



# World Chronicle

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**GUEST:** Arjun Sengupta  
Independent Expert  
on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights

**JOURNALISTS:** Susie Salmond, BBC

Ricardo Alday, Notimex

**MODERATOR:** Tony Jenkins

## **Is Poverty a Violation of Human Rights?**

Poverty has been a part of human society since the beginning of time. But does it need to be a part of humanity's future? Today, some experts say, the international community finally has the technical, economic and social resources to abolish extreme poverty worldwide.

Does the capacity to eliminate poverty imply a moral obligation to do so? Should the eradication of poverty be an issue of law rather than of ethics? In what ways can freedom from extreme poverty be understood as a fundamental human right? Can poverty really be abolished in the 21st century, the way slavery was in the 19th?

These are some of the questions discussed in this edition of World Chronicle with Professor Arjun Sengupta, Independent Expert on Extreme Poverty to the UN Commission for Human Rights.

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**ANNOUNCER:** From the United Nations in New York, an interview programme on major global issues. This is **World Chronicle**. And here is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

**JENKINS:** Hello, I'm Tony Jenkins. How much is poverty like slavery? Is freedom from extreme poverty a fundamental human right? Should the 21<sup>st</sup> century become the era in which poverty is abolished, the way slavery was in 19th? These are some of the questions raised by the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva through the work of its Independent Expert on Extreme Poverty, Arjun Sengupta, who is our guest today. Professor Sengupta, welcome to World Chronicle. Poverty has been part of the human social condition since the beginning of time, why should we suddenly focus on it today?

**SENGUPTA:** For a very simple reason, that today we know how to abolish poverty. Today the world community has enough resources, technical, economic and social resources by which poverty can be abolished. This was not true...even say thirty years back - we could not have said that it can be abolished immediately but today we can say that.

**JENKINS:** Alright we have the resources for doing it, the question is...do we have the obligation? I think we'll be getting into that with some of the other panelists. We're joined today by Susie Salmond of the BBC...and Ricardo Alday of Notimex. Ricardo, why don't you jump in.

**ALDAY:** Mr. Sengupta, it seems like a pretty obvious issue ending poverty, abolishing poverty. It's like an easy undisputable target. Why is it that it's so difficult? Why is there no consensus about the subject?

**SENGUPTA:** Well it's a pity that there's no consensus. Part of it is because people don't quite understand the implications of it. But it's also a part that requires a kind of obligation as Tony pointed out, which are the governments - the duty bearers, who are quite often the corporations, other agencies who will have to take upon themselves. And these obligations must trump over other objectives, other social policies - this is the human rights language. Once you accept human rights the obligations of human rights get the top priority to fulfill.

**ALDAY:** Is it really an obligation? Some might argue that why should a particular side be responsible for the other in this particular context?

**SENGUPTA:** Well this is the beauty of the human rights language. Human rights are fundamental objectives, a constitution for national governments and the international community - these are the binding principles. And once you recognize

these are the human rights, every agency in the international community has accepted through that recognition, that these are the obligations there. Now it is true that extreme poverty or poverty as such, has not been recognized as human rights. But extreme poverty creates conditions and everybody agrees, it is a serious degradation of human dignity - but human rights are violated. So that link has to be established, that can be done very clearly in every particular case and once that is accepted, then if you have accepted human rights, then you have accepted the obligation to do everything that is within your means to fulfill those human rights and extreme poverty is one of those obligations...eradication of that.

**JENKINS:** Susie.

**SALMOND:** You talked about duty bearers, about the fact that poverty is a violation of human rights and furthermore, you say that with correct political will there will be very little poverty today. But if all these things are true, arguably as you are saying, then the actual obligation is put on the developed wealthy nations. And also the Universal Declaration of Human Rights suggests that that is so as well. Who bears what responsibility towards solving the problem?

