

Poverty and Human Rights

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Human rights would be fully realized, if all human beings had secure access to the objects of these rights. Our world is today very far from this ideal. Piecing together the current global record, we find that most of the current massive underfulfillment of human rights is more or less directly connected to poverty. The connection is direct in the case of basic social and economic human rights, such as the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of oneself and one's family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care. The connection is more indirect in the case of civil and political human rights associated with democratic government and the rule of law. Desperately poor people, often stunted, illiterate, and heavily preoccupied with the struggle to survive, typically lack effective means for resisting or rewarding their rulers, who are therefore likely to rule them oppressively while catering to the interests of other, often foreign, agents (governments and corporations, for instance) who are more capable of reciprocation.

The statistics are appalling. Out of a total of 6575 million human beings, 830 million are reportedly chronically undernourished, 1100 million lack access to safe water and 2600 million lack access to basic sanitation (UNDP 2006: 174, 33). About 2000 million lack access to essential drugs (www.fic.nih.gov/about/summary.html). Some 1000 million have no adequate shelter and 2000 million lack electricity (UNDP 1998: 49). Some 799 million adults are illiterate (www.uis.unesco.org). Some 250 million children between 5 and 14 do wage work outside their household with 170.5 million of them involved in hazardous work and 8.4 million in the "unconditionally worst" forms of child labor, which involve slavery, forced or bonded labor, forced recruitment for use in armed conflict, forced prostitution or pornography, or the production or trafficking of illegal drugs (ILO 2002: 9, 11, 17, 18). People of colour and females (UNDP 2003: 310-330; UNRISD 2005; Social Watch 2005) bear greatly disproportionate shares of these deprivations.

Roughly one third of all human deaths, some 18 million annually, are due to poverty-related causes, easily preventable through better nutrition, safe drinking water, mosquito nets, re-hydration packs, vaccines and other medicines. This sums up to over 300 million deaths in just the 17 years since the end of the Cold War — many more than were caused by all the wars, civil wars, and government repression of the entire 20th century. Children under five account for nearly 60% or 10.6 million of the annual death toll from poverty-related causes (UNICEF 2005: inside front cover).

Never has poverty been so easily avoidable. The collective annual consumption of the 2735 million people reportedly living (on average 42%) below the World Bank's \$2/day poverty line is about \$440 billion and their collective shortfall from that poverty line roughly \$330 billion per year. This poverty gap is less than one percent of the gross national incomes of the high-income countries, which sum to \$35,142 billion in 2005 (World Bank 2006: 289). These countries contain 15.7 percent of the world's population with 79 percent of the global product (*ibid.*). The global poor are 42 percent of the world's population with 1 percent of the global product. At market exchange rates, the per capita income of the former is roughly 200 times greater than that of the latter. (For the year 1998, Branko Milanovic (2005, 111-12) estimates income inequality between the top and bottom 10% of the human population to have been 320:1 in terms of market exchange rates and 71:1 in PPP terms). Eradicating severe poverty (relative to the \$2/day poverty line) is a matter of raising the income of the poor from currently 2.3% of the average human income to 4%.

While modest institutional reforms, affecting merely one percent of the global income distribution, could overcome severe poverty, the effect of existing institutional arrangements goes the other way. They are seriously aggravating global inequality. The World Bank reports that gross national income (GNI) per capita, PPP (current international \$), in the high-income OECD countries rose 53.5% in real terms over the 1990-2001 globalization period: from \$18,740 in 1990 to \$28,761 in 2001 (and on to

\$33,622 in 2005; devdata.worldbank.org/dataonline). World Bank interactive software (iresearch.worldbank.org/PovcalNet/jsp/index.jsp) can be used to calculate how the poorer half of humankind have fared, in terms of their real (inflation/PPP adjusted) consumption expenditure, during this same period. Here are the gains for various percentiles, labelled from the bottom up:

- +20.4% for the 50th percentile (median)
- +20.0% for the 35th percentile
- +15.9% for the 20th percentile
- +12.9% for the 10th percentile
- +11.9% for the 7th percentile
- +10.4% for the 5th percentile
- +6.6% for the 3rd percentile
- +1.0% for the 2nd percentile
- 7.3% for the 1st (bottom) percentile.

There is a clear pattern: the global poor are not participating proportionately in global economic growth. This pattern is further confirmed by trend data about malnutrition and poverty. The number of malnourished, reported annually by the UNDP, has been stuck around 800 million and recently stood at 830 million (UNDP 2006: 174) - even while the ranks of the hungry are thinned by millions of deaths each year from poverty-related causes. For 1987-2001, Chen and Ravallion (2004: 153) report a 7% drop in the population living below \$1/day but a 10.4% rise in the population below \$2/day. (For a critique of these numbers and their reliance on general consumptions PPPs, see Reddy and Pogge 2007.) Also using PPPs in his analysis, Branko Milanovic (2005: 108) reports that real incomes of the poorest 5% of world population declined 20% in the 1988-93 period and another 23% during 1993-98, while real global per capita income increased by 5.2% and 4.8% respectively. For the 1988-98 period he finds that the Gini measure of income inequality among persons worldwide increased from 62.2 to 64.1, and the Theil from 72.7 to 78.9 (*ibid.*: 112).

