

The End to Poverty: A Human Right
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Imagine if you will, a tree, a tree of life. This tree has many branches – some are so low that they almost scrape the ground and others are so high that looking at the branches from the bottom-up they seem to touch the sky. This is a very full tree, it holds about 6.5 billion people, but the sun does not touch each branch in the same way. The bottom-most branches are prey to disease coming from the ground and from the debris of the branches above. And because they are so close to the ground, the people living on the lowest branches are often victims of flood or drought. These low-lying branches represent the over one billion people around the world who are the poorest of the poor, living on less than one dollar a day. They live in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and parts of Europe and Central Asia. In Sub-Saharan Africa, more than 15 of every 100 children die before the age of five. Around the world, it is estimated that over 21,000 people a day, or 8 million people a year, die from poverty-related causes – too little food, too much or too little water, disease or suffering.

Another 1.5 billion persons live on branches slightly above the lowest branches. They are more likely to live through their daily struggles of survival but are vulnerable to chronic suffering because they lack basic amenities such as safe drinking water, sanitation, basic health care and medicines, adequate nutrition and shelter. These people live in cities and in the countryside. They work in fields and factories. They have little or no education and few skills. They live on between \$1 and \$2 per day.

Today 40 percent of the world's population lives on less than \$2 per day.

As we continue to climb up the tree we find branches that sprawl in every direction. These middle-income countries have branches that twist around the lower and higher branches. Many of these countries are in Latin America, the Caribbean, North Africa and South Asia. They are more diversified and integrated with the world economy but are also subject to greater economic volatility and poverty. In Egypt, Thailand, and Ecuador, one out of every 3 persons live on less than \$2/day, and in China, it is nearly one out of every 2 persons. In countries transitioning into free markets and democracies, such as Bulgaria, nearly one out every three persons lives on less than \$4 per day. Throughout Latin America only 60% of the population is enrolled in secondary education, and one in ten adults is illiterate; the infant mortality is five times the higher than in Europe. Despite the stronger capacity of these middle income countries, the daily battles with high unemployment, wide-spread discrimination and powerlessness, create environments in which poverty thrives and progress is threatened.

Only one-sixth of the world's population lives at the very top branches. The "rich" living on the highest branches don't need to worry about being hungry or access to health care. The folks on these branches are well-educated and highly skilled. But residents of the highest branches **do need** to be concerned about those on the lower branches because we all occupy the same tree.

Most of the affluent persons living on the highest branches are from rich countries. Since 1990 however, tens of millions of high-income persons are now coming from middle-income countries. They live in cities such as Shanghai, Sao Paulo and Mexico City. And we also know that millions of people living in rich countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Portugal, and Australia, live impoverished lives.

Within national borders and throughout the world, our branches intertwine more than ever before. We call this globalization. And like most things in life, it comes with good and bad.

The fact that economic growth is spreading beyond the rich countries is good news. Even better news is that extreme poverty is decreasing. The number of people living on less than \$1 a day dropped by nearly a quarter of a billion – that's over 200 million people – since 1990. The main reason for the decline is the sustained economic growth in China and India, the two most populous countries in the world. But in sub-Saharan Africa, the average income of those living below \$1 per day – has declined further. The lack of economic opportunities, agricultural stagnation, the spread of diseases such as HIV/AIDS and malaria, and armed conflicts, have extracted a harsh toll on the population.

So while we move closer toward the UN Millennium Goal of halving the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015, it is clear that much more needs to be done. While, we, as Americans are fond of believing that our nation's wealth is all due to our hard work – it is only part of the story. We, like other rich countries, have been blessed by the vastness of our natural resources such as thousands of miles of coastlines, good ports, navigable rivers and rich soils. But for countries who are land-locked, overcome by mountainous regions, or have land in which little grows, it is difficult to imagine that hard work alone would be enough to lift millions out of poverty. The extreme poverty in these regions of the world runs very deep and those living there are trapped by the land and the lack of resources. The soil is often depleted of nutrients because of prolonged droughts and associated diseases. The lack of paved roads, power generators and irrigation channels isolate them further. The people in these areas are hungry, vulnerable to disease, and have few skills, including literacy. All their energies go toward survival.

The United States, as other rich countries, has also been blessed with long reigns of peace. This is not the case in many of the poorest countries. About 60% of the poorest countries experienced civil conflict since 1990 and in most cases the conflict erupted after a period of economic stagnation and regression. In Rwanda, for example, average consumption per capita fell by more than 12% directly before the genocide occurred. From 1994 to 2003, 13 million persons died from large scale conflicts. Over 12 million of these persons lived in sub-Saharan Africa, Western Asia and Southern Asia. Poverty, or the struggle over scarce resources, makes war an attractive option.

