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Issue: Improving human rights for those living in extreme poverty

Student Officer: Martina Rosso, Lucia Miri Echavarria

Position: Chairs of Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee

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Introduction

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, “we must bear in mind that none are more committed to ending poverty than the poor themselves. Often, all they lack is the guidance, the tools, and the opportunities to win this fight.” Addressing this issue implies looking at the connection between poverty and human rights and how nations, organizations and humanitarian agencies can help the United Nations achieve its first Millennium Development Goal - the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger.

According to the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, today almost half of the population in developing countries lives in extreme poverty, and are denied basic human rights such as the right to an adequate standard of living, including food and housing, the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, and education. People living in poverty across the world are often socially excluded and marginalized from political power and processes. Their right to effectively participate in public affairs is often ignored.

The elimination of extreme poverty is not a question of charity, but a pressing human rights issue. States are legally obligated to realize human rights for all, prioritizing the most vulnerable, including those living in extreme poverty. Everyone, everywhere has the right to live with dignity. That means that none should be denied their rights to adequate housing, food, water, sanitation, education and health care.

“Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an action of justice. It is the protection of fundamental human rights. Everyone everywhere has the right to live with dignity, free from fear and oppression, free from hunger and thirst, and free to express themselves and associate at will.” – Nelson Mandela

Definition of key-terms

Poverty: Privation or deprivation. Poverty is a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity.

According to a UN declaration that resulted from the World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995, **absolute poverty** is "a condition characterised by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. It depends not only on income but also on access to services."

David Gordon's paper, "Indicators of Poverty & Hunger", for the United Nations, further defines **absolute poverty** as the absence of any two of the following eight basic needs:

Food: Body Mass Index must be above 16.

Safe drinking water: Water must not come solely from rivers and ponds, and must be available nearby (less than 15 minutes' walk each way).

Sanitation facilities: Toilets or latrines must be accessible in or near the home.

Health: Treatment must be received for serious illnesses and pregnancy.

Shelter: Homes must have fewer than four people living in each room. Floors must not be made of dirt, mud, or clay.

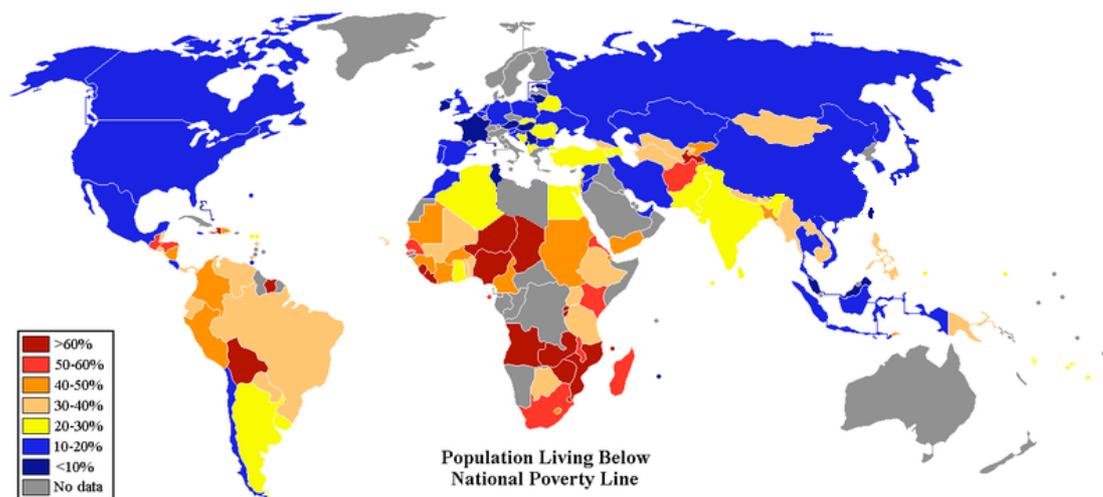
Education: Everyone must attend school or otherwise learn to read.

