

Laudation for Dr. h.c. mult. Juan Somavia.

By Professor Dr. Christoph Scherrer

March 3, 2009

The University of Kassel wishes to express its profound admiration for a long-standing scholarly and political commitment to a 'just globalisation', which puts at its core decent work for a decent life, by awarding an honorary doctorate to Professor Juan Somavia. Juan Somavia has used his intellectual, analytical, policy formulation and diplomatic skills to focus upon the significant issue of global inequity. In doing so, he has advanced understanding of the ways in which contemporary globalisation has impacted upon inequity and brought together international actors in ways that have advanced the formulation of global policies in the sphere of poverty alleviation, social protection, social development and job security. His contribution to advancing global social justice is significant.

Mr. Somavia has made his intellectual insights accessible to the public in many publications, written primarily in Spanish, French or English. However, three monographs, published in English, deserve special attention. First, his 1995, "Let the Dawn Come. Social Development: Looking Behind the Clichés". Second, the 1999 anthology of his articles and speeches, "People's Security. Globalizing Social Progress", which focus on making social progress accessible to all. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the collection of essays, "Perspectives on Decent Work", which best document Juan Somavia's intellectual powers in pursuit of a decent work strategy. In these collected essays he argues convincingly for the necessity of enforcing a set of core labor standards, regardless of the level of development or competition. Subsequent empirical work has substantiated his arguments. He does not take a paternalistic position towards the world's poor. As Professor Nutzinger, one of the reviewers for the honorary doctorate, has emphasized, Somavia stresses in his writings and speeches the need to provide opportunities for participation of those who are most negatively impacted by the ever changing international division of labor.

Three terms best capture Juan Somavia's contribution to the pursuit of a just globalisation: "Development", "Democracy", and "Decent Work".

Let me begin with “Development”. The perennial question about which trade policies are best suited to promote economic development was a focus of Somavia’s early academic career. In 1971, already at 30, a scholar of law, Juan Somavia became Professor of International Economics and Social Affairs within the Political Science Department of the Catholic University of Chile. In 1975 he contributed to the watershed *Dag Hammarskjold* report, “What now: Another Development”, which argued persuasively for a ‘New International Economic Order’ that takes account of the economic needs of poor countries. A few years later, as co-author of the Tinbergen Club of Rome report, “Reshaping International Order”, he introduced a development dimension to the emerging discourse on the ecological crisis. He continued to elaborate this development perspective in his capacity as founder and executive director of the Latin American Institute of Trans-national Studies (ILET) between 1976 and 1990. During the 1970s and 1980s Somavia worked tirelessly in the interests of the social development of the Global South and in particular of Latin America.

In addition, Juan Somavia spent one term as chairman of the board of the Andean Development Corporation in Caracas, working in favor of regional integration. He served as a member of the Advisory Committee for Development Dialogue for a period of twenty years, from 1975-1995. He was chairman of the board of the United Nations Research Council for Social Development and ensured this organization’s increasingly important contribution to international policy-related social science scholarship. And from 1998 until 1999, he was president of the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

The next term that encapsulates Juan Somavia’s agenda is “Democracy”. The bloody military coup of Pinochet against the democratically elected President of Chile, Salvador Allende, forced Somavia into exile. From there he participated actively in the restoration of democracy in Chile. Not only was he president of the International Commission of the Democratic Coalition in Chile but also founder and secretary-general of the South American Peace Commission. After democracy was re-established in 1990, he served his country for nine years as the Permanent Representative of Chile to the United Nations in New York.

However, it is his work contributing to the understanding of and acting upon unjust working and living conditions, that marks Somavia's most significant contribution. As a precursor to his pursuit of "Decent Work" at the ILO, he launched an agenda of social progress as chairman of the Preparatory Committee for the World Summit for Social Development. At a time of neoliberal triumphs, the World Summit's Copenhagen Declaration in 1995 put the social dimension onto the international community's agenda. The Declaration's goals have become embedded in almost every UN agency's program, as well as in those of the World Bank Group and the IMF. Somavia is widely regarded as being the key person behind this Declaration.

These achievements made him the natural choice for the position of Director-General of the ILO in March 1999. He came with a clear vision for the ILO. Only weeks after his inauguration he refocused the myriad ILO programs on to four strategic priorities:

- fundamental workers rights;
- the creation of employment;
- social security; and,
- social dialogue.

Running across these four streams was a commitment to both development and gender issues.

His "Decent Work" agenda was subsequently endorsed by the Governing Body and the International Labour Conference. From this point the ILO adopted "Decent Work" as the contemporary expression of its historical mandate.

In his second term at the helm of the ILO Somavia conceived of and brought into existence the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalisation, chaired by the Presidents of Finland and Tanzania. Its 2004 report, "A Fair Globalization: Creating Opportunities for All", advanced the analysis and policy prescriptions beyond Copenhagen 1995 towards more precise and concrete global social governance reforms, which would be needed if the elements of the Copenhagen Declaration were to be realized in practice. On its publication Professor Bob Deacon, the other reviewer for Somavia's honorary doctorate, wrote

“the publication in February 2004 of the report of the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalisation commissioned by the ILO marks a significant step forward in the global discourse about the management of globalisation taking place within and between international organisations. Its analysis and recommendations represent a shift from the earlier dominance in globalisation talk of the neo-liberal paradigm towards something which is much more recognizable as a social market if not yet a social democratic approach”.

Somavia’s tenacity and dedication in pursuing the cause of a just globalization was crowned by another achievement, just last month, in Berlin. He ensured that the ILO’s Decent Work Agenda was a central part of attempts by the WTO, IMF, OECD, World Bank and Germany to address the current global crisis.

In moving from the feats of Juan Somavia’s skills as a negotiator for social and economic justice back to his intellectual achievements, let me quote from some of his writings. They reveal most clearly his moral commitment, intellectual clarity and global social purpose. One such example is, “Integrated Thinking and Global Governance” (Somavia 2006:2) in which he argues:

“In essence the growth of global markets has not been accompanied by a commensurate development of agreed rules, regulatory mechanisms, policy coordination, and cooperative action at the international level. As a result, global public “bads” proliferate and intensify at the same time that the growing need for the provision of global public goods remains basically unmet. In social and human terms these deficiencies in global governance aggravate problems of growing inequality and security between and within nations”.

In sum, Somavia combines in his writings an explicit normative stance for “Decent Work” with astute analytical insights into the concrete facets of the decent work deficit. Most importantly, they reveal the difficulties of organizing work according to human needs under the present conditions of globalisation; as long as this process of economic universalization is not accompanied by a process of strengthening societal institutions that do not follow market logic.

As Bob Deacon has put it so succinctly “Somavia belongs to a small but extremely significant global cadre of intellectuals and policy advocates working as international civil servants who remain rooted in their earlier understandings of the factors shaping injustice within their home countries and regions but who, having found themselves actors and players on a global stage, use that stage to argue that commitment to the welfare of others must extend beyond frontiers to encompass the goal of global social justice. “

Let me end with another quote from our outside reviewer: “Kassel University should itself be proud to be able to honor Somavia with an honorary doctorate.” Indeed we are proud.