

POVERTY IN SOUTH ASIA: A Perspective from the Human Rights

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At a time in which the world boasts breathtaking advances in science, technology, industry and wealth accumulation - massive poverty and obscene inequality are terrible scourges of our times. Like slavery, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. And overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life. While poverty persists, there is no true freedom and no future for the millions who are reeling under its burden.

The Rhetoric of Poverty

The poverty of our century is unlike that of any other. It is not, as poverty was before, the result of natural scarcity, but of a set of priorities imposed upon the rest of the world by the rich. Consequently, the modern poor are not pitied...but written off as trash. The twentieth-century consumer economy has produced the first culture for which a beggar is a reminder of nothing.

Poverty continues to intensify due to increasing militarism, environmental degradation, the lack of democratic governance and processes and the exclusion of groups of people on the basis of class, caste, gender, disability, age, race and religion.

Armed conflicts, wars and their consequences destroy livelihoods, undermine democratic processes, human rights including the right to self determination – and divert resources that should be directed to development and social equity. Investing in human security best prevents conflict and builds peace. The protection of people is a universal obligation of all states and international democratic institutions. Growing militarism and rearmament reduces political space and public accountability of states, diverts development financing and ultimately, renders lasting peace illusive and unrealizable. War and conflict disproportionately affects the security, dignity and future of women and children.

Overcoming poverty will not be possible without challenging patriarchy, capitalism and the current model of development, which puts profits before public goods, human security and welfare. Furthermore, implementation of a fairer distribution of land is necessary to overcome rural poverty. International human rights instruments protect the rights of all people to an adequate standard of living and well being, including food, clothing, housing, clean water and medical care. Unjust governance, debt and aid conditionality and trade practices are undermining these rights.

In 2000 the whole world came together to make a solemn promise for 2015, the Millennium Development Goals:

- The promise of primary education for every child
- The promise of an end to avoidable infant and maternal deaths and
- The promise of a halving of poverty

The Millennium Development Goals included a whole range of other promises - to help improve water supply, to improve sanitation, to reduce child deaths and maternal deaths - to do a whole range of good things. To date, the pledges required to meet the Millennium Declaration efforts in South Asia to tackle poverty, inequality, injustice and deliver sustainable development have been grossly inadequate. Governments too often fail to address the needs of the people within their territory, the quantity and quality of aid from rich countries is inadequate and promises of debt cancellation have not yet materialized.

However it is not as though these issues have just arisen they have been well reflected earlier too:

Aristotle, the Greek philosopher said, “The mother of revolution and crime is poverty” .

Mahatma Gandhi too said, “ Poverty is the worst form of violence.”

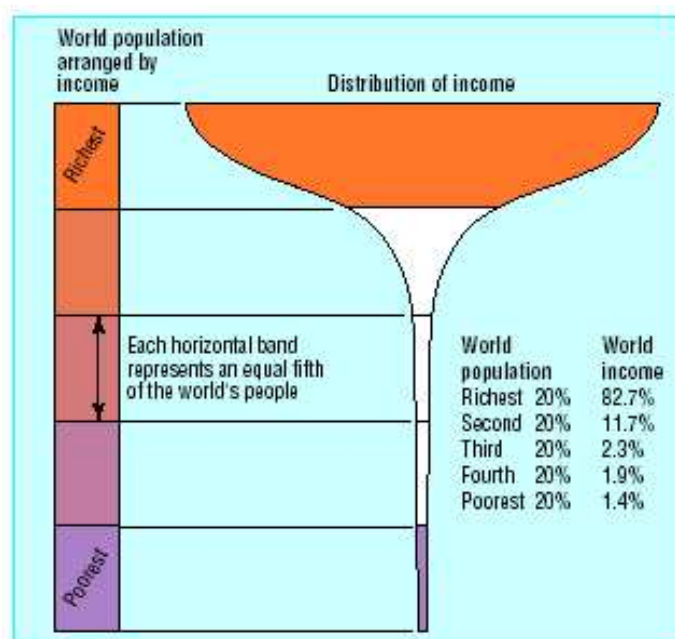
There has been a lot of rhetoric around poverty but, unfortunately, the reality is somewhat different and one of the purposes of this paper is to follow the advice of Spinoza who said:

"Do not weep, do not wax indignant. Understand."

