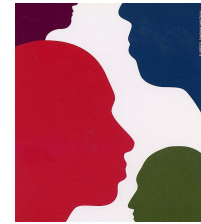


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Round Table: “Human Rights to Counter the Globalization of Poverty”

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1. Definition

Poverty can be defined for the purpose of this presentation as follows: “Poverty is the situation where an individual or a group of individuals lack against their will basic human needs such as nutritious food, safe drinking water, clean clothing, adequate shelter and appropriate medicines and medical services to live a physically and mentally sound life with dignity.”

2. Poverty as Violations of Human Rights

In understanding the question of “Poverty and Human Rights”, first point that we have to recognize is the fact that poverty itself is a violation of human rights. For instance, people in poverty by definition do not enjoy the right to life, right to health, right to food, right to safe drinking water, and right to live in dignity. Such situation is not the result of personal choice of the persons in poverty but is forced to them against will. Thus it is the violation of human rights.

There are a variety of ways which people are forced to live in poverty. Some were born in the family in poverty and have had no means to get out of the misery. Some people are forced to live in poverty as a result of failure in business, unemployment, serious illness or big accident. There are also people who live in poverty as a consequence of economic or natural disasters. There are yet other people who are forced to live in poverty because of serious discrimination which takes away from them jobs, opportunity to education, places to live, adequate public services, etc.

For whatever reason, people in poverty are deprived of some basic human rights and the local and central governments as well as international community should endeavor to provide necessary goods and services, including pecuniary assistance,

to ensure the enjoyment by such people of the basic human rights. Poverty is often regarded as an issue of economic development. It certainly has that element and further efforts are needed to provide development assistance to eradicate poverty. Poverty is also generally perceived as an issue of humanitarian concern. It indeed has that element, too. However, we have to recognize that poverty itself is a violation of human rights and measures to stop the violations should be taken urgently, not to wait until certain level of development is achieved. Remedies to the victims should also be effectively provided as a matter of responsibility, not just as an ex gratia act, as any other cases of human rights abuses.

1. Poverty as the Result of Human Rights Violations

There is another aspect of the relationship between poverty and human rights. It is that human rights violations are the causes of poverty. As hinted above, severe discrimination against sick people such as HIV/Aids or Hansen's disease patients and their families, or against racial, ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities including indigenous peoples, or against persons belonging to certain social classes including outcaste populations, often pushes these persons into poverty.

Furthermore, mentally or physically handicapped people are often driven to poverty due to the handicaps, or due to lack of adequate education or training because they are handicapped, resulting in no or little earning from work. People in poverty also generally lack good health conditions or adequate education and vocational training which deprive them of the opportunity to engage in decent and adequately paid work.

2. Poverty Induced Violation of Human Rights

There is also the third aspect in the relationship between poverty and human rights. That is, in many instances, poverty is the cause of further violations of human rights. For example, children from the poor families of poor communities are often forced into child labor, prostitution, slavery or child soldiers for small amount of money to live or to support the families. The evil of international trafficking of children and women for sexual exploitation is in a large part the result of extreme poverty. The terrifying stories of selling children's organs seem to happen as a result of poverty.

The persons living in poverty are usually easily identifiable as "poor people" in the way they look, dress or behave and become the targets of social discrimination, or,

in extreme cases, the targets of verbal or even physical attacks.

Women in poverty tend to suffer more in carrying out heavy loads of work to keep the families living marginally even if in addition they often have to carry babies and raise children sacrificing their health and leisure time.

3. How to Stop the Vicious Circle

As has been described, the relationship between poverty and human rights is three dimensional, i.e., (a) poverty as human rights violation; (b) poverty as a result of human rights violation; and (c) human rights violation as a result of poverty. In fact, the dynamic relationship between the two indicates that it is a vicious circle: (a) people suffer from human rights violation because they are poor; (b) because they are poor they suffer from human rights violation; and (c) they become, or remain, poor because their human rights are violated.

In order to stop this vicious circle of poverty and human rights violations, the policy to tackle the problem of poverty and human rights must address both problems together, at the same time and in a coordinated manner. This means that the present structure of international systems and policies to tackle poverty and human rights violation must be fundamentally changed. At the moment, poverty is a focus of international efforts under the large umbrella of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) lead by the UNDP and other international development agencies such as the World Bank. However, in this valuable and meaningful effort, the element of human rights seems to be put aside. On the other hand, the UN human rights discourse seems to ignore the element of the need to eradicate poverty through development process. It is clear from the above analysis that the efforts of UNDP and other development agencies as well as international human rights bodies and forums should pay more attention to the close relationship between poverty and human rights and that their policies must be well coordinated so that both issues of poverty and human rights will be tackled by them together and at the same time.