**SENGUPTA:** Yes, the first responsibility – as they call it - the primary duty holder – is the state of the region that the individual belongs. But it so happens - particularly in today's globalizing world and we're talking about today – the states maneuverability, flexibility of policies, have been very much limited and they can not do things without the cooperation of the international community. They can not have extended policies, they can not engage in expenditure, they can not engage in fiscal deficit, everything will go against their well being. So they need to be helped. Now this is why international cooperation becomes an obligation and this is nothing new. The UN Charter has given it - categorically in Article 55 and 56 - that all nations have taken the pledge that they would help every other nation to realize their human rights.

**JENKINS:** I'm not sure if I necessarily agree with you that... that you say the first obligation is on the state in which the poor people live themselves. And then you say but those states can't do anything about it by themselves, they need international help - I'm not entirely convinced of that. I recently returned from Liberia, a nation with just 2.9 million people which has gold, diamonds, oil, vast hydroelectric potential, fisheries, tourism, and 85 percent of the

arable land lies fallow. They could pull four crops of rice out of the ground every year if they wanted to, and the reason that everybody in that country is not extremely wealthy is not because the international community has let them down, but because they've had dictators for the last twenty five years and civil war for the last fourteen years. You can say they brought it upon themselves, and there are many nations I can give that example to. Why is it our responsibility in the rich world to fix the problems they've brought on themselves?

**SENGUPTA:** The first point you talked about – Liberia - is a very good example. They have resources, but they're ruled by a regime which have other objectives.

**JENKINS:** They're a kleptocracy.

**SENGUPTA:** Well...o.k. I accept that you see. But I would say...when I say that the international community is also responsible to cooperate, it doesn't mean every country has the same need of international cooperation. For example, in India, probably you can say that in the case of India, most of the problems of poverty can be resolved by the Indian government. But the only problem is that if the Indian government tries to do that, there would be problems of financial crisis, those crises would require some kind of international understanding of flows, etc... on a system where everything depends on everything else. But Tanzania for example, they can not do anything by themselves. They can not sell their cotton because of the international prices. They can not do anything without international assistance, so the nature of cooperation would be different in the different countries. In the case of Liberia, since you mentioned Liberia, I would say that the first duty of the international community is to see that that kind of regime does not get all the support from the international community. I mean the nature of international cooperation would be different. I have no difference with you Tony on that point, and I should say that the state is the primarily responsible, if the state doesn't do that - then of course, the international community can say that you are not doing anything. But if the state is trying to do that – but it cannot help, then you need to cooperate. The international obligation for cooperation is clearly specified, it is a new form of humanitarian intervention. No war, no active intervention, but promote and help the other country to do what you think they should do to recognize their rights.

**SALMOND:** You brought up the point about cotton and globalization of trade. I was up in Uganda, where a farmer there would get a hundred Ugandan shillings let's say for a kilo of cotton which is ten cents. Now that China has joined the World Trade Organization, this means that obviously cotton prices are much cheaper, a Ugandan farmer cannot compete. Do you

feel that this globalization of trade is having a substantial effect on poverty? And if so, how are we going to even out this playing field?

**SENGUPTA:** This is a very good point. In many countries, the first impact of globalization may be that people would lose their jobs, they would become poor. But the hope of globalization is that in the second stage, those countries would recover and will find better ways of using their resources. So in the case of globalization, I'm not saying that everything is going to go against the poor people, but we need a mechanism to convert the globalization into something that is consistent with human rights, consistent with the poor peoples fate, poor peoples dignity.

**ALDAY:** Do you have any ideas for such a mechanism?

**SENGUPTA:** Yes,

**ALDAY:** How does it work?

**SENGUPTA:** This is the reason I say that today we can do that. You've read Jeffrey Sachs report, it clearly shows that it is possible to do that in every step; you can create the right kind of job, you can create the right kind of production, you can create the right kinds of distribution. These are now...as economists, we know how to do it. So it is basically the political system which is actually preventing it.

**ALDAY:** So it's just a matter of political will, so to speak.

**SENGUPTA:** Yes but political will is not enough. Political will is always explained by groups, their fight, their dominance group versus their non dominant group, the power position and the international community. Political will is not something that comes from the heaven it emerges from the dynamics of the social equation.