You should therefore leave here after this conference with a greater understanding of the reality behind the rhetoric and why some of these noble statements by very powerful men, women and nations have not been carried through.

The Reality Behind the Rhetoric

The world is a very unequal place and the diagram below shows the income distribution of the world. The population of the world is divided into fifths, with the richest fifth having 83% of the world's income and the poorest fifth having 1.4% of the world's income. It's called the champagne glass of income distribution because it looks like a champagne glass and, unfortunately, this stem is getting thinner and thinner. In the 1960s, the income of the wealthiest fifth was 30 times greater than the poorest fifth. It is now 80 times greater. As the world got wealthier, the rich have got richer and the poor have got poorer or just about stayed the same.



Reality in South Asia too

South Asia is home to 1.4 billion people, constituting 22.2 percent of the world population. Despite being rich in human resources and sophisticated technical skills, yet the number of people unemployed climbed to new heights in 2005. The region faces rising unemployment in the face of sustained economic growth. The common factor that cuts across all the countries in the region is poverty. Poverty and an appalling inequality between the rich and poor are also causative factors for socio-political tension, armed insurgencies, gender discrimination, violence and child labour.

Apart from the Maldives, the population below the poverty line ranges from 26.7 percent to nearly 50 percent. On an average, nearly 31.7 percent of South Asia (around 433 million) is living in abject poverty in the various countries of the region. In all the countries of the region there is a concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few. The average earnings of the richest 10 percent are eight times the earnings of the poorest 10 percent in the region as a whole.

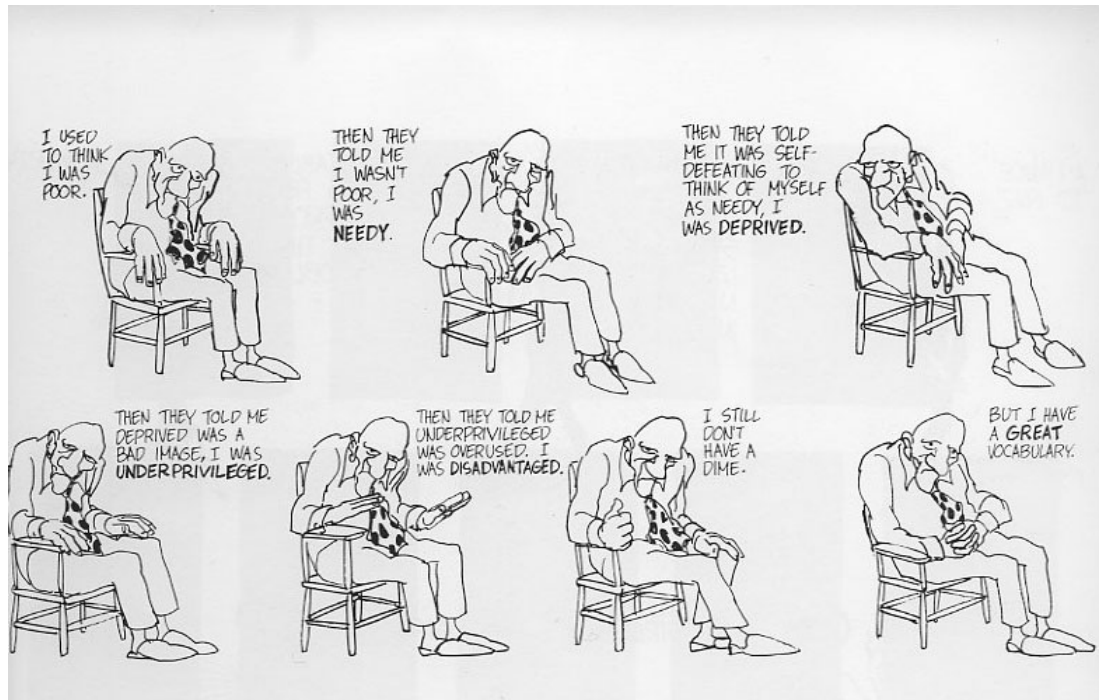
Countries	Richest 10% to Poorest 10%	Richest 20% to Poorest 20%
Bangladesh	6.8	4.6
India	7.3	4.9
Nepal	15.8	9.1
Pakistan	6.5	4.3
Sri Lanka	8.1	5.1
South Asia	8.9	5.6

Note: Other countries such as Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives data has not been taken to arrive at the South Asia figure for computation purposes.

