

Enter Himalayan Consensus by Laurence Brahm

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Since the global financial crisis began, “Washington Consensus” models of development have been discredited. Developing nations seek alternatives to the Washington Consensus. Nowhere is this feeling stronger than Asia.

Enter the Himalayan Consensus. Finding acceptance from Dhaka to Islamabad, from Kathmandu to Lhasa, it is now being discussed in Beijing. Nepal’s Prime Minister Prachanda says, “This Himalayan Consensus is special given the unique physical and spiritual dimension of this region, and the political and economic institutions developing here should encompass these ideas.”

Himalaya Consensus is based upon traditional values combining economic development experiences from countries in the Himalayan region – both East and South Asia. Beyond restructuring our financial system, it calls for reengineering the very values underlying assumptions driving that system. As Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Muhammad Yunus stated, “With all of our economic theories we forget the environment, forget people, forget culture, and destroy anything to make money. This is the inherent fault in economic theory which creates an artificial human being who knows how to make money because maximizing profit is the sole basis of business. But human beings are bigger than just money.”

Himalayan Consensus prioritizes environmental protection as the single most urgent task for all. It promotes multi-ethnic diversity best fostered and preserved through cultural sustainable development economic programs – not just aid – to solve real problems of poverty and income gap inequality, while rejecting economic theories and models that may be constructed around ideology.

Himalayan Consensus seeks to address chronic problems of cyclical poverty not through top-down economic models, but by drawing upon ideal Asian values of compassion, alms giving, and community cohesion and organization. It seeks a middle way between extremes, rejecting both economic and political fundamentalism. Regardless of socialist or capitalist economic tools, the Himalayan Consensus calls for mixing methodologies and disregarding labels, to find solutions both realistic and acceptable to the communities being addressed. Politically, the Consensus draws upon indigenous forms of community expression and participation to create effective mechanisms of representative government relative to each society and culture.

Himalayan Consensus embraces three pillars. First, throw out economic theory and models. Enter the era of no model. Experimentation and exchange of experience can be invaluable. Each country’s experiences will be based on local conditions. Different countries can share experiences about development. For instance, China’s economic experience overturned classic assumptions about “shock therapy.” But while China emphasizes GNP (gross national product) growth, across the Himalayas, Bhutan measures growth in terms of GNH – gross national happiness. Both are equally suited to the unique circumstances prevailing in each country, with no one model for all. There should be an end to the blind application of Washington Consensus economic-module fundamentalism, which often bears no relation to local realities.

Second, the Himalayan Consensus draws its value paradigm from the indigenous ethical values of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, all of which have similar aspirations for equality among humanity, closing the gaps between rich and poor. Himalayan Consensus universal rights include: credit, medical treatment, and respect for the environment to assure humanity’s own sustainable development, including finding peaceful solutions to global conflicts.

Reza Aslan, argues, “A Himalayan Consensus can draw positive commonalities among different cultures. It was not some Hindu in the Himalayas who came up with the clash of civilizations. It was a Westerner who created the clash of civilizations to highlight the advantages of one over the other. This is not scholarship.”

Ian Baker, explorer and author of several books on the Himalayas explained, “Engaged social interaction without violence is a Buddhist, Taoist, Hindu and also Islamic vision. The Himalayan Consensus approach should mean positive social action. Don’t spend time looking for a perfect world. That’s just escaping. Go create it!”

The third pillar is that every country should have the right to develop its own political system. That system should incorporate the nation’s unique ethnic, religious and social groups as it sees fit. Indigenous models of participatory government should be based on the foundations of each country’s local cultural, tribal, historic, political, and economic traditions as relevant. While such ideas may be anathema in Washington, the reality is that forcing a particular model of government on nations having no relevant historic, social, or cultural commonality with the country transferring its system will only lead to ineffective government, political instability, and social-humanitarian disasters.

“It all comes down to politics,” Baker said. “Buddha renounced politics to sit under a tree. It’s time for Buddha to get back into politics, not sit under a tree. Because the trees are all being cut down.”