We must find ways too to overcome the cynicism of the rich and poor that we can eradicate poverty. People in poor countries who have been betrayed by neighbors, family and donors will not risk and sacrifice even more, they will not allow themselves to dream of better lives – unless the commitment to help is strong and deep. It is the obligation of rich countries to make this commitment by moving beyond their often repeated but undelivered promises to give more. Rich countries must stop focusing on the faults of the poor and blaming corrupt leadership for poverty. Poverty is sustained by much more than corruption.

We have learned that eradicating extreme poverty is possible and that it takes more than money. Some believe that if we doubled spending on these efforts, poverty could be eliminated for the year. Many countries don't want to increase spending because they are concerned that aid is becoming an addiction among poor countries.

We need to help in ways that will not make poor countries dependent on aid but in ways that will empower them and grow their own economies. This strategy is embodied by those who see poverty as a human rights issue. A human rights approach to poverty argues that the causes of poverty are multidimensional and efforts to eradicate poverty must integrate economic, social, political and civil rights. Key to this approach is the empowerment of a nation's people to participate fully, equally and responsibly in the decision-making and implementation of policies that will bring and sustain prosperity. The human rights approach to poverty:

- Is about more than feeding the poor, it is teaching the poor how to grow their own food by learning how to replenish their own soil.
- It is ensuring that the poor understand why education is a defense against poverty and assisting them in their efforts to build universal and strong education systems in their countries.
- It is about teaching the poor how to care for their health and making sure they have access to the tools needed to keep them healthy.
- It is about ushering in legal tools and institutions – laws and the judiciary – as a means to secure freedoms and human development
- A human rights approach teaches the poor that they not only have a right to a better life, it teaches the poor that they have a responsibility to advocate for one.

The human rights approach to poverty is not new but it is becoming more popular. The normative framework for human rights, codified in the UN's 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), is the guide for policy making on poverty reduction. Subsequent to the Declaration of Human Rights other conventions have been passed by the United Nations to protect and promote human rights of vulnerable groups. All countries have ratified at least one of the major human rights conventions and 80 percent have ratified four or more.

Increasingly, different arms of the United Nations and related organizations are adopting a human rights strategy to poverty reduction. For example, UNDP, the UN's global development network, is working to capture the multi-dimensional nature of poverty in its development of the Human Development Index, the Gender-related Development Index, and the Human Poverty Index. These efforts have opened up avenues for more holistic approaches to poverty reduction strategies and monitoring. The elimination of poverty is addressed as a basic entitlement and a human right – not merely as an act of charity. Within this framework, development, trade and investment are evaluated against their impact on human rights.

There are signs that these strategies are yielding good results for most countries. On average, people in developing countries are healthier, better educated and less impoverished—and they are more likely to live in a multiparty democracy. Since 1990 life expectancy in developing countries has increased by 2 years. There are 3 million fewer child deaths annually and 30 million fewer children out of school. On the other hand, we are increasingly divided into a rich world and poor world. Today the income of the 500 richest people in the world approaches the income of almost the 500 million poorest people in our world. Income inequalities are not just growing between countries, they are also growing within countries. Unless open and participatory decision-making goes hand in hand with economic strategy, our efforts to reduce poverty will be short-lived.

As you see, a human rights approach to poverty reduction is more difficult to implement but it is also more likely to create sustainable results. Integrating human rights in poverty reduction strategies does not so much change 'what' is to be done as to 'how' it happens. A human rights perspective places as much importance on the process as the outcome. A human rights perspective empowers individuals through skills and education to make their own decisions – an approach that is at the core of the social work profession. It is true that we need professionals with strong analytical skills and knowledge of economics and political science, but in the end, success will hinge on being able to empower individuals and the communities – skills that social workers know best.

Students have remarked that they don't know how to break in or that international relief-related organizations don't seem to hire social workers. Just as we teach our clients to overcome barriers, we must do the same for ourselves. About a hundred years ago, the founders of the social work profession looked upon our cities and states and saw unnecessary human suffering. They saw millions of recent migrants and immigrants working long hours, living in deplorable housing, suffering from diseases caused from their environments that could be easily prevented, and trapped by the socioeconomic system in place. Some called for social and economic reforms, others focused on

reforming the individual but what both were quick to learn was that only by working together could they be successful. In a land that had few laws granting rights to the oppressed, the social work pioneers forged ahead and were catalysts for change. They were the ones who brought about labor laws, tenement laws, juvenile justice systems, sanitation systems, playgrounds and kindergartens for our children, along with employment bureaus, loan societies, training centers, hospitals, summer camps, nursing services, and shelters. These pioneers did not receive invitations to ferry in these social reforms, in fact, they encountered more than a little resistance.

Today, a hundred years later, you can pay tribute to the founders of our profession by sharing not only your skills and knowledge but your sense of social justice with those who don't dare to dream. You can help stop the needless deaths and suffering, and brighten the tomorrows. I hope you will join me and my colleagues in working toward a world of peace, in which conflict, strife and needless suffering are left to live in the past and our dreams of good will toward all, carry us into the future.

Thank you.

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