

# Poverty Alleviation in the Context of Human Rights

Dr. Wijaya Jayatilaka\*

Poverty is considered to be the greatest threat and challenge to development and peace. It is the root cause of many conflicts that threaten to tear apart society. Poverty is often seen as the result of low or no income or the lack of a means of livelihood. Thus people are unable to obtain the basic necessities of life – food and shelter. However, poverty is more than the lack of income, it is also the denial of choices and opportunities for having an acceptable standard of living. Thus, poverty is differentiated into *income poverty* and *human poverty*. The inability to earn an adequate level of income which would enable people to purchase the basic needs of life, ensuring material well-being, is income poverty. Human poverty is the absence of choices to lead a long, healthy and creative life and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self esteem and respect for others. The Human Development Report of the UNDP (1997) states that, "poverty should be addressed in all its dimensions, not income alone".

Thus poverty has many dimensions. They can be simplified and presented as:

- i. Short life – which is the result of lack of good health care or nutrition.
- ii. Illiteracy – which is the result of lack of access to education. Thus people will be unable to function effectively in the modern world and access meaningful livelihoods.
- iii. Exclusion – which is the result of processes that deny peoples participation in and having a say in important decisions that affect their lives. These would be economic, social and political, at a societal, community or at the family level.
- iv. Lack of material well being –

which results from the lack of income, the means of obtaining requirements from the market place.

## Poverty Eradication Framework for Action

The UNDP in its report of 1997 has identified six priorities for action in order to eradicate poverty. They are:

- i. Enabling women and men to have control of their lives is the starting point. This means empowering them, i.e. to ensure that they participate in the decisions that affect their lives so that they are able to build their strengths and assets.
- ii. Gender equality is essential to eradicate poverty. Women are in the forefront in the efforts towards eradicating poverty in their work at family and community levels. Women can bring new energy and action into community and national efforts at reducing poverty if they are involved actively in the decision making processes.
- iii. Pro-poor economic growth policies. Economic growth alone does not ensure reduction of poverty. This has been shown in the case of many countries such as Argentina, Honduras, New Zealand, United Kingdom and the United States. The three essentials for a pro-poor policy are; placing high priority for a policy of full employment, reducing inequality and moderating its extremes, and accelerating growth in poor economies. The rural poor requires special attention, where priority should be given to support the development of small scale agriculture, micro-enterprises and the informal sector; foster development and dissemination of appropriate technology for these sectors, reversing environmental degradation in marginal regions, and ensuring a small family size.

- iv. Prudent management of the opportunities that occur due to globalization. Although there are some winners due to globalization, the rising inequalities, poverty, deteriorating terms of trade experienced by many poor countries, the UNDP calls for caution and better management of the processes at both national and international levels. It is established that poorer and smaller economies, such as Sri Lanka need to be cautious.
- v. The state must provide support for pro-poor policies and markets. Providing basic education, health care, improving access to assets, pursuing full employment as a national goal, eradicating poverty and inequality are fundamental responsibilities of government. In this area of intervention what is lacking is the political will and not the resources or the economic solutions. In creating an environment that will ensure that the state responses to this need the following are essential; conflict prevention and resolution, peace building and reconstruction, debt relief for human development and poverty eradication, direct assistance, strengthening the commitments to mechanisms of social accountability and good governance.

## Eradicating Poverty

There are three basic requirements for a strategy to eliminate poverty. First the empowerment of the poor, where they would play a decisive role in matters that affect their lives, secondly having the key partners coming together in a unified approach. Namely the government organizations, professional associations, media, the private sector, universities & research organizations, community organizations, trade unions, and political parties. Third, these partners must forge a collective strategy to address the challenge. This will require mutual understanding and the

\* Director, Sri Lanka Foundation Institute

ability to compromise in order to have consensus for a long term collective intervention.

Government should continue to play a key role in reducing poverty. It must provide the necessary environment for effective partnerships to develop. Promotion of political participation by elimination of corruption within politics and public sector through a process of transparency and accountability is essential. Public-private partnerships where the latter is taking a lead role in providing economic growth and employment and having a bottom up participatory planning approach is essential. Prevention of the criminalization of politics, a common occurrence at local, regional and national level in many developing countries need to be reversed. A responsible and free press that protects the freedom of the poor, a social environment that promotes activism in the judicial system, and promotion of civic education contributes positively to the creation of required conditions for the elimination of poverty (UNDP 1997).

### Human Development

Human development is defined as the process of enlarging peoples choices. The most crucial among these choices are those that enable people to lead long, healthy lives, to be educated and enjoy a decent standard of living. Poverty exists where the choices most basic for human development such as those for a long, healthy, creative, life with dignity, self respect and freedom, are denied. Development may be viewed as how well each community from the rich to the poor have advanced. Another manner is to examine how the poor have fared. Both approaches are necessary so that a balanced, inclusive understanding is possible.

