality that exists within each country makes it unrealistic to think that we can have a universal definition of “poor,” “rich,” and “middle.” Our definitions also must not be so rigid that they will not be useful when economic conditions vary.

As Stiglitz acknowledges, we are living in a country of “trickle-up economics.” It is not enough to put forth policies decided by established economists and follow along blindly. Not everyone can benefit from this, despite the belief that those with countless qualifications know the best things to do.

Stiglitz points out that the independent central banks are the worst manifestation of this view. Everyone trusts that the choices of the central bankers will lead to policies that will enhance the well being of everyone, however this view is simply impractical because there cannot be one reality for everyone.

This conference opens countries up to seeing the differences between views and the importance of understanding that not everyone will benefit from a universal standard. The vicious cycles of economic and political inequality must not be ignored but rather must be recognized and combated. The way to combat them is through national dialogue.

Communities must be given a chance to speak so that the different standards of inequality within each country can be understood. It is impossible to know what a true reduction of poverty would entail without realizing what this means within the context of each country.

Therefore, we must hear the opinions of those around the globe. Although we want to make



universal goals that would apply equally to all countries, as Jose Antonio Ocampo stated, we cannot have the same goals for all countries.

Irene Khan said that goals are universal but application is local and that we must not underestimate the innovative power of community. When you look at the facts, most of the biggest changes originated at the local level. For example, in Khan's hometown of Bangladesh, she mentioned that the garment industry there has done more for women's rights than has ever been done nationally.

The elites set high standards and goals, however they, for the most part, fail to meet them. The solution requires commitment and a focus on empowering communities. We must translate global goals into national self-interest.

The closing speaker, Amina Mohammed, the Secretary-General's Special adviser on Post-2015 Development Planning, made very poignant statements to conclude the event that day, but keep the dialogue going. She acknowledged that a large portion of our world's population does not have access to education that allows them to understand the matters being discussed at the UN and the manner in which they were being discussed.

Therefore, the most pressing task of the elite of society and those who have had access to a broad education is to determine the best way to communicate what is very real to the people who must implement the agenda, those who have not had access to a full education and a plethora of opportunities.

Without the translation of our social issue and inequalities into forms that are easily comprehensible by all, there cannot be improvement. She emphasized the importance of an ambitious, yet realistic, agenda.

We must realize the extent of the meaning of "universal." We cannot let universal become what smaller countries fear the most: exclusion from dialogue. We must learn to respond to needs and not to wants, because our wants are what have gotten us into so much trouble with regards to consumption.

The disparity between the abundance of America, the aisles of grocery stores filled with food, Costcos and Targets galore, and the lack that exists in continents such as Africa and Latin America is astounding. We must learn to be ambitious for our needs, just as Ms. Mohammed said. Although the Millennium Development Goals require work and may not be reached, they should not be scraped completely.

We must use them as a springboard and framework to help us develop a more realistic, workable agenda. The most important lesson to take away from this conference is the importance of keeping the door to discussion open. Through conversation, the impoverished will live with hope and the elite will be able to work to make the eradication of inequality a reality.

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[2] <http://www.josephstiglitz.com/>

[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther_King,_Jr._Day

[4] <http://webtv.un.org/watch/the-threat-of-growing-inequalities-roundtable-with-prof.-joseph-stiglitz-nobel-laureate-for-economic-sciences-2001/3086046375001/>

[5] <http://www.iicnewyork.esteri.it/NR/rdonlyres/A0D97FEB-783F-42AC-995F-6AA074AE5391/0/VialeCV.pdf>

[6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fabrizio_Barca



[7] <http://polisci.columbia.edu/people/profile/114>