Increasing income inequalities accumulate into even larger inequalities of wealth. A recent WIDER study (Davies et al. 2006: Appendix 1, Table 10a) estimates that in 2000 the bottom 50% of the world's adults together had 1.1% of global wealth while the top 10% had 85.1% and the top 1% had 39.9%. (In PPP terms, the bottom 50% had 3.7%, while the top 10% had 71.1% and the top 1% had 31.6% - *ibid.*: Table 11a.) The authors stress that their study may understate global wealth inequality because the superrich - the world's few hundred billionaires alone accounted for 1.7% of global household wealth in 2000 - are typically not captured in household surveys (*ibid.*: 31).

The rich countries' response to world poverty is mainly rhetorical. Though official development assistance has reversed its long-term decline in the aftermath of 9/11, it is still only \$100 billion annually or 0.33% of GNI (2005) as compared to the 0.7% target promised over 30 years ago. More importantly, only \$10 billion of ODA annually is earmarked for basic social services, complemented by a similar amount donated by individuals through international NGOs.

And even the rhetoric is appalling. At the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome, the world's governments grandly promised to halve the number of extremely poor people between 1996 and 2015, implicitly accepting 25,000 daily poverty deaths in 2015 and some 250 million such deaths in the interim. In the 2000 UN Millennium Declaration, they modified their promise — replacing “number” by “proportion” and extending the plan period backward to 1990. Taking advantage of rapid population growth and a huge poverty reduction in China during the 1990's, these clever modifications greatly dilute the target: the new promise, if fulfilled, would reduce the number of extremely poor people by only 19.5% between 1996 and 2015 (Pogge 2004).

Confronted with such facts, citizens of the rich countries may concede that we affluent should do more to help the poor. But they see this as a demand of humanity or charity — not as a demand of justice and certainly not as a moral duty imposed on us by the human rights of the poor. As the US government

declared after the World Food Summit: “the attainment of any ‘right to adequate food’ or ‘fundamental right to be free from hunger’ is a goal or aspiration to be realized progressively that does not give rise to any international obligations.”

The presumption behind this denial is that, internationally at least, human rights entail only negative duties: They require that one not deprive foreigners of secure access to the objects of their human rights; they do not require that one help them attain such secure access by protecting them against other threats.

This presumption can be attacked by arguing that human rights do impose positive duties, even internationally. But, even if the presumption is accepted, it shields the rich from human-rights-based obligations only insofar as they bear no responsibility for the existing ever more radically unequal global economic distribution. And this claim to innocence is highly dubious at best.

For one thing, the existing radical inequality is deeply tainted by how it accumulated through *one* historical process that was deeply pervaded by enslavement, colonialism, even genocide. The rich are quick to point out that they cannot inherit their ancestor’s sins. Indeed. But how can they then be entitled to the fruits of these sins: to their huge inherited advantage in power and wealth over the rest of the world? If they are not so entitled, then they are, by actively excluding the global poor from their lands and possessions, contributing to their deprivations.

Moreover, even the causes of the current persistence of severe poverty are by no means exclusively domestic to the countries in which it occurs. The asymmetries inherent in the current global economic (WTO) regime are well documented: It allows the rich countries to favour their own companies through tariffs, quotas, anti-dumping duties, export credits and huge subsidies. UNCTAD estimates that the latter market distortions cost the developing countries \$700 billion annually in lost export revenue — a huge amount relative to the needs of their poor. And the heavily trading opportunities the rich countries afford the poor do not come for free. To obtain them, poor countries must spend large amounts on enforcing the intellectual property rights of the rich, thereby depriving their own populations of access to cheap generic versions of patented seed and life-saving medicines.

To be sure, many developing countries are run by corrupt and incompetent leaders, unwilling or unable to make serious poverty-eradication efforts. But their ability to rule, often against the will and interests of the population, crucially depends on outside factors. It depends, for instance, on their being recognized by the rich countries as entitled to borrow in their country’s name, to confer legal title to its resources, and with the proceeds to buy the weapons they need to stay in power. By assigning these privileges to such rulers, on the basis of their effective power alone, the rich countries support their banks and secure their resource imports. But they also greatly strengthen the staying power of oppressive rulers and the incentives toward coup attempts and civil wars, especially in the resource-rich countries.

More generally, bad leadership, civil wars, and widespread corruption in the developing countries are not wholly homegrown, but strongly encouraged by the existing international rules and extreme inequalities. The rulers and officials of these countries have vastly more to gain from catering to the interests of wealthy foreign governments, corporations, and tourists than from meeting the basic needs of their impoverished compatriots.

Are the rich countries violating human rights when they, in collaboration with Southern elites, impose a global institutional order under which, foreseeably and avoidably, hundreds of millions cannot attain “a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care” (Universal Declaration of Human Rights §25)? The Declaration itself makes quite clear that they do when it proclaims that “everyone is entitled to a social *and international* order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized” (§28). The existing international institutional order fails this test. It aggravates extreme poverty through protectionism and aggressive enforcement of intellectual property rights in seeds and essential medicines.

And it fosters corrupt and oppressive government in the poorer countries by recognizing any person or group holding effective power — regardless of how they acquired or exercise it — as entitled to sell the country's resources and to dispose of the proceeds of such sales, to borrow in the country's name and thereby to impose debt service obligations upon it, to sign treaties on the country's behalf and thus to bind its present and future population, and to use state revenues to buy the means of internal repression.

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