

Securing a Future for Dignity

by Yap Kwong Weng

Human dignity needs to be embraced amid increasing humanitarian and social challenges. Yap Kwong Weng, a Young Global Leader of the World Economic Forum, tells us why.

Can dignity be a global movement? It is already one.

Global Dignity is the brainchild of three concerned global citizens who met as Young Global Leaders at the World Economic Forum in 2006, HRH Crown Prince Haakon Magnus of Norway, Professor Pekka Himanen Professor at the University of Art and Design, Helsinki

and John Hope Bryant, CEO of Operation Hope. Young Global Leaders represent the future of leadership, coming from all regions of the world and representing business, government, civil society, arts and culture, academia and media, as well as social entrepreneurs. Since 2006, they have worked with many Young Global Leaders and partners from more than 50 countries,

hosting what are known as Dignity Days. This involves visiting local schools and communities around the world and teaching a “course in dignity” to youth.

This is a positive step forward, but the buck cannot stop here. More needs to be done by civil society to collectively strengthen human dignity in our crises-ridden world.





Photo by Hu Qiren

Dignity and Development

Ignoring human dignity as a precondition to the broader developmental agenda is dangerous. Professor of Politics George Kateb from Princeton University proposes that dignity is an “existential” value that makes up the identity of a human being. Injuring this identity would bring about negative societal consequences.

In Southeast Asia, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam will clearly be testing grounds. The economies of the region have all registered positive results at a growth rate of five percent. Since 2010, tourism in these four countries, also known as the “ASEAN 4”, has also increased significantly despite the uncertain global economic situation. These developing countries are resource rich but are trying to make some very difficult transitions. Poverty, unemployment, human trafficking and marginalised communities continue to remain as some issues that require urgent attention.

The good news, however, is that these developing countries are gaining traction in regional economic integration and the liberalisation of global trade. With Vietnam currently leading the pack – these economic developments could level the playing field in poverty, unemployment, security, politics and healthcare. Having said that, economic independence is no guarantee of peace.

Over in the Middle East, revolutions are taking place partly due to the lack of recognition on human dignity. Take the Arab Spring for example. This social movement highlighted a deeper human problem – humiliation and disrespect – which is an anti-thesis to dignity. This was exemplified when Mohamed Bouzizi, a jobless Tunisian graduate, set himself on fire after police confiscated his unlicensed fruit cart in 2010. His suicide sparked off massive protests that led to the fall of several political leaders in the Middle East and North African region, including former Tunisian President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Regardless of how the Arab Spring has reshaped the world, the clear lack of human dignity continues to affect many societies. In a world with rising urbanisation, middle-class booms and challenges of aging societies, reforms in social and economic domains can no longer just be the “new normal” but the priority for governments and organisations. Separately, economic uncertainty alone should not provide a pretext to guide such reforms especially when the global humanitarian challenge is expected to become larger in the future.

Preventing, Not Managing, Crises

Prevention is better than cure. It is not just governments that are responsible in recognition of human dignity. Civil society plays a critical role in broader ownership. The media can choose whom to feature, consumers can choose goods and services from socially responsible organisations, and young people can work with stakeholders to plan and lead change.

Former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan reminds us that “human beings are at the centre of everything we do – from conflict prevention to development to human rights”. So, whether it is tackling issues in human rights, natural disasters to establishing government legitimacy and economic stability, human dignity plays a key role in development.

The ongoing fight for human dignity has become tougher in our inter-connected world. For one, the world may not necessarily become better off as it experiences technological advancement and economic growth. While globalisation has created new risks, it has also opened doors of opportunity in economic cooperation, social reform and human rights.

In 1995, Hillary Clinton, Former U.S. First Lady, gave a remarkable speech on women’s rights in Beijing, saying, “We have not solved older, deeply rooted problems that continue to diminish the potential of half the world’s population”. Until today, many of same challenges remain to engulf our society. Issues such as discrimination against marginalised communities, human trafficking and ethnic violence are still not solved.

Dignity for Stability

Global consequences could be dire should countries choose to ignore human dignity as a precondition to social stability. If everyone agrees on dignity, then what is the problem? First, the principle of dignity is difficult to quantify. Second, the priority of maintaining dignity is perceived to be less urgent than other global concerns such as terrorism, demographic imbalances and climate change. Third, the consequences of dignity are not necessarily seen as a critical factor for informed decision-making in social reforms.

Regardless of culture, race and religion, dignity is a necessary condition for social solidarity. Maybe one day, macroeconomic challenges can be tackled through “the use of policy measure” and “dignity tested” implementation, says Young Global Leader Lutfrey Siddiqi and Managing Director at UBS. Maybe one day, a dignity scale can be used as a yardstick in assessing social policy development and conflict resolution. The possibilities are infinite but the key question is: “Will society give dignity a chance to flourish?” Clearly, the future of dignity lies in the hands of civil society.

True development can be achieved if lives are improved with dignity enhanced. Promoting dignity as a legitimate cause, not as an elusive ideal, could be a possible departure point to close development gaps. In the end, every human being has the right to lead a dignified life, and to have access to resources to fulfill one’s potential. Therefore, human dignity must be recognised and protected. It cannot be excluded from the social equation.

As founders of Global Dignity put it, “In a world where it seems no-one agrees on anything, a world where politics divides, religion divides, and race and even cultural borders seem to divide, dignity is something that everyone can agree on”. This couldn’t be truer today. [GiA](#)

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