Information: Everyone must have access to newspapers, radios, televisions, computers, or telephones at home.

Access to services: This item is undefined by Gordon, but normally is used to indicate the complete panoply of education, health, legal, social, and financial (credit) services.

In 1979, British sociologist, Peter Townsend published his famous definition, "individuals [...] can be said to be in (**relative**) **poverty** when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong".

Poverty line: the estimated minimum level of income needed to secure the basic necessities of life.



Human right: a right that is believed to belong to every person.

Adequate standard of living: Adequate welfare. Includes the right to adequate food, water, sanitation facilities, health care, shelter and information.

Sanitation: Conditions relating to public health especially the provision of clean drinking water and adequate sewage disposal.

Exploitation: the action or fact of treating someone unfairly in order to benefit from their work, the fact of making use of a situation to gain unfair advantage for oneself.

Marginalize: treat a person, a group or a concept as insignificant or peripheral.

Discrimination (in the context of poverty): Discrimination of persons living in extreme poverty shall mean any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on individual's sustained or chronic deprivation of and lack of access to, resources, capabilities, choices, security and power, which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of all human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field. It can be combined with other forms of discrimination, including on grounds of race and colour, age and gender, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, nationality and residential status, disability, physical appearance or any other consideration stemming from extreme poverty or causing de jure or de facto stigmatisation and discrimination.

General Overview

It is evident that while poverty alleviation is important, so too is tackling inequality and fundamental rights and freedoms affected due to poverty.

In 2001, the Commission on Human Rights stressed the need to develop guiding principles on the implementation of existing human rights norms and standards in the context of the fight against extreme poverty. The Guiding Principles created, recognise the link between poverty and human rights. These Principles serve a dual function, as both an interpretive as well as practical tool, clearly aiming to offer operational guidance to States and other relevant actors.

The Principles apply in particular to people living in extreme poverty; they address the full range of relevant principles and rights; and should be relevant to States and non-state actors alike. It is hoped that they will serve to empower people living in extreme poverty, through the reaffirmation of their rights and the provision of concrete means and methods aimed at securing their realisation¹.

Inequality is often discussed in the context of relative poverty, as opposed to absolute poverty. Even in the wealthiest countries, the poor may not be in absolute poverty (the most basic of provisions may be obtainable for many) or their level of poverty may be a lot higher than those in developing countries, but in terms of their standing in society, their relative poverty can also have serious consequences such as deteriorating social cohesion, increasing crime and violence, and poorer health.

Some of these things are hard to measure, such as social cohesion and the level of trust and comfort people will have in interacting with one another in the society. Nonetheless, over the years, numerous studies have shown that sometimes the poor in wealthy countries can be unhappier or finding it harder to cope than poor people in poorer countries.

