

# ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGIES WITH REFERENCE TO THE DISADVANTAGED SECTIONS OF THE COMMUNITY\*

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## *Introduction*

Causes of poverty are well known. For the sake of refreshing our memory and leading up to the question of strategies for combating it, let me review a few of the major ones.

Despite certain arguments to the contrary there is no denying that poverty is largely caused by systemic inadequacies of our societies. This may not have been the case much earlier in history but has glaringly been so in the industrial era. Over the past centuries, our societies have developed systems and processes of resource allocation and/or distribution which favour certain groups at the expense of others. Our economic systems are built that way; our social structures have been evolved that way; our political systems have been designed in support of that way; and our cultural mores and even religious credos often reinforce that way. Many governments may subsidize and sustain giant corporations on the verge of collapse, presumably fearing the effects of such collapse on the overall national economy, but few governments subsidize individuals, families and communities on the verge of collapse due to hunger, sickness or homelessness on the same scale or with the same attitude as when subsidizing industry despite the far-reaching human and social consequences their collapse would generate. In many countries, dividends of economic growth and benefits of modernization tend to go to those who already "have" rather than to those who "have not".

The shares of national income for capital and corporate bodies far outweigh those for labour. For instance, modern medicine, modern transport and other inventions of science and technology, which are often subsidized in large measure out of tax revenues, are apt to serve the affluent rather than the poor. On close scrutiny, we also find that such crucial opportunities in our lives as, for example, education, health care, cultural development, social contacts and political participation are much more easily accessible to those who already have them than to those who do not, and are, therefore, badly in need of them. With the advent of the technological age, even the life-giving and life-sustaining benefits of sun and air and the beauty of nature, which are presumed to favour each and all equally, serve the rich who can pick and choose a place to live better than the poor who have no such choice.

In this day of multinational corporations, the pattern of resource allocation and benefit distribution suggested above extends beyond national boundaries and the small but affluent, powerful and otherwise advantaged sectors of our societies are increasingly being absorbed into a world-wide socio-economic and political system working in their favour, thus dichotomizing not only national societies but the global one as well.

On another dimension, one observes the relationship between automation and unemployment leading to poverty. Population explosion and its effect on employment, the link between poverty

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and family size via the wage system, etc., constitute still another dimension of systemic inadequacy contributing to poverty. Also not to be overlooked is the dimension of the modern way of life and work caught up in an interrelated process of industrialization, urbanization and mechanization, increasing the risks of accident, mental stress and other hazards which lead many men and women to poverty every day. The agricultural sector is not necessarily exempt from this predicament. It suffers physical and socio-economic dislocations and losses in the process of industrialization and urbanization in addition to their more common effects such as those just mentioned.

Finally, there is the simple failure on the part of our social systems to respond to simple socio-economic requirements as exemplified in erroneous projections of crop yields, fuel needs, market behaviour, birth rate etc., breakdown of transportation systems, bureaucratic malfunctions, irrationality of social institutions and cultural biases, among numerous others, all of which directly or indirectly contribute to the breeding and the perpetuation of poverty.

That poverty is often attributable to natural causes such as drought, excessive rainfall, earthquake, and other natural disasters, as well as to certain normal human conditions such as extreme youth and aging, needs no elaboration. Nor does the fact that poverty can result from certain personal attributes such as low level of intelligence, lack of employment skills, preference for a large family despite a small family income, poor physical conditions or illness, preference for life styles not conducive to financial security, etc. My consideration of these causes of poverty shall therefore be limited to one simple observation: In this day and age, it is difficult to separate the natural and personal causes of

poverty from systemic ones. As it was indicated, natural disasters may be the result of human activities or the machinations of our societies and, certainly in many instances, natural disaster needs not be associated with poverty as long as societies are willing and able to prevent such an association from occurring. For example, there is no reason why tens of thousands of people, including children, should perish from hunger in those parts of the earth affected by severe droughts, given the abundant food supplies available around the world and the jet age transport facilities, except for the fact that the world system as it exists today cannot or would not respond to them in an adequate way.

With reference to personal causes of poverty, we are aware of the close link between childhood diet and the development of the brain, as well as that between nutrition and the capacity for learning and task performance. Low mental aptitude, lack of trade skills, and even "laziness", in other words, may be the result as well as part of the causes of poverty locked in a process of mutual reinforcement.

In short, there are sufficient grounds for assuming that poverty is caused by the inadequacies of our socio-economic and political systems, and that any strategy aiming to deal with it must, therefore, seek to overcome these inadequacies above all.

If we accept this view, in devising strategies to combat poverty we would have to start by discarding the assumption that economic growth and development will automatically lead to its eradication. Economic development can alleviate the conditions of absolute poverty to some degree, but not to the extent, demanded by reality. As far as relative poverty is concerned, economic development is likely to aggravate rather than ameliorate it. The situation to be found in some of the wealthiest countries in the world as well as in many deve-

loping countries attests to this.

An alternative assumption must therefore accept the necessity of either modifying the existing socio-economic system itself to remove or minimize its poverty-causing inadequacies or compensating for such inadequacies to a degree and in a manner adequate. To be sure, many countries have already resorted to anti-poverty strategies based on this assumption, in some instances successfully and in others reluctantly and ineffectively. For instance, many countries adopted universal compulsory education systems, but not up to a level where it will make a difference in terms of anti-poverty impact. Its implementation is also often haphazard, reducing its anti-poverty potential even further. For another instance, most of our countries have one type or another of progressive income tax structures supposedly designed to even up income disparity. But the "loopholes" in them and the nature of other components of the tax system as a whole are such that it is usually ineffective as a measure of redistribution. For still another instance, there are the familiar public assistance measures which, although supposedly to ameliorate poverty, have no real power to do so. If anything, they tend to perpetuate it by sustaining the poor in that condition. What we are looking for in anti-poverty strategies, therefore, are not only systemic modifications and compensations *per se* but certain decisive degrees of them.