**JENKINS:** You know, I think I would be remiss if I didn't point out that the context of this... which is that you've actually prepared your report for the Human Rights Commission in Geneva, which as you know, has come under a great deal of criticism especially from the United States, the Western States. They say that the Commission is dominated by countries which have nothing to say to the rest of the world about human rights. They include some of the world's worst human rights abusers. Just recently Zimbabwe joined the Commission, Zimbabwe represses its political opposition, has shut down the free press, beats up its opponents, etc., etc. Some might say that this is an effort by the Human Rights Commission to – if you like - poke the richer, wealthier countries in the eye and say, stop criticizing us for our

human rights, how about you guys? You're not taking care of the most basic human right which is poverty. What's your response to that?

**SENGUPTA:** You can do exactly the same thing. First of all, your first point is too easy to...you know, this is not only Zimbabwe. Many countries...I can immediately point out are doing it. They're members of the Commission, they're members of the United Nations...this is how the world community has actually developed. But the point...

**JENKINS:** Let me just say...of course as you know, Kofi Annan has also said that the Human Rights Commission needs revising but precisely for this reason. It's not just Zimbabwe - it's Libya, it's Cuba, it's a number of states that have very bad human rights problems at home.

**SENGPUTA:** The Zimbabwean Minister says that the United States also has the same kind of bad policy. But I don't want to get into what Kofi Annan's proposals are because that has to be debated very carefully. But what I'm saying to your first point... is it a method of fingering the industrial countries? It's just the other way around. The industrial countries can say that look, if you have really signed all these covenants you have accepted human rights, to do something for the human rights of your country including poverty eradication. The only thing they would have to add – that if you do something we are here fully prepared to help you to the hilt. So it is the other way around also. I believe that this has a tremendous potential if the international community comes and tell this government you must do something and if you do something then we are going to help you. And why aren't you doing something? Exactly the same way, because the world is no longer divided between developing and developed countries. It is divided between those who believe in human rights, they are willing to implement human rights, and those who do not believe in human rights. And this happens to be across the country, it's not in one country only.

**SALMOND:** Mr. Sengupta, how do you propose convincing though, these wealthy nations that they do have a political will, to actually have an obligation to feed, to house, to help these people who have nothing, especially since the G7 met at the beginning of this year and in fact it was the US who had opposed doubling aid donations from 50 billion to 100 billion dollars. In this light, how can you convince these nations?

**SENGUPTA:** Well, I don't know if I can convince them but I don't see reasons why they would be opposed to it. Assuming that they signed or accepted this human rights document of treaties in good faith - which I believe it's a democratic world, they have done that – I don't see

why they should be opposed to it. You see, there is one reason why they may be opposed by the powers that may be, as I have been told by my American friends in the Commission, that if we're talking about the right to housing, then I am not worried about what is happening in India. I'm worried about what would happen to New York. This is their...and that is their major point. They have to consider the right to help, that's a very major thing going on here. So we may have to follow a different tact, but let us accept for the poorest countries - and this is why extreme poverty becomes important – let us accept for the poorest countries, the people who are living in extreme poverty, we shall accept the removal of that as a human rights obligation.

**JENKINS:** Let me just say that this is World Chronicle and we're talking about the implications of defining extreme poverty as a human rights violation. Our guest is Arjun Sengupta, the UN Human Rights Commission Independent Expert on this subject. We'll be right back after this.

**POVERTY PSA BEGINS:**

(A hand makes a clicking sound 6x's)

**MALE NARRATION:** A child dies completely unnecessarily

(A hand makes a click sound)

**MALE NARRATION:** As a result of extreme poverty

(A hand makes a clicking sound)

**MALE NARRATION:** Every three seconds.

(A hand makes a clicking sound 4x's)

**NARRATION:** There we go...

(A hand makes a clicking sound)

**NARRATION:** That's another one,

(A hand makes a clicking sound)

**MALE NARRATION:** Somebody's daughter,

(A hand makes a clicking sound)

**MALE NARRATION:** Somebody's son, the thing is...

(A hand makes a clicking sound)

**MALE NARRATION:** All these deaths are avoidable.

(A hand makes a clicking sound 3x's).