Source: UNDP (2006)

But what is Poverty?

One of the problems of studying poverty is the plethora of language and terms. There are many, often confusing; sets of definitions and people use concepts loosely to mean different things. It can be a very confusing subject to study. This is Feiffer's idea.



Wherever we lift one soul from a life of poverty, we are defending human rights. And whenever we fail in this mission, we are failing human rights."

Kofi Annan
United Nations Secretary-General

Economic deprivation – lack of income – is a standard feature of most definitions of poverty. But this in itself does not take account of the myriad of social, cultural and political aspects of the phenomenon. Poverty is not only deprivation of economic or material resources but a violation of human dignity too.

Indeed, no social phenomenon is as comprehensive in its assault on human rights as poverty. Poverty erodes or nullifies economic and social rights such as the right to health, adequate housing, food and safe water, and the right to education. The same is true of civil and political rights, such as the right to a fair trial, political participation and security of the person. This fundamental recognition is reshaping the international community's approach to the next generation of poverty reduction initiatives.

A human rights definition and understanding leads to more adequate responses to the many facets of poverty, responses that do not trample on rights in the pursuit of growth and development.

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It gives due attention to the critical vulnerability and subjective daily assaults on human dignity that accompany poverty. Importantly, it looks not just at resources but also at the capabilities, choices, security and power needed for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other fundamental civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights.

PEOPLE BELOW THE POVERTY LINE IN SOUTH ASIAN COUNTRIES

<i>Country</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Bangladesh	50
India	29
Nepal	42
Pakistan	33
Sri Lanka	25
South Asia	35.8

Note: Other countries such as Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives data has not been taken to arrive at the South Asia figure for computation purposes.

Source: World Bank (Indicators - 2006)

Country-wise poverty stats

Country	Less than \$ per day	Less than \$2 per day
Bangladesh	36.0	82.8
India	34.7	79.9
Nepal	37.7	82.5
Pakistan	13.4	65.6
Sri Lanka	6.6	45.4

Source: SAAPE: Poverty Report

SOUTH ASIA: GRIM REALITIES

From all of the above statistics we can see that South Asia, with 23 percent of the world's population, is the planet's poorest region. About 540 million people, or 45 percent of the region's population, are living below poverty line, with daily incomes of less than one dollar. This proportion is higher than in Sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Pacific region, including China.

The income disparities in South Asia are one of the largest in the world. All the countries in the region have a dramatic concentration of wealth and power among their richest members. The highest income-earning layer own most of the total income in the region while the lowest 20 percent bracket owns almost nothing.

From this one can easily infer that economic development in the region has never benefited the poor. Even though GNP has been rising annually at around 5.4 percent and per capita income grew at an annual rate of 3 per cent, the average income of the richest 10 percent is still six times the average of the poorest 10 percent. The biggest gap is in Nepal. There the richest 10 percent

earn 10 times the poorest 10 percent. The ratio is seven in Pakistan, six in India and Sri Lanka and five in Bangladesh.

The Dark Cloud

Disastrous living conditions

Out of the total 600 million poor in the region, the poorest 200 million people's average life expectancy is less than 40 years. This is a direct consequence of worsening health conditions. For the region as a whole, the average life expectancy is 62 years. These figures are in stark contrast to those in advanced countries. In the US and the UK it is 77 years while Japan's average is 88 years.

South Asia: regional data from the WDI database

	Population	Life expectancy at birth	GNI per capita	Primary completion rate	Ratio of girls to boys in primary and secondary	Child malnutrition	Under-5 mortality rate	Prevalence of HIV, adults	Access to improved water source
	millions	years	\$	%	%	weight	per 1,000	15-49	%
	2005	2005	2005	2005	2005	2000-05b	2005	2005	2002
South Asia	1,470	63	692	82	87..		83	0.7	84
Bangladesh	142	64	470	77	101	48	73	0.1	74
India	1,095	64	730	89	87..		74	0.9	86
Nepal	27	63	270	75	88	48	74	0.5	90
Pakistan	156	65	690	63	75	38	99	0.1	91
Sri Lanka	20	75	1,160..		102	29	14	0.1	79

Note:

Figures in italics are for years or periods other than those specified.

a. Atlas method; see WDI *Statistical methods*. b. Data are for the most recent year available.

