

Eradication of Poverty: a Civil Society Perspective 2011

Introduction

The eradication of poverty has proven to be an elusive goal despite it being central to the international development agenda. Recent studies, in particular the DESA “Rethinking Poverty” report, suggest that conventional approaches are not working¹. The dominant development model has not created a socially just world; rather it has put at risk a sustainable future by human-induced emissions of greenhouse gases and overuse of non-renewable resources and has favoured the wealthy over those forced to live in poverty. It will take a shared ethical and social commitment to redirect our culture and economy toward a sustainable future. The current crises throw into bold relief a model of development that is blind to environmental and human rights issues and confuses economic growth alone with progress.

We strongly endorse the call to rethink and refocus our efforts to eradicate poverty through policies and programmes at all levels that are equitable, integrated and that address the systemic roots of inequality.

Multidimensional poverty

Poverty is a complex human reality. Poverty is not the condition of a fixed group of people; everyone is at risk of experiencing poverty at some point in their lives. Lack of income by itself can never adequately measure or explain poverty. Because it is multi-dimensional, poverty encompasses all aspects of human life. Such factors as geography, a vulnerable environment, the limitations that age, disability or illness impose, all contribute to the experience of poverty. Structural limitations such as social exclusion, lack of access to the tools and the absence of the necessary conditions that enable a person to participate in social, economic and political life, characterize extreme poverty which leaves people marginalized in their own society. The powerlessness flowing from these causes, damages a person’s spirit and capacity to relate with others.

The new indices proposed in the 2010 Human Development Report - the Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index, the Gender Inequality Index and the Multidimensional Poverty Index – expand our current understanding of poverty and offer us some tools to measure it.²

Cumulative impact of multiple crises

The recent crises: climate, financial, economic, food and energy, have culminated in increasing levels of poverty in many areas of the world. Massive investment, both consistent and long term, is

¹ *Rethinking Poverty: Report on the World Social Situation 2010* (United Nations, 2009). Also available at <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/rwss/docs/2010/fullreport.pdf>

² *The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human Development* (UNDP Human Development Report, 2010)

called for in researching, developing and making technologies available to mitigate and adapt to the changes we are facing. Unwavering political will is needed if we are not to squander the progress already made in addressing poverty.

The Climate crisis is increasingly recognized as a cross-cutting issue which exacerbates poverty and threatens the achievement of the MDGs as a whole. Although it is a global phenomenon, its negative impacts are more severely felt in poor countries and by people living in poverty.³ To name one example: agriculture and fisheries in climate sensitive areas can suffer drastic economic effects from extreme variations of temperatures. This in turn puts at risk the provision of basic services to people living in poverty.

The global financial and economic crisis has strained some governments' ability to meet the social, educational and health needs of their citizens. Governments require the policy and fiscal space to allocate resources according to the priorities of their development plans. All illegitimate and odious debt and the debts of the poorest countries should be cancelled. We support the establishment of a sovereign debt workout mechanism under UN auspices to ensure equitable arbitration of debt that is enforceable.⁴

The food and energy crises have had a direct negative impact on people living in poverty, particularly small scale farmers, among whom women farmers predominate. Croplands that have traditionally met the nutrition needs of rural communities have been converted to the production of biofuels and other cash crops.

Because these crises present challenges that are closely linked, the global community has a window of opportunity to address them in a unified and holistic way.

This is highlighted in the Secretary General's words in Cancún,⁵ "I am deeply concerned that our efforts have been insufficient ... that despite the evidence ... and many years of negotiation ... we are still not rising to the challenge. Now, more than ever, we need to connect the dots between climate... poverty ... energy ... food ... water".

Addressing the root causes of poverty

A fundamental shift from the dominant development model

Efforts to tackle the multiple crises have uncovered some basic deficiencies in the current model of global partnership for development. Key among these deficits are the absence of a human rights framework and the subordination of social and ecological needs to the demands of economic growth.