**GRAPHIC OUT:** Make Poverty History...becomes Make History 2005.

**POVERTY PSA ENDS:**

**JENKINS:** Very graphic, but it seems to me in some ways that that public service announcement...what it does is it beats what you might call the old UN drum, which is that fighting poverty is a moral obligation. It seems to me you're saying something slightly different...you're saying it's a legal obligation. But even that I wonder...if that's the right tact to take. After all you're appearing to stretch the UN's legal authority at a time when its largest stakeholder – the United States - is already complaining that the United Nations is over reaching. And it seems to me that one of the ways that Kofi Annan and those who would reform the United Nations have tried to fight back against that, is to say...actually fighting poverty is not just a moral obligation... it's for your own security. Isn't that a more useful way of tackling this? Rather than trying to persuade everybody that they have a legal obligation?

**SENGUPTA:** Well I mean there are different methods of persuasion. And I am not at all worried about the US position because it is a democracy. And if we can't explain why it is happening there, I'm quite sure at some point in time this government will respond to that popular pressure. But the question whether it is a legal obligation or moral obligation is a tricky one. Because if you have a legal obligation, then there is an implication of this, that this removal of that, or reversal of that particular problem gets top priority. Because if you don't do that you are responsible, you are a violator. You see the difference between the language of violations now and the language of violations earlier is that we don't think that it is necessary to prove that you have caused it. What is sufficient is that if you could prevent it - you're not doing it. It is complicity, the French have actually put this thing in a complete...if you could stop it, you did not do it; if you find the people are being killed, you are not that thing; you are guilty of complicity.

**ALDAY:** Now that you mentioned language, is there really a consensus of what is poverty? What is extreme poverty? Because that seems to me part of the problem. We've seen this kind of disagreements, blocking issues from terrorism to many other issues. Where do we stand on poverty?

**SENGUPTA:** Fortunately, on poverty, I don't think there is much disagreement. There can be a disagreement whether it should be one dollar per day or two dollars per day. But people generally accept that poverty means extreme indignity, in fact, what I have done is to expand it from income poverty to what we call human development poverty. You see there are many countries, even in the United States, where schoolchildren don't even know how to read or write. So there is a lack of education, a lack of health, some basic means, lack of

shelter...they also become people whom we're discussing are suffering from indignity, basic indignity. Add to that, this is the French idea – exclusion, social exclusion. People who are marginalized, people who are vulnerable, they are there for generations. Your Hispanics, your Blacks, your Indians...I mean not all of them but a part of them are socially excluded. Similarly in the European Union there's a major move against exclusion. So I would say that I can identify the target population and I don't think there would be much disagreement; because the European Union has accepted certain things, the American society has accepted certain things and one dollar per day is a universally accepted idea.

**ALDAY:** But in terms of effectiveness, wouldn't it be easier to achieve concrete results to have an agreed definition of what does it means to be poor?

**SENGUPTA:** I agree with you, there should be an agreement that provides a definition which I think is the most easily acceptable. But international discourse, one doesn't agree every time it's everybody else.

**JENKINS:** Just to clarify. When you say...your understanding is that it should be set at...when somebody's living on one dollar a day or two dollars a day is what you're saying? That's your definition.

**SENGUPTA:** Plus, plus, I've given the composite definition, below one dollar a day plus, extreme human development degradation; no education, no health, no shelter, plus social exclusion.

**JENKINS:** Just to quickly follow-up on that...

**SENGUPTA:** Yes.

**JENKINS:** Here we are in the United States, in this country millions of people go to bed every night without any food, without eating, millions of people sleep out in the streets. Would you say that this country, which is founded on the notion that everybody has the right to the pursuit of happiness, that has a public education system, that has food banks, etc., etc., that it's violating its legal obligation to those people?

**SENGUPTA:** That's exactly the point. Because if the government realized this, then the government could do something to change this, it is possible to remove these poverties in the United States - it doesn't take much time. It is just that the political power must accept that we have to provide the right to health, we have to provide the right to shelter. Not to everybody but to the poorest of their people.

**SALMUND:** But if they're not helping violations of rights within their own back garden, why would they necessarily want to do so in the international community?