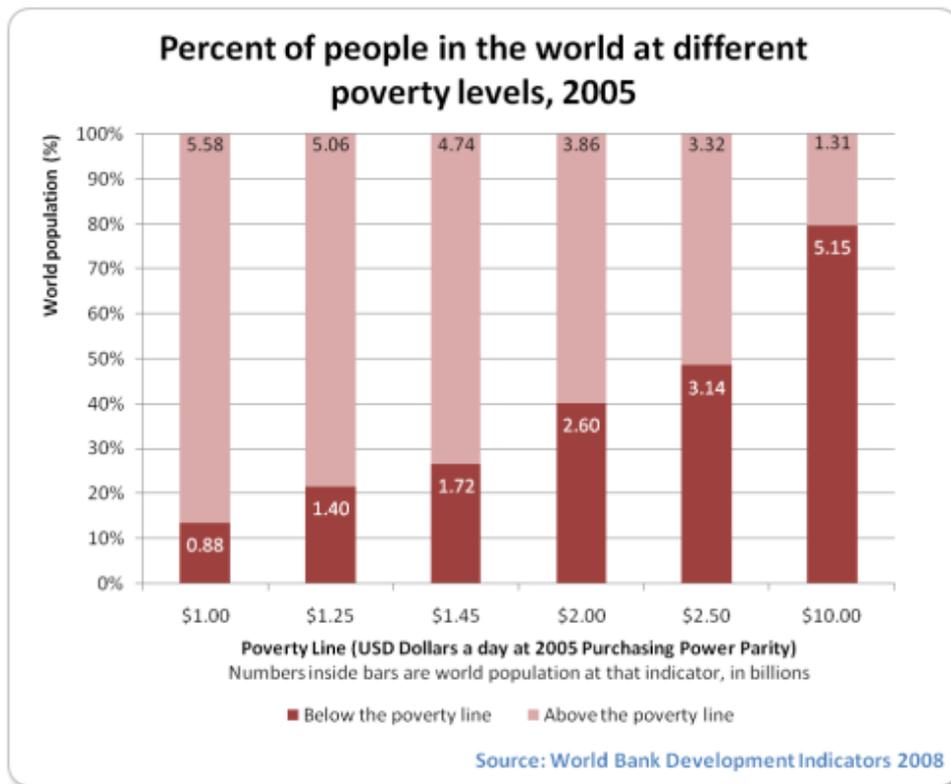
Facts

- About 0.13% of the world's population controlled 25% of the world's assets in 2004.
- The wealthiest 20% of the world's population consumes 76.6% of the world's goods while 80% of humanity gets the remainder².
- World Bank figures for world poverty reveals a higher number of people live in poverty than previously thought.
- The new poverty line is defined as living on the equivalent of \$1.25 a day. With that measure based on latest data available (2005), 1.4 billion people live on or below that line.

¹ <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Poverty/TechnicalReviewDGP.pdf>

² <http://www.globalissues.org>

- Furthermore, almost half the world—over three billion people—live on less than \$2.50 a day and at least 80% of humanity lives on less than \$10 a day:



- Almost half the world — over 3 billion people — live on less than \$2.50 a day.
- The GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of the 41 Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (567 million people) is less than the wealth of the world's 7 richest people combined.
- Nearly a billion people entered the 21st century unable to read a book or sign their names.
- Less than one per cent of what the world spent every year on weapons was needed to put every child into school by the year 2000 and yet it didn't happen.
- 1 billion children live in poverty (1 in 2 children in the world). 640 million live without adequate shelter, 400 million have no access to safe water, 270 million have no access to health services. 10.6 million died in 2003 before they reached the age of 5 (or roughly 29,000 children per day).

Timeline of Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

- 18 December 1992: Human rights and extreme poverty: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly in its 47th session
- 1995/2005: World Summit for Social Development, at the Millennium Summit, at which Heads of State and Government committed themselves to eradicate extreme poverty and to halve, by 2015, the proportion of the world's people whose income is less than one dollar a day and of those who suffer from hunger
- 2000: Millennium Development Goal set by 189 member states to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. The first development goal relates to this issue:

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

Target 1A: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people living on less than \$1.25 a day

Poverty gap ratio [incidence x depth of poverty]

Share of poorest quintile in national consumption

Target 1B: Achieve Decent Employment for Women, Men, and Young People
GDP Growth per Employed Person

Employment Rate

Proportion of employed population below \$1.25 per day (PPP values)

Proportion of family-based workers in employed population

Target 1C: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger

Prevalence of underweight children under five years of age

Proportion of population below minimum level of dietary energy consumption

- 2007: the General Assembly proclaimed the Second United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (2008-2017) in order to support, in an efficient and coordinated manner, the internationally agreed development goals related to poverty eradication, including the Millennium Development Goals.
- 2010: Conclusions of the summit on the Millennium Development Goals held in New York from 20 to 22 September 2010,
- September 2012: *Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Property Rights*, adopted by the Human Rights Council in its 21st session. The objective of the Guiding Principles is to provide guidance on how to apply human rights standards in efforts to combat poverty. They are intended as a tool for designing and implementing poverty reduction and eradication policies, and as

a guide to how to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of persons living in extreme poverty in all areas of public policy. They are global in scope, recognizing that extreme poverty is a phenomenon that affects all countries.