³ Synthesis Report of the Third Assessment Report of the IPCC (2001) cited in *Rethinking Poverty: Report on the World Social Situation 2010* (United Nations, 2009, p.4).

⁴ African Forum and Network on Debt and Development, "Call for Establishment of a Fair and Transparent Arbitration Mechanism on Debt." *Policy Brief No.1*, 2002.

⁵ *UN News*, 8 December 2010.

“The norms and values embedded in the Millennium Declaration and international human rights instruments must continue to provide the foundation for engagement, in particular the key human rights principles of non-discrimination, meaningful participation and accountability”⁶ If policies and programmes to eradicate poverty are to be effective, the active involvement, as essential partners, of people living in poverty is crucial. Their efforts must be recognized and actively supported by government policy makers.

Basic reform of the international financial architecture

The dominant economic system based on an unregulated free market has caused significant negative economic and environmental consequences. The Bretton Woods institutions are not serving the needs of the global community. A growing consensus indicates that global imbalances in savings and consumption must be addressed. It is urgent that the architecture for international aid and global trade agreements be re-examined.⁷ The wisdom of maintaining a single currency as the major reserve currency ought to be closely examined in reforming international financial architecture.

An integrated approach to poverty eradication will lack credibility if the issue of military spending is not addressed. This calls for a revolutionary change of attitude by government decision makers to fund human rights-based development over war. Secretary-General Ban’s recent comments to youth suggest the difference such a change would make to the task of poverty eradication,⁸ “Every year, the world spends \$1.4 trillion dollars on weapons. With a fraction of that we could cut poverty, fund schools, provide health care, and protect the environment. One year of global military spending could pay the UN's budget for 732 years”.

Key leverage points for addressing poverty

Education

Wide consensus exists that education is a critical tool in poverty eradication. Each state must provide the education needed by its citizens to address the moral, social, cultural, spiritual, political and economic dimensions of poverty. Universal access to primary education is the starting point. Lifelong education that provides skills and increases the potential for meaningful employment, responsible citizenship and successful social integration in a changing world is essential.

If education for all is to succeed as a tool of transformation to bridge the inequality gap, states must allocate sufficient budgetary resources to make this possible. Classrooms without books or teachers without sufficient training limit the effectiveness of a national education policy. Other barriers such

⁶ *Keeping the promise: united to achieve the Millennium Development Goals*. Draft resolution to the high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly, by the General Assembly at its 64th session. New York, September 2010, p.28.

⁷ “The Global Economic Crisis after One Year: Is a New Paradigm for Recovery in Developing Countries Emerging?” *Policy Brief UNU Number 2*, 2009.

⁸ Secretary-General's remarks to Security Council "informal informal" Youth Session, New York, 21 December 2010.

as lack of access to clean water and basic sanitation have consequences not only for health, but for education too.

Gender equity

In many countries of the world legal, economic and political rights enjoyed by men are often denied to women. Furthermore, poverty and the consequences of climate change exacerbate already existing gender inequalities. Discrimination and violence against women and girls is a daily occurrence. Many women, particularly rural and older women, are denied the right to inherit property and own land, preventing them from enjoying economic independence and security. Legal empowerment of people living in poverty is especially urgent for women.

Poverty eradication begins with the legal registration of all births and extends to implementing women's legal rights to land ownership and inheritance. Women's access to human rights and social justice empowers and ensures them a means of livelihood, income and freedom from discrimination and violence. Only when women and men, supported by gender sensitive legislation, work together to change social customs and cultural practices that discriminate and condone violence against women and girls, will gender equity be achieved.

Investment in agriculture

Seventy percent of the world's poorest live in rural areas. Some 2 billion farmers, the majority of whom are women, engage in small-scale agriculture which feeds the majority of the world's population. Investment in this sector has decreased by almost 20% in recent years. An ambitious increase in investment in small-scale agriculture is urgently needed. This would also help to slow the rate of departure from the land for the city.

