

The global poverty threat:

An Agenda 21 for human rights

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■ The evergrowing dimension of poverty worldwide and the increasing disparities between North and South, rich and poor, is endangering the ethical foundation of our planet and penalizing the future of coming generations.

One person in four lives in absolute poverty and nearly half of humanity at the margin of poverty. The polarization between rich and poor countries has taken dramatic proportions, as the inequality ratio has more than doubled in the last 30 years. This situation is jeopardizing the democratization process, questioning the development models and threatening international security.

Poverty, described as the lack of satisfaction of basic human needs, is a human rights violation. But it is also, at the same time, an

economic problem linked to national and international development policies, and a social and political issue that has to do with entitlements of liberties and freedoms, popular participation, and above all democracy. The three dimensions – human rights, development and democracy – are closely interrelated, and have to be considered when dealing with economic, social and cultural rights. Unidimensional approaches to issues related to these rights would be incomplete, biased and little effective.

This is why our proposal for the World Conference is the creation of an AGENDA 21 FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, DEVELOPMENT AND DEMOCRACY. This Agenda would encompass the various aspects of human rights – economic, political, social, cultural and civil, reflect all major revindications by movements and groups – racial minorities, migrants and refugees, indigenous people, women's rights, etc; and involve the international community, the governmental and non-governmental entities and the society at large.

International compact for human rights

Recent and current examples of international cooperation suggest that the time for international efforts to deal with the important issues of

One person in four around the globe lives in absolute poverty: children in Manila, the Philippines, scavenge to survive



At the dawn of the 21st century, violations of human rights remain among the main challenges to civilization; they are a threat to peace, security and sustained development. Let me add the voice of Poland to the voices of those who hope that the spirit of solidarity will prevail and will enable us to map out the road well into the new age. We must be constantly aware of our duties - for the common good.

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equity and justice at the global level has come.

In its 1992 Human Development Report, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) proposed a New Global Compact for Development, to create 'a new world order: an order based on mutual respect between nations, on greater equality of opportunity for the world's people and on new structures for international peace and security.' This initiative is indeed a vital first step towards concerted action in the field of human development.

Focusing on the specific problem of poverty, we would like to go a step further by suggesting a compact based on necessity, and not only on the goodwill of states. Our postulate is that international security, as an indivisible international public good, must be preserved for the welfare of all, and that one of the elements that is threatening international stability is the magnitude of the poverty problem. As market forces cannot be relied upon to guarantee this stability, concerted efforts should be undertaken by poor and rich countries to eradicate poverty.

For this reason, the adoption of pro-development measures cannot be considered as an act of paternalism or pure altruism, but a vital necessity to promote peace and justice in the world. As in the case of national security, international security requires collective action towards a common interest. Unfortunately, the common interest is rarely achieved spontaneously by individual action in pursuit of individual interests, thus creating the need to reach a compact that would translate this global concern into an agenda of concrete intervention, the nearest possible thing to a global welfare state.

This compact should not be limited to strictly economic issues. It should encompass cultural, technological and ethical aspects. The wasteful lifestyle by industrial countries cannot be sustained on a global level, and not even any more on national level. Industrial countries are suffering from growing income disparities within their own societies, as well as growing unemployment and poverty, with the consequent rebirth of xenophobic and racist outbursts of violence. Out of the necessity for a better global world an alternative development pattern should emerge that will not increase polarization between countries, nor associate economic growth with gross human rights violations.

a) Role of the State

Governments have the primary responsibility of alleviating poverty and ensuring progress in the human development of their people. The role of the state is to respect, to protect and to promote human rights. This function of the

state is double-faced: on the one hand, as bearer of the monopoly of legal violence, the state has to put limitations on its powers and actions; and, on the other hand, as guardian of public order, it must be the protector and provider of all liberties.

The poor are today the most vulnerable 'minority' in every society, although being a majority in most. They are 'institutionally excluded and systematically discriminated against' in societies governed by laws that are not applied and markets that exclude them. Whereas the responsibility of the State is clear-cut and immediate in the case of political and civil rights, the determination of its responsibility in the case of economic, social and cultural rights lacks definition and precise obligations. It is therefore imperative for the states to create systems of governments that institutionalize the protection of human rights. In the fulfilment of its obligations, the guiding principle must be equity. Governments of developing countries should:

Respect Human Rights: to implement the provisions of the main international instruments; to adopt public policies in favour of the poor, and make sure that social services reach them; and, to respect the political and social rights of the poor without discrimination of race, religion, gender, region, ethnic group; and to allow their access to the benefits of development.