- 20 December 2012: Human rights and extreme poverty: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly in its 67th session

Major Parties Involved and Their Workings

Amnesty International: is a global movement of more than 3 million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights. Their vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards. They are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by their membership and public donations.

Today they are working to hold governments, big business and other powerful actors to account for human rights violations, which target people living in poverty, driving that poverty deeper still.

Amnesty International is increasingly documenting how human rights violations drive and deepen poverty. People living in poverty have the least access to power to shape the policies of poverty and are frequently denied effective remedies for violations of their rights.

Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights: is an independent expert appointed by the Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a country situation or a specific human rights theme (in this case, extreme poverty and human rights). This position is honorary and the expert is not a staff of the United Nations nor paid for his/her work.

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (HCHR): is a United Nations agency that works to promote and protect the human rights that are guaranteed under international law and stipulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. The office was established by the UN General Assembly on 20 December 1993 in the wake of the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights.

The office is headed by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, who co-ordinates human rights activities throughout the UN System and supervises the Human Rights

Council in Geneva, Switzerland. The current High Commissioner is South African lawyer Navanethem Pillay, whose four-year term began on 1 September 2008 and then was extended an additional two years in 2012.

ATD Fourth World: The International Movement ATD Fourth World is a non-governmental organization with no religious or political affiliation that engages with individuals and institutions to find solutions to eradicate extreme poverty. Working in partnership with people in poverty, ATD Fourth World's human rights-based approach focuses on supporting families and individuals through its grass-roots presence and involvement in disadvantaged communities, in both urban and rural areas, creating public awareness of extreme poverty and influencing policies to address it.

ATD Fourth World initially called on the United Nations to consider extreme poverty itself as a violation of human rights in 1982, collecting 300,000 signatures that were delivered to the then Secretary-General. With the support of leading human rights experts, committed governments, and other human rights NGOs, this eventually led to the Human Rights Council's predecessor body deciding that a rights-based approach to the fight against poverty would be a powerful tool in the eradication of extreme poverty.

United Nations agencies and intergovernmental organisations:

- European Committee for Social Cohesion
- Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)
- Secretariat of the Pacific Community, Adviser on gender equality
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
- World Trade Organization (WTO)

All nations: Extreme poverty persists in all countries of the world, regardless of their economic, social and cultural situation; however its extent and manifestations are particularly severe in developing countries.

Other non-governmental organisations:

- Associazione ONG Italiane
- Bahá'í International Community
- Care International

- Caritas Internationals
- Centre Europe-Tiers Monde
- Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE)
- Comité Quart Monde Européen
- Equal Opportunities Commission
- Franciscan International
- Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
- HelpAge International
- International Catholic Child Bureau
- International Council of Women
- International Federation of Social Workers
- Light for the World
- Lutheran World Federation
- Marangopoulos Foundation for Human Rights
- Mouvement contre le Racisme et pour l'Amitié entre les Peuples
- NGO Committee for Social Development

Possible Solutions

Improving the human rights of those living in extreme poverty requires collaborative processes: States, specialized agencies, United Nations bodies and other international organizations, including intergovernmental organizations, should all be giving the necessary attention to this problem.

Education and information are also particularly relevant to this issue. Information can create awareness, encourage aid and bring respect and protection of human rights of all people, especially those living in extreme poverty. Education can provide people with opportunities to escape poverty and provide better lives for themselves. With a free public education system, most impoverished have the opportunity to go to school, and therefore the opportunity for a better life.

Some possible solutions could include:

- Improving governance structures
- Make sure that aid that is given is spent on programmes that really work
- Improving access to markets and basic services for those in the most remote rural areas
- Providing insurance to help households deal with health crises
- Enabling investment in education and physical capital for those with few assets
- Addressing the exclusion of disadvantaged groups
- Adding collaborative processes such as Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRSs) and Common Country Assessments.
- Education
- Data collection so as to keep track of progress and the actual situation.

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