**SENGUPTA:** The way we have defined...if they accept it, they will have to do that for their own people also. As I said from the very beginning, that this is not a problem of developing and developed countries, it's the problem of the poor - this is the human rights question. Human rights is... I'm concerned with the violation of human rights of anybody living anywhere in the world. This is the first definition of international human rights, so this distinction between Tanzania, India and the United States acted upon doesn't matter. It's a question of do the people have those rights? Do they suffer from basic indignity? And if they do - in Europe, in the streets of Harlem or Belgium or in the United States and in India, it's equally a violation of human rights. And we should be able to say something for them.

**JENKINS:** You know, you've referred to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights a few times and in fact, if you look at it carefully you will see that in reality you're not really saying anything new. Fifty-seven years ago, the General Assembly of the United Nations signed a compact which essentially said a lot of what you're saying. It says that no one should be held in slavery or servitude; it said that...let me quote some of these...everybody has the rights to just and favourable remuneration; everyone has the right to work; everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well being for himself and his family including food, clothing, medical care; necessary social services; the right to security; everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedom set forth in this declaration can be fully realized. The entire world community signed on to these rights more than a half a century ago, are you suggesting that the international community has ignored the commitments it has made and that it's time it became conscious of them again and work on them in the same way as the international community reached a tipping point on the issue of slavery? Because you did mention the comparison to slavery...

**SENGUPTA:** You see I'm not saying that they have ignored it. The human rights movement has achieved a hell of a lot of things. This 1948 declaration was there, first quarter century - twenty-five years after that, the international community was able to abolish apartheid and colonization. These two main human rights violations were abolished in the first twenty-five years. The next twenty-five years you have an end of totalitarian regimes, and what we hope in another twenty five years - this is the first quarter of the twenty-first century - we should be able to abolish poverty. And the basic principles - I'm glad that you pointed this out - in 1948 the international community accepted this of course, that was the Universal Declaration. So they, the American and other powers that be, said this was not a treaty. By 1966, it became

a treaty, so the obligations were accepted but they were not implemented. One of the reasons why they were not implemented besides political will was that it takes a gradual progressive realization. The resource problems, the technological problems, political, constitutional problems - today we have gotten over that. At least for the removal of poverty, at least for these Millennium Development Goals which are the first steps towards that particular objective - we can achieve them, and therefore our issue is that if we can achieve them today, you have accepted the principle of a half a century back. Let us now resolve that we shall abolish it. This is one point I want to stress again, I want to put it not as a political agenda but as a human right agenda. Because the politics of this you know, the Millennium Development Goals puts it in the political agenda but that is where I think there is a gap. Because if I mention it and accept it as a human rights agenda, then it gets the overwhelming priority. No government... Indian government you can not allow the Indian government to spend money on arms and all that, until they have actually abolished poverty.

**JENKINS:** We don't have much time. I just want to clarify this last point. Why do you make the comparison to slavery? In what way is that useful?

**SENGUPTA:** One main point to slavery is the worst denial to human dignity. We put forward poverty is also similarly the worst denial of human dignity. In the case of slavery, the violators were clearly identified, they were directly responsible. In the case of poverty, I'm not saying that you are directly responsible, the American's are directly responsible, the responsibility comes in a secondary way. That you can do something to remove it you're still not doing it, this is the whole human rights obligation and continuum theory of the perfect and imperfect obligation. Every agency has an obligation to do what it can do. And they say the world has now come to that position.

**JENKINS:** Well fortunately for you, you are not the only person to be saying that this should be the next top priority of the international community. Tony Blair in Britain is saying it and Kofi Annan is trying to get the international community to accept it at the end of this year at the next meeting of the General Assembly. But obviously you are doing a lot to help. Professor Arjun Sengupta, that's all the time we have today. Thank you very much for joining us. Our guest today was Professor Arjun Sengupta, he was interviewed by Susie Salmund of the BBC and Ricardo Alday of Notimex. I'm Tony Jenkins thank you for joining us we invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

**ANNOUNCER:** Electronic transcripts of this programme may be obtained free of charge by contacting World Chronicle at the address on your screen:

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