I have described the gulfs in prosperity between the developed and developing countries, and between the rich and poor within the Third World as obscenities. We could, however, be in process of creating a third offence to human decency which would be almost as obscene. That would be if the two sides in the current quarrel between the two worlds allowed it to escalate so much that they failed to find the necessary compromise, and thus allowed the world to slither into a running, pseudo-ideological struggle in which everyone would suffer but the poor would suffer most of all.

‘Pseudo-ideological’, because a kind of mock battle is now developing between planners and free market advocates, capitalists and socialists. At most the ideology is woolly and the differences are blurred at the edges. More often the whole argument is overlaid with hypocrisy or cynicism, with words not used to mean what they appear to mean. Someone once said unkindly of an Indian intellectual that if he came upon two doors, one marked ‘heaven’ and the other ‘discussions about heaven’, he would choose the latter. The tendency is not confined to India, nor to the Third World.

The hair-splitting and political posturing which go on among the West, the Communist bloc, and the Third World are understandable. It is too easy to become angry, rather than concerned, about world poverty, to see the other man’s faults rather than one’s own, as one of Christ’s Parables observed. The danger in the next few years, and particularly at the World Employment Conference, is that each side will point an accusing finger at the other; that everyone will call on everyone else to play his essential part in reform; and that no one will actually do anything which is inconvenient to his
own interest or country.

When set against the plight of 800 million of the poorest people in the world, such a sham fight is offensive. As Robert McNamara said, most of these people, representing 40 per cent of the Third World population, are trapped in their poverty, hardly surviving on the margin of life, in conditions so degraded by disease, illiteracy, malnutrition and squalor as to deny them the basic human necessities. They are neither contributing significantly to their nations' economic growth nor sharing equitably in their economic progress.

In the past few years, the countries to which these people belong have been the worst hit by the oil crisis and its aftermath. They have poor natural resources, negligible foreign exchange reserves, and now they are damaged not only directly by the increase in the prices of their oil and fertilisers, but by the imported inflation set off by the rise in oil prices. On top of all that, the world prices of many of their commodities have fallen.

This is not the best time to remind the developed world of its duty to the less fortunate. On the heels of a savage inflation, the West has suffered its worst recession since the Great Depression of the thirties, with levels of unemployment which had been considered unthinkable since the adoption of Keynesian economic policies after the war. But it is well, throughout the tit-for-tat debate in which industrial and developing countries indulge, to remember how comparatively well off the average citizen of a developed country is.

Compared with the poorest of his fellow human beings, his intake of calories is 40 per cent greater, his literacy rate four times higher, the mortality rate of his children 90 per cent lower, and his own life expectancy 50 per cent greater. With those figures in mind, aid ought not to be regarded as an optional extra to be afforded when the rich world is feeling affluent, and abandoned when we are having a harder time.

What makes it more difficult, however, to persuade ordinary people, and therefore decision takers, in the West that they must do more to help the Third World is their doubts about the internal structures of those societies. It is no service to the cause of mutual understanding to dodge this