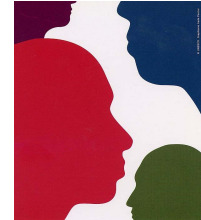


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Theme : Economic Globalisation and Human Rights

« Fighting Against Globalization and Poverty – and what about human rights? »

Mrs. Mercedita is from the Philippines. She lives under a bridge since early 90's, with her three children. Her husband passed away several years ago. For years that I have known her through ATD Fourth World, I had witnessed how she struggled so much to keep her children together, to provide them education and shelter. Recently, she has been afflicted with tuberculosis, prompting her to stop her work, which she struggled so much to get. She was and is often obliged to choose between her family's health, her children's education, shelter or work when all these are linked to each other. This short description of such a family may not be strange for us. We may have heard about such a story before and yet it is a reality that millions of families living in extreme poverty experience. For very little has changed, we have to keep on telling them until they are heard and understood.

Recently, I finished writing the story of Mrs. Mercedita's family, which will be published eventually in the Philippines. This writing recounts the reality of her family and her community under the bridge, the daily difficulties they encountered and how, often on their own ways and means tried to overcome them. One of the sources of this writing is the daily writing that I had since I joined ATD Fourth World as full-time volunteer. But most importantly, this work of writing was shared with Mrs. Mercedita and her children since the very beginning to ensure that the story could transmit their life and in a way that they like it to be shared with others.

Solidarity in the community

What helped these families bear such a living condition under the bridge? Like any family, parents of these families hope of a safe place for their children, a place where they can grow up well, a place where their children will not beg anymore. The place under the bridge does not have what they hope. They were fully aware that it is not a place to live in and they hope one day to get out from it. However, one important factor that is often overlooked when speaking of relocation or re-housing of poor families is the solidarity in the community. For a while after the death of her husband, Mrs. Mercedita had to rely on support of her neighbors. She had to ask for their help in looking after her children when she had to be away everyday looking for jobs. On the other hand, Mrs. Mercedita, having knowledge and experience about processing papers in administrative offices like the city hall would often give a hand to help a neighbor process papers for death, or to solicit financial help. When a threat of demolition came in 2000. A group of parents gathered to go to the city hall and spoke with the mayor to clarify the question of demolition. Mrs. Mercedita, like other parents from her community clearly stated, "We will not move out unless we all can be sure to get relocation. We do not want to leave when others are not sure of where they will live..."

In April 2005, families living under this bridge were evicted. Evicted without clear relocation. Each family was given a sum of 5,000 pesos and asked to find their own place elsewhere. Few families went back to their home provinces. Other families found other places in Manila where they could stay temporarily with their relatives. Families with many children had to disperse them into care of relatives in different places. Others who have no other places to go but under the bridge, were again building shelters out of scrap materials and live in pushcarts along the bridge, along a big avenue. When it rains, they go under the bridge to protect themselves from getting wet. The bridge had been cleared of houses but not of its people. Others who found a small apartment through the sum they received for moving out are again back under the bridge after three months. The amount was used up even before parents could find a stable job to keep paying the rent.

Extreme poverty, globalization, human rights

Speaking of extreme poverty, Mrs. Mercedita and her neighbors under the bridge have a lot to share. They live it everyday, happening from generation to generation. And it is as important to know that in terms of fighting extreme poverty, they have valuable aspects to contribute, for this fight is first of all theirs. They hope to become actors themselves in fighting extreme poverty by facilitating society to learn and understand what living in poverty really means.

The Philippines, being one of the signatories in the UN Millenium Declaration has tables and assessment tools used to track its progress in attaining the 8 goals and 18 targets of the MDG and eventually reduce poverty by half between 1990-2015. In parallel, the globalization in the country is in full swing and is often sending shock waves on poor people. Being a poor country and lacking power and influence, its poor people live unpleasant terms in areas of trade, finance, technology and labor. Despite of the mushrooming of skyscrapers and malls, impressive economic growth, the poverty remains a big problem. It seems that globalization has come at a heavy price that in the name of modernity and a standard of living that is getting high, the poorest families are often left behind. They seem to spend their life running after these changes and developments so that they can be considered part of a developing society. By running after these developments, they are forced to leave behind the social network and securities that they had hold on to for years, making them even more distant from the core of our society's policies, projects and their realization.

Someone say that there is no way to fight globalization. It is a phenomenon but it is not beyond correction. It can work for people, its benefits more equally shared if an indivisible and interrelated system of national and global policies, approaches and mechanisms are vigorously adopted, which includes enforcement of social; economic and cultural rights. These rights consist of the right to work, the right to shelter, the right to health, the right to education, the right to food, etc. When enforced, the protection and promotion of these rights contribute to the human face of globalization. In front of this enormous work for such a system, how can the daily efforts, knowledge on fighting poverty and respect for dignity and human rights of the likes of Mrs. Mercedita and her neighbors living under a bridge be integrated? Are they not the people we have in our minds when we agree and accept that extreme poverty is a violation of human rights? Are they not the people we need to meet in order to find veritable assessment of our tools for development?

Few months ago, I came back to the Philippines and met Mrs. Mercedita, materially speaking not much had change and from my perception, she seems to be

going back to the same situation of poverty despite of years of work. Nevertheless, she kept telling me that many things have changed. She said, "I have been fighting amidst these problems. I fought and I will keep fighting." This was what she was asking me to see, to understand and to recognize the strength, the resilience that she and her neighbors live everyday. And if others would take her hand and try to see it as well, then there will be change and the likes of Mrs. Mercedita could continue to make the pathways to their hopes, no longer alone but with others at the core of our society.