Government policy is a major determinant in moving towards solutions. If a state is to improve its potential for development through a viable agricultural sector, the first place to look is to the farmer in rural communities. Examples from such countries as Malawi, Tanzania and Rwanda show how policies that make it easier for small farmers to obtain seeds and fertilizers produced greater harvests, addressed food insecurity and led to impressive economic growth.

Governments should facilitate dialogue between small farmers, scientists, agribusiness and NGOs to explore sustainable agricultural practices to improve productivity while restoring the soil and the natural environment. Developing equitable partnerships between small farmers and others in the supply chain would benefit all.

Productive employment

Jobless growth based on the single economic bottom line is unacceptable. Progress must be measured by the triple bottom line: social, environmental and economic benefits. To promote full employment and decent work for all, appropriate national policies must insure the protection of labour rights of all workers in both the formal and informal sector, including domestic and small-farm workers, especially women. A universal social protection floor to ensure services that respond

to the basic needs of workers and their families, including those who work in the informal sector or who are unable to work, is essential for all workers, especially in times of crises.⁹

Social Inclusion

Well-being, material and non-material, depends on the socio-political structure in which people live. People living in poverty often experience a sense of powerlessness because of discrimination, lack of access, lack of representation and lack of voice. Active involvement of these men and women, at all levels, in planning and implementing development strategies has proven effective in poverty reduction and sustainable care of the environment. Vigorous effort is needed to transform structures of exclusion and create new social norms more conducive to social inclusion. We applaud those countries that have already recognized that social inclusion is essential to a more equal society and have created ministries of social inclusion.

Best Practices

Our experience with community involvement has shown us that the most effective programmes focused on poverty eradication are characterized by the following elements:

- Multiple benefits for the whole community
- Community-based assessment, planning, execution and evaluation
- Participation of those most directly affected by the programme or policy
- Design and implementation is able to be replicated
- The programme or practice is sustainable.

Attached to this document is a list of examples of good practices that demonstrate the recommended elements that have proved successful.

Conclusion

There is no one right way to reduce poverty. Though research by UNRISD¹⁰ indicates that countries that have successfully reduced poverty have focused on state-directed strategies linking economic development goals with active social policies so that they reinforce rather than compete with each other, countries must be allowed the policy space to develop different models of development appropriate to their situation. Such models should take into account local aspects of food security and livelihoods, land reform, cultural rights, gender equity, social policy and participatory democracy as key ingredients.

A necessary key to success in turning back the scourge of poverty, however, is governance that is transparent and open to scrutiny and a justice system that is fair, restorative and equally available to all. The energetic involvement of governments is essential. So also, involvement of civil society

⁹ ILO-UN social protection floor initiative: the role of social security in crisis response and recovery, and beyond. June 2010.
http://www.ilocarib.org.tt/portal/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1387&Itemid=368

¹⁰ "Combating Poverty and Inequality", UNRISD Research and Policy Brief 10, September, 2010

and the local community is not optional, but an essential ingredient in the struggle to overcome extreme poverty and imagine a new more civilized and humane world.

It is within our power to eradicate poverty if we are willing to address the root causes of poverty and inequality. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, based on the inherent dignity of the human person, is a firm foundation on which to construct a life free from poverty for all people.

The UN Human Rights Council's "Draft Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights"¹¹ which highlights the indivisibility and interdependence of cultural, civic, social, political and economic rights of all people and names discrimination and stigmatization as roots of inequity, is also integral to the way forward as are the three pillars of Copenhagen: social inclusion, decent work and full employment, along with the eradication of poverty.

¹¹ A/HRC/2/2 *Report of the sub-commission on the promotion and protection of human rights on its 58th session*, p. 29. UN Geneva, September 2009, United Nations, and A/HRC/15/41 *Report of the independent expert on the question of human rights and extreme poverty, Magdalena Sepulveda Carmon, on the draft guiding principles on extreme poverty and human rights*, August 2010, United Nations.