Source: 2007 World Development Indicators database, World Bank, April 2007.

In South Asia, 879 million people are deprived of proper sanitary facilities—661 million in India, 98 million in Pakistan, 91 million in Bangladesh, 18 million in Nepal and 6 million in Sri Lanka.

A total of 278 million people have no access to safe drinking water—178 million in India, 56 million in Pakistan, 25 million in Bangladesh, 1 million in Nepal and 7.7 million in Sri Lanka. In addition, 276 million people, or 22 percent of the entire population, have no access to basic health facilities—that is 50 percent of people in Bangladesh, 45 percent in Pakistan, 15 percent in India, and 7 percent in Sri Lanka.

In the face of such powerful evidence, South Asia is still channeling insufficient resources towards the social sectors. Whenever there has been a fiscal adjustment, the axe has fallen on health and education expenditures. Real per capita expenditures on education have followed a downward trend since the early 1990s.

All the countries, except tiny Bhutan and Maldives, spend less than 2 percent of gross national product (GNP) on public health. India's expenditure on health is just 0.7 percent of GNP. In Pakistan it is 0.8 percent, in Bangladesh 1.2, in Nepal 1.2 and in Sri Lanka 1.4.

As a result of inadequate facilities and poor social conditions, the childbirth death rate is shocking—480 per 100,000 live births in the region as a whole. In Bhutan it is 1,600, in Nepal 1,500, in Bangladesh 800 and in India 437.

Part of this toll can be attributed to the poor health of mothers. About 85 percent of pregnant women aged 15 to 49 are suffering from anemia. In India it is 88 percent, Bangladesh 58 percent and Bhutan 30 percent.

Many of the children who survive birth do not live beyond infancy. In Pakistan the infant mortality rate is 95 for every 1,000 live births. In Nepal it is 75, in India 71, in Maldives 53 and in Sri Lanka 17. Some 79 million children in the region are suffering acute malnutrition. In India alone, 59 million children under 5 years are malnourished.

Shortages of doctors and nurses contribute to the poor health conditions. Throughout South Asia there are only 44.34 doctors per 100,000 people. In India the ratio is 48, in Pakistan 52, in Bangladesh 18, in Nepal 5, in Sri Lanka 23, in Bhutan 20 and in Maldives 19. Across the region there is one nurse for every 4,078 people and one doctor for every 3,684. By contrast, there is one policeman for every 939. Thus there are four times as many policemen as nurses or doctors.

A low literacy rate too contributes to the social backwardness. Among the region's adults, 395 million are illiterate. The illiteracy rate in Nepal is 72 percent; in Pakistan and Bangladesh it is 62, in India 48, in Sri Lanka 10 and in Maldives 7. Women suffer the most. Of the illiterate, 243 million are women, or 64 percent of the total number of women. For the entire region, the illiteracy rate among is 38 percent. The highest rate is in Nepal—86 percent, followed by 76 percent in Pakistan, 74 percent in Bangladesh, 72 percent in Bhutan and 62 percent in India.

Fifty million children in the region are not enrolled in primary education. About 35 million children in India never get any education. Throughout the region, 41 percent of children drop out of school before grade 5. The teacher-student ratio is 1 to 60, with the worst figures in India and Bangladesh—64 and 71 respectively.

The Silver Lining:

Poverty has many dimensions that cannot be adequately captured by one single indicator. First and foremost is to examine the impact of interventions on alternative poverty measures, such as poverty gap formulations. Alternative poverty lines, such as \$5/day are likely before long to supplement the current the \$2/day measure for “moderate poverty” and the \$1 measure for “absolute poverty”. Most important, in the spirit of Amartya Sen, capabilities measures such as education and health, and the human development index (HDI) must be added to the analysis.

