

Development and human rights:

The poverty process

International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)

Sustained and sustainable rural development starts with, rather than ends with, the alleviation of poverty

The Netherlands Government was a founder member of the United Nations and one of the first signatories of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We have felt for a long time that safeguarding human rights for the whole of mankind should be a primary purpose of international cooperation. International treaties are important instruments to serve this purpose. These treaties lay down the agreed standards for human rights. But having these standards is only the first part. What really counts is putting them into practice all over the world and for all people.

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■ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims the economic, social and cultural rights to which everyone 'as a member of society' is entitled. A corollary to that proclamation is the right to development for all: wealth, income, opportunity and social services should not be the prerogative of a few; inequalities between rural and urban sectors should be reduced since everyone has a human right to food, shelter, education and health care.

The stark reality is, however, that out of a population of some few billion in 114 developing countries, there are more than 2.5 billion poor people who live in rural areas, and of these approximately one billion live below the poverty line and are therefore denied such basic human rights. Despite efforts to reduce the percentage of the rural populations below nationally defined poverty lines, the absolute number of the rural poor has increased and there has been no significant progress in reducing the number of those living below the poverty line.

The poor folks' very right to live is threatened by disease, malnutrition and just the plain lack of the basics to sustain life. The rural poor comprise smallholder farmers (having three hectares or less of cropland) and the landless. In addition, there are artisanal fishermen, nomadic pastoralists and indigenous ethnic tribals. Smallholder farmers suffer from low yields, lack of productive services, inefficient markets for their produce which bind them in a low production:low savings trap. The most marginal of these small farmers, as a result of demographic pressures, have gradually been pushed into the ranks of the landless. The survival of the latter depends on uncertain and ill-paid seasonal labour and access to common pasture and forest lands. The meagre existence of the above-said groups is made even worse by natural disasters, policy biases, commercial premises and civil strife, which often forces them from their homelands. Other groups of rural poor are also affected by these processes. Artisanal fishermen and pastoralists are particularly vulnerable in terms of ecology damage and resource depletion and, as in the case of ethnic minorities, are exploited by a variety of intermediaries, traders, moneylenders and petty officials.

Nonetheless, across all these groups of rural



poor, the plight of women, who account for nearly 60 per cent, is by far the worst. Rural women are triply disadvantaged: as poor they are deprived human beings; as women they are subject to age-old discrimination and bias; and these two factors combined seem to detract and marginalize their role in society. In comparison to men, rural women have less access to literacy, education, land and credit, their labour is cheaper and they must make do with less of everything, although they have the primary responsibility for homes and children and often must also manage the land due to male migration. Their lives are a drudgery of long work days, doing household chores, fetching water and wood. They must often look after food crops, vegetable crops and tend small livestock. As producers, though, they have less access to credit, extension and other productive services than the males. Rural women are the victims of gender discrimination at its worst, since often the nutrition available to them is hardly commensurate with the physical demands of manual work plus childbearing. Apart from the violation of inalienable human rights, poverty also acts as a destructive agent on nature and the environment. After all, environment and poverty are closely linked in a circular process of causation: left alone, each reinforces the other into a negative spiralling process of further degradation of environment and accentuation of poverty. Indeed, the rural poor are obliged in their plight for survival to make