We are familiar with anti-poverty measures pertaining to socio-economic problems. Land reform, co-operative movement, construction of reservoirs, wells, irrigation canals, roads and highways and provision of pumps and fertilizers, expansion and/or acceleration of economy and the creation of jobs, stabilization of commodity prices in general and the cost of living in particular, dispersion of industry and other enterprises to underdeveloped areas, provi-

sion of basic services such as safe drinking water, sewage system, vaccination, compulsory education, adequate public transportation system, etc., are all among such measures one way or another. While it will be highly useful to review the various and often serious problems still involved in or associated with these measures which render them ineffective or only partially effective, I am constrained on this occasion to give thought to only those which have not yet been seriously attempted, at least not in the particular context being proposed. Before going on to discuss them, however, let me qualify their potentials by observing that the type of anti-poverty strategy required and feasible is closely related to the level of economy and the degree of industrialization, as it is related to the overall social objectives sought by a country or a people, of which eradication of poverty is a part.

#### A. *Integration of the Poor in the Mainstream of Economic and Social Development*

This is easier said than done. But if we grant that the strategy of reaching the poor indirectly through either a "trickle down" or a "proliferation" effect of aggregate economic growth and development is not really viable, then a strategy designed to reach them directly would seem to be the logical alternative. But what concrete steps or measures should such a strategy entail? In answering this question, we can draw on some of our past experiences as well as break new ground. First of all, such a strategy would call for providing the poor simultaneously with: (i) adequate economic opportunities which will assure them decent livelihood, (ii) skills, knowledge and other abilities useful in making effective use of such opportunities, and (iii) the resources needed to do so, including

funds, equipment and facilities.

With regards to the first provision, at least two alternatives would seem open. One is to bring suitable economic activities, which may be agricultural or industrial, to where the poor are. This would involve not only dispersing industry and other development projects to economically depressed areas or communities but also to design and carry out such activities in a manner which will help to develop as well as utilize the community potentials, whether they be in terms of manpower, raw materials, energy source or market outlets.

The other is to generate economic activities from within the depressed areas or communities. This might be possible through initiatives on the part of certain individuals in the community or on a co-operative basis, although a mix of these two may be more likely in many instances. In Asia, we have at least several anti-poverty-cum-community development models of this nature. From experience with these models and other experiences, a set of conditions which must be met if co-operative or communal economic enterprises are to be successful seem to be emerging. They are that: (i) such community effort be part of a national drive supported by policy, administrative back-stopping and resource inputs, (ii) it be based on a plan closely tailored to each community's socio economic development endeavour which aims toward attitudinal and structural changes on the part of the communities concerned, (iii) it be based on authentic participation of the poor themselves, and (iv) it be linked with the national economy as a whole, whether in terms of finance and banking, consumer demands, marketing system or commodity pricing.

It goes without saying that the above alternative to providing the poor with viable economic opportunities should be

part and parcel of an overall, economic policy geared to expanding employment opportunities such as through labour-intensive production methods and the opening up of new economic sectors or the expansion of old ones.

Whichever of the alternatives may be chosen, the second and the third provisions of the strategy to integrate the poor in the socio-economic mainstream, i.e. skills, knowledge and other abilities which will enable the poor to make use of economic opportunities accessible to them and the resources with which to do so are equally important. An intensive and on-going training not only to instill skills required by the community or the community-based enterprise but to foster an attitude and a life style which will make participation in the community enterprise effective and meaningful in more than monetary terms would have to accompany the launching of such an enterprise. As for resources, it is important that they be provided on well justified grounds, that is, according to carefully thought out plans formulated with the broadest possible participation of the poor themselves. It is also important that, once the resource inputs have been adjudged necessary, they be provided at the right time and to a sufficient degree to serve the purpose. One might also add that community enterprises too marginal in scope and in overall economic viability, such as certain types of cottage industry, cash crops, livestock raising, etc., might help the poor to continue in their marginal existence but cannot serve as their vehicle for joining the mainstream.

Developing community-based economic activities would require a strong national policy encouraging the collaboration and linkage between the poor communities concerned and the relevant economic sectors because, without it, such collaboration and linkage would have a hard time materia-

lizing in most societies. Undertaking such activities would also necessitate evolving and organizing the community infrastructure, which can be difficult and time consuming but well worth the effort in motivated and resourceful communities.

The strategy of integrating the poor in the socio-economic mainstream would also entail involving the hitherto neglected but potentially most promising population sectors such as women, youth and the aged in anti-poverty programmes as well as in the overall national development process. We know that in most countries of the region, women contribute to the growth of national economy as much as men, although their share in national income may not suggest this. We also know that in those few countries of the region which have achieved notable success in rural development through community approach, women played important and, in some respects, crucial roles. But, even without these experiences to guide us, the simple recognition that women constitute half of any population, they are key members of families who carry out such vital functions as child-rearing, including the instillation of values, mores and habits which form the basis of its future attitudes toward life and work, management of the well-being of other family members, neighbourhood and community relations, etc., and they can be as potent an economic force as men, given the chance, is enough to convince us that involving women in the effort to alleviate poverty is a must.

The case for involving youth is equally cogent. They are, in general, not only the most energetic and creative sector of the population, but in most developing countries, they are also the best educated and