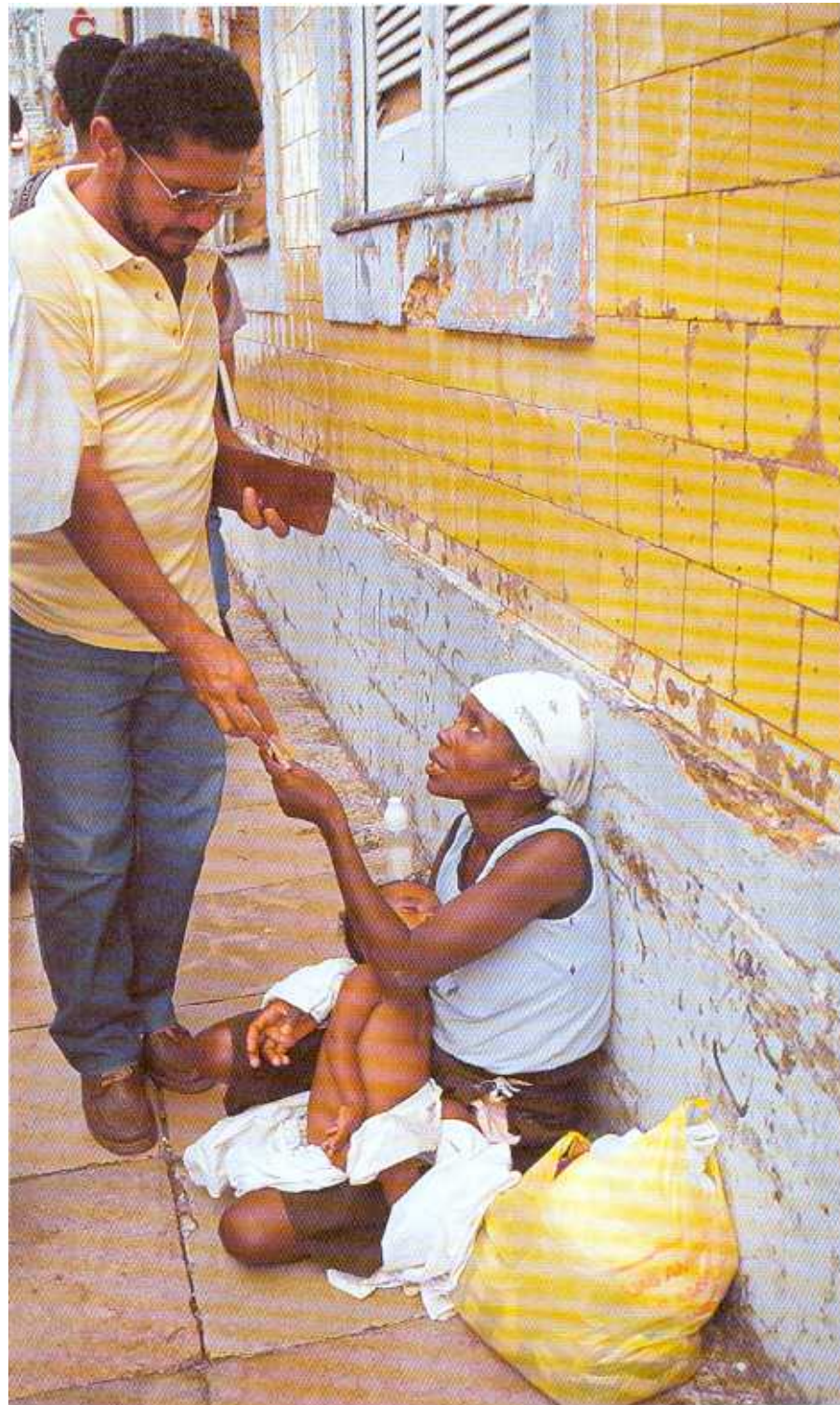
Protect Human Rights: to ensure the access of the poor to justice; to protect the rights of the poor against economic exploitation on the part of the non-poor; to protect the poor against violence and human rights abuses on the part of its own apparatuses; and, to eliminate corruption in public administration.

Promote Human Rights: to launch a decisive campaign in favour of the eradication of poverty and against inequity, corruption, and discrimination against marginalized and destitute groups; to gain the support of the entire society in this campaign; to strengthen democratic institutions and increase popular participation; and, to create networks of solidarity regionally and internationally.

b) Role of civil society

The societies of developing countries are internally divided into a modern sector and a peripheral sector, formerly called traditional sector. This is no more the case given that, in many countries, the poor have been marginalized and in the process lost their culture and identity.

NGOs and human rights entities have played a vital role to defend victims of



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autocratic regimes on all continents, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, and continue to do so in countries that are still using authoritarian practices against their opponents. Their struggle against human rights abuses of political and civil rights has been and continues to be courageous, well-targeted, efficient and, in many cases, successful. Their actions have been, in many instances, supported by the mobilization of the society and the existence of

a network of support to the cause at regional and international level.

In comparison, the present fight against poverty is, at the same time, wider and less precise. The group of victims, the poor, cannot be as easily defined as is the case of political opponents or dissident minorities. Their number is infinitely higher, and their profile much more difficult to draw as they do not constitute a homogenous group. Their rights are also more difficult to defend as they lack the support of public opinion, as the poor are seen by many as '*les classes dangereuses*'. Civil society has, in many instances, kept out of this struggle. The small educated middle class of the 'non poor' has not taken concrete action to prevent human rights abuses and struggle for law enforcement and justice in favour of the destitutes. Moreover, because of the weakness of the political representative system, popular participation has been limited.

Today more than ever an alliance is needed between state and society, poor and rich, human rights entities and other groups. Without a mobilization of all the forces and a massive popular participation, democracy will be jeopardized.

Time is short. Our common future is in danger. Immediate concerted action has to tackle the ever-spreading problem of poverty that is threatening stability at national and international level. The images of poverty, destitution and violence on our TV screen are but an instant glimpse of a tragedy, where hundreds of millions of innocent people are suffering in a world that would have the means to attend to their needs. What is missing is not food or resources at the global level, but the solidarity of those who have achieved freedom from want. The 'apartheid', between those who are 'expendable' and those who have a say, must be dismantled both within nations and in inter-state relations.

There is no magic solution, and we are fully aware that the process of integrating the poor in a new world order will neither be painless nor without resistance. However, we do believe that the still erected wall of shame between the North and the South, between rich and poor, has to be torn down with a view to building together a new future. The task is huge, urgent and vital, but by no means impossible. It requires awareness of what is at stake, political will, and persistence.

In the long run, the world could only be better if it were for all to enjoy. Happiness must be global.

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