Recognizing the fact that one size does not fit all, each nation will need to adopt its own prescription for reducing poverty, however these are some priority areas that call for action:

Social Development

Economic growth can effectively reduce poverty only when accompanied by a comprehensive program for social development. Just as some targeting of economic development is necessary to reach bypassed areas, so social development must be targeted. Therefore, every country needs to have a comprehensive national poverty reduction strategy that provides for (i) adequate budgetary allocations for human capital, (ii) targeting of basic social services to the poor, (iii) removal of gender discrimination, (iv) an effective population policy, and (v) social protection. Beyond developing human capital, the aim must be to strengthen social capital, especially for people subjected to some form of exclusion. Accordingly, targeted programs will be required in the above said five areas.

Good Governance

The quality of governance is critical to poverty reduction. Good governance facilitates participatory, pro-poor policies as well as sound macroeconomic management. It ensures the transparent use of public funds, encourages growth of the private sector, promotes effective delivery of public services, and helps to establish the rule of law. A sound macroeconomic framework is needed to encourage efficient and productive domestic investment and to keep inflation low to protect real incomes of the poor. Likewise, it helps prevent interest and exchange rate distortions that artificially reduce the cost of capital and discourage the use of labor. Good public expenditure management is necessary for fiscal discipline, economic growth, and equity. Thus the creation of a political environment can be created so that poor people and poor communities can be heard rather than suppressed and oppressed.

Gender and Poverty

While nearly two-thirds of the world's poor are in South Asia, more than one-third of the region's poor are women. And poverty is particularly acute for women living in rural areas. In poor

families, the gender division of labor, and responsibilities for household welfare, mean that the burden of poverty falls most heavily on women. Given gender disparities in education, health care, economic participation, and incomes, women are the most vulnerable category.

Trade

Trade can be a powerful force for growth and poverty reduction. Countries that have increased the share of trade in their GDP have grown faster and reduced poverty to some extent. Investments in trade facilitation, such as improvements in customs and ports, significantly increase trade, thereby boosting growth and creating new opportunities for poor people to improve their lives. The benefits of trade facilitation will be greater still if rich countries act to remove barriers to trade and open their markets to developing countries' exports, including better trade policies, and fairer rules and fair terms for poor countries to enter markets.

Military Expenditure

The military expenditure in South Asia in 2006 is (in US million \$) India 25,485.3; Pakistan 4,818.2; Bangladesh 678.3; Sri Lanka 663.6 and Nepal 111.3. Though Bangladesh is higher than Sri Lanka in Military expenditure but per capita GDP of Bangladesh (\$407) is less than one-third of Sri Lanka (\$1,324). According to the wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org>) ranking of the list of countries by military expenditure India stands on 11, while Pakistan 29, Bangladesh 55, Sri Lanka 70 and Nepal 114. Bhutan, Maldives and Afghanistan are not in the list.

Couldn't we do a lot for our over 500 million poor people (who earn less than a dollar a day) with the sum \$32 billion that spent in South Asia in defense in 2006? A fraction of the yearly expenditure in defense could even reduce debts and help in economic reversal, including peace-building efforts in war-torn countries and provide a better living standard for the under-privileged and downtrodden.

Thus we see that the resources needed to implement this **5-point resurrection** agenda are a mere fraction of the resources available -- globally and in most countries. The cost of accelerated action must be measured against the cost of allowing poverty to grow -- that is, against continuing political conflict and instability, against continuing poverty and disease in large parts of the world, against affronts to humanity and human sensibilities.

The additional cost of achieving basic social services for all in developing countries is estimated at about \$40,000 million a year over the next 10 years. This sum is less than 0.2 per cent of the world income of \$25 trillion. The amount needed to close the gap between the annual income of poor people and the minimum income at which they would no longer be poor is estimated at another \$40,000 million a year.

Thus, to provide universal access to basic social services and transfers to alleviate income poverty would cost roughly \$80,000 million -- less than the combined net worth of the seven richest men in the world.

Now the trumpet summons us again -- not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need -- not as a call to battle, though embattled we are -- but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, "rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation" -- a struggle against the common enemy of man: poverty itself.

Can we forge against this enemy a grand and global alliance, North and South, East and West that can assure a more fruitful life for all mankind? Will you join in that historic effort?

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility -- I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it -- and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.

In concluding may I end with the words of Confucius who said, ~~€134~~ a country well governed, poverty is something to be ashamed of. In a country badly governed, wealth is something to be ashamed of.€35

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