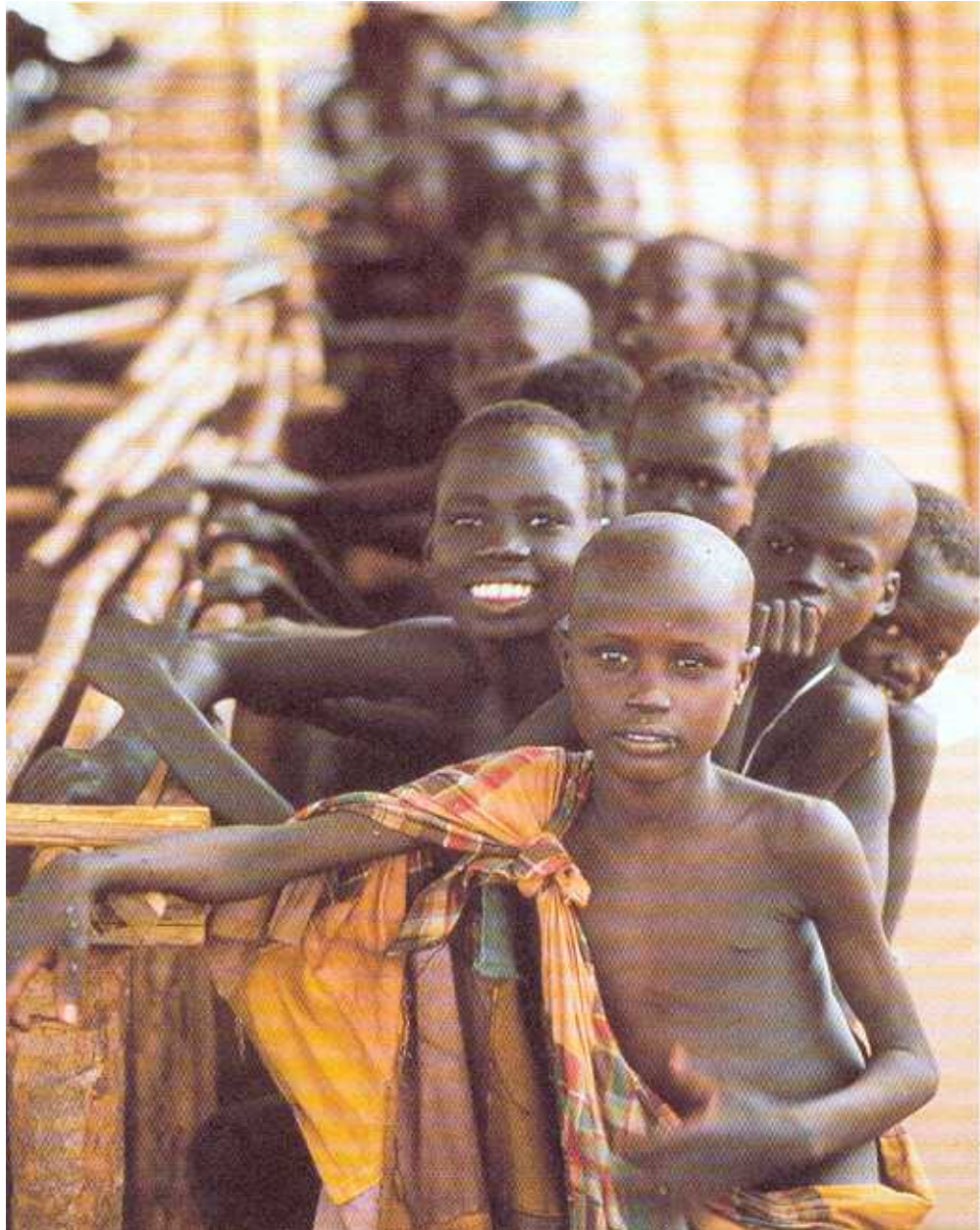
major onslaughts on natural resources: over-exploitation of soils, poor range management, destruction of forests, to name a few.

IFAD believes that the deprivation suffered by millions due to hunger and poverty cannot be halted by the mere pursuit of the growth of the overall economy, which is believed to lead automatically to wealth 'trickling down' to the have-nots. That this approach has not worked is demonstrated by the overwhelming persistence of poverty, not only in the rural world but also in the number of poor nations. A whole new understanding of the causes of the poverty process which infringes on the right to development is required, which IFAD believes may be formulated on a paradigm for development based on three fundamental propositions. The first is that sustained and

sustainable rural development starts with, rather than ends with, poverty alleviation. The second is that poverty is essentially linked to problems of production and investments in poverty alleviation are therefore investments in production. The third is that it is the poor themselves that can increase production and it is they who represent a tremendous force for development. Without investment in human beings there can be no real development. Indeed, the poor can be mobilized in the search for domestic assets, since the resort to external resources has neither helped in alleviating the poverty of nations nor their people.

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The poor themselves are the people who can increase production and it is they who are therefore a force for development



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