### Right to a good life

With the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948,

human rights became a global responsibility. Sri Lanka is also among the many countries that are signatories to the six core covenants and conventions on civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights and the seven core labour rights conventions. Being signatories to these international covenants and conventions makes Sri Lanka also accountable to the UN and the International community to ensure that the rights of her people are respected and preserved. This is a collective responsibility of the state as well as the broader civil society.

### *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes*

*freedom from discrimination by gender, race, ethnicity, national origin or religion.*  
*freedom from want to enjoy a decent standard of living.*  
*freedom to develop and realize one's human potential.*  
*freedom from fear of threats to personal security, from torture, arbitrary arrests and other violent acts.*  
*freedom from injustice and violations of the rule of law.*  
*freedom of thought and speech and to participate in decision making and from association.*  
*freedom for decent work without exploitation.*

Two important freedoms in relation to poverty that the universal declaration guarantees are a decent standard of living and a livelihood. Thus to be above poverty and deprivation, is recognized as a basic human rights by the international community and by the government of Sri Lanka.

Human rights and human development are about securing basic freedoms to people. When they advance together they reinforce each other. Preserving human rights strengthens policies and programmes that addresses human development.

Although much has been achieved in preserving human rights, there still is a long way to go. Further, there are constant and new threats that require

greater vigil and action. The raging conflict in the North and East, economic and political transitions and resultant instabilities, and global inequalities and the marginalization of poor countries and poor people are major issues. These require greater sensitivity and prudent strategies. The massive achievements of several decades of social and human development that Sri Lanka has been proud of is rapidly eroding due to these new threats.

Human freedoms do not advance automatically. They need clear and decisive action. The key requirements for securing human rights are:

- i. Strengthening of the social structures such as norms, institutions, legal frameworks and an enabling economic environment.
- ii. The practice of an inclusive democracy that protects the rights of minorities, provide for separation of powers and ensuring public accountability.
- iii. Considering poverty eradication as a central aspect of human rights.
- iv. Developing a more valid system that would preserve human rights, extending beyond the state to the global arena and which includes obligations of the non-state sectors.
- v. Generate appropriate information and its dissemination to help dissipate myths, and disbelief and help mobilize policy changes and behaviour.
- vi. Commitments from all social groups in society such as the community based organizations CBOs, non-governmental organizations NGOs, media, business community, professional organizations, local and national government, politicians, and opinion leaders.
- vii. Stronger international action and commitment.

Thus, when one considers what need to be done to ensure that there is a

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more holistic development of people, we could identify responsibilities at the individual, community and state levels. Identifying these responsibilities and ensuring that they are carried through by proper monitoring, feedback and constantly building their capacities to enact their roles effectively will ensure eradication of poverty. Being introspective and constructive, innovative and informed are essential for bringing about improvements.

**The individual**

Social groups, communities and the state are made of different collectivities of individuals. First, it is necessary that people are informed and are aware of their rights and responsibilities. This awareness and knowledge can be imparted through formal as well as non-formal education and training. The role of the media is creating a well informed public is critical. Having had the information, using it effectively, seeking more information and acting accordingly is the responsibility of the individual. However, particularly with the marginalized, poor and deprived, this responsibility may not be effective unless supported by other external institutions. Thus the importance of the community based organizations, NGOs, professional organizations, the business community as well as the government.

**The community**

Education, being informed, generating accurate and valid information and acting on the information to plan and implement strategies to eradicate poverty and creating a more enabling environment that would preserve human freedom of choice, create more social and economic opportunities is a collective responsibility. The need for objective research, monitoring mechanisms, dissemination of this information to all stakeholders, by various means including the media are essential responsibilities. Developed communities have committed and professional leaders,

effective organizational capabilities, and informed democratic decision making and long term strategies for succession and institutional development. It is within these community development parameters that effective decision making could take place that address effectively the challenges of poverty and deprivation.

**The state**

The state with its power, and legitimacy holds the key responsibility of creating the enabling environment for the other key stakeholders to become effective in eradicating poverty. Thus a pro-poverty development policy frame, and a governance mechanism that is transparent, effective, efficient and accountable is essential. The effective state apparatus affects decision making at the local, regional, provincial and national levels. Its mechanisms are the public sector bureaucracy as well the parliamentary, provincial and local governmental apparatus. Elected officials of government, the public officials, law enforcement agencies and the judiciary also need to have a focus on poverty elimination, human development and human rights. Human rights and human development provides a wide and a more inclusive framework to make effective decisions to eliminate poverty.

**A human rights & human development framework provides a more holistic approach to assess poverty alleviation programmes such as the Sri Lankan initiatives of Janasaviya and the Samurdhi Movement.**

“The mark of all civilizations is the respect they accord to human dignity and freedom” HDR 2000 ■

**References:**

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