

Why is poverty a human rights issue?

When she was the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, the former President of Ireland, said 'Poverty is the world's worst human rights crisis.' She certainly believed that, and in her tenure as High Commissioner from 1997 until 2002, she did much to increase the attention given by her Office to the human rights issues arising from poverty.

Notwithstanding that, and despite numerous UN resolutions that proclaim the links between poverty and human rights, when most people think about a human rights crisis, they think about Syria, or Iraq, or some other situation when human rights are being violated in war.

The fact that 1 billion people live in extreme poverty may be shocking and it might even spark moral outrage, but it has not - at least not yet - led to the UN Human Rights Council meeting in emergency session. Indeed, many people, especially those who have no experience of poverty, wouldn't quickly identify it as a human rights issue, and certainly not a *human rights crisis*.

In this clip, therefore, I want to summarize for you the arguments that addresses this apparently simple question – why is poverty a human rights issue? Additionally, I will suggest to you some reasons that, I believe, explain why this link between poverty and human rights is too rarely understood or acted on.

Being poor is commonly understood as a situation of deprivation – lacking the basic necessities of life, including first and foremost sufficient (and adequate) food, water, clothing and shelter, but also extending to education, basic health care, and secure employment. The solution most commonly offered to this situation of deprivation is to increase the income levels of the poor – whether through aid, transfer programs, or improved employment prospects, and of course, to increase a country's gross domestic product, and its growth rate, to raise aggregate income levels.

Of course, poverty is about *deprivation* – what poor people lack, or lack in sufficient capacity or adequate quality (contaminated water is not drinkable). But the experience of those living in extreme poverty – defined by the World Bank as living on less than \$1.25/day – that experience is about more than deprivation.

It is also about *insecurity*. There are two types of insecurity of particular importance to those in extreme poverty – threats to their lives and physical integrity, and threats to their livelihoods. Regarding the first, the poor suffer disproportionately from all types of violence – criminal, conflict-related, domestic violence. It is the rich who build gated communities and fret about rising crime levels, but it is the poor – in every country – who are at most at risk from crime. And the poor who are most at-risk from conflict-related violence.

Further, studies show that the threat and experience of violence keeps poor people poor.

The second kind of insecurity concerns *livelihoods*. Those in extreme poverty are also those hundreds of millions who go to bed hungry every night, who do not own land or even their own home and may be easily characterized as squatters, subject to arbitrary eviction without notice. They are day labourers with insecure employment, or those working in situations of debt bondage or other forms of forced or coercive labour. They are also those who lack protection in the form of social security if illness, injury or the death of family members suddenly removes a source of income. And, of course, the insecure nature of their livelihood also keeps them poor.

Living in extreme poverty is also about *exclusion*; that is, being denied access to, or being treated unfairly by, government institutions which are designed to administer government policy. The poor in many countries report unfair treatment by – or being ignored by -- police, courts, land and birth registries, municipal agencies and a host of other institutions.

Discrimination is a powerful contributing factor to poverty. Groups that are marginalized on grounds of race, religion, language, ethnicity, or caste -- these groups will almost always be disproportionately represented among the poor. And in many instances, the poor are discriminated against simply on account of their poverty – for example, by laws that prohibit sleeping on the streets even when no affordable housing is available. Or that prevent those without stable addresses or employment from opening bank accounts, or being eligible for government transfer programs.

Fourthly and finally, extreme poverty is about *voicelessness* – best understood as a powerful sense the poor feel that they are denied a say in decisions that affect them, or that their views are ignored. In extreme forms, the denial of voice is explicit in laws that prohibit or restrict the formation of unions or organizations representing the poor. In other cases, while the poor may be free to organize, their collective views will be ignored by unresponsive political systems – in which too often their right to vote is constrained.

Deprivation, Insecurity (of lives and livelihoods), Exclusion and Voicelessness – taken together, these four factors provide a more comprehensive and truer picture of the experience of living in extreme poverty than income levels alone. And just as importantly, these four factors are interdependent.

For example:

- deprivation in the form of a lack of education or illiteracy inhibits the effective exercise of voice in local politics;
- gender discrimination keeps girls out of school;
- insecurity of tenure as regards housing – and the fear of slum-dwellers as being seen as illegal residents - prevents them from accessing government programs;
- the lack of effective political participation by the poor means issues of deprivation go unaddressed;
- police discrimination against poor minorities means the criminal violence they experience – and that inhibits their ability to earn a living – continues unabated.

Many more examples could be given of this interdependence. To return then, to our question - Why is poverty a human rights issue?

Because *only* the human rights framework forces attention on all four of these factors, and on their interdependence. The international legal standards that define global human rights set clear standards in relation to all four factors:

On deprivation

- the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights provides guarantees in relation to the basic necessities of life, and the services and resources the poor lack (rights to food, water, health care, education, social security etc.)

On insecurity

- rights to physical security and integrity, prohibitions on arbitrary power, and duties on the state to protect the vulnerable all provide protection against violence

On exclusion

- non-discrimination is an essential component of all human rights treaties, and these standards outlaw discrimination on any ground and require the state to act against private forms of discrimination that cause harm

And on voicelessness

- the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and numerous other international standards protect – on an equal footing – the right of all people to assemble, organize, and to participate in public life and hold accountable those in government

Further, although economic and social rights are dealt with in a separate treaty, the interdependence and indivisibility of rights is repeatedly affirmed by United Nations bodies.

Now, if you agree with my argument – that the human rights framework provides a more comprehensive and clarifying approach to understanding and acting on the multiple factors that characterize the lived experience of the poor, the question becomes, *what are the obstacles to treating poverty as a human rights issue?*

I will suggest four reasons: First, there is the issue of politics - and power. The language of human rights is threatening to those who wield power. Those wielding state power hold duties in relation to respecting, protecting and fulfilling rights, and failure to meet those duties raises questions of accountability. To state clearly that poverty is perpetuated because of the failures of the state to provide security, to prohibit discrimination, or ensure meaningful political participation suggests power is not being fairly and effectively exercised. Second, this more comprehensive approach clearly emphasizes the importance of effective institutions in combatting poverty. It is not enough to grow the economy, although that helps. Police forces must be made effective, local governments responsive, and political participation enhanced; corruption must be eradicated. Such reforms are difficult, they are time-consuming, and to be successful they will need to overcome entrenched interests. The human rights approach, with its emphasis on the role of state institutions in protecting and fulfilling rights, unavoidably puts the spotlight on the performance of these institutions, and for many this raises far too many complications.

Third, there is the problem of measurement. The global effort to combat poverty relies heavily on charting the progress of individual countries – to focus policy and to influence the distribution and expenditure of aid dollars. The current global framework is known as the Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs (these replaced the Millennium Development Goals, or MDGs – the framework in place from 2000 – 2015). The 17 SDGs each have several targets, and these are measured through specific indicators – for which data is collected. Human rights goals, like eliminating discrimination, or giving the poor a voice, are not so easy to measure as the number of children in school or the declines in deaths from communicable diseases.

And fourth, there is the problem of the different categories of rights. Although the indivisibility of economic and social rights and civil and political rights is asserted – and I've suggested some examples of this connection in practice – the fact is that much of the UN's work is still linked to these categories. If people think of poverty as a human rights issue, for the most part they think of it in terms of a problem of not fulfilling economic and social rights. This blocks the comprehensive understanding that I have suggested is required.

None of these four obstacles is easily overcome.

But, we are making progress. The SDGs, for example, include many more human rights-related targets than the MDGs which preceded them. At the global level, and certainly within the UN, there is much greater understanding now of the human rights dimension to poverty. The challenge today is to act on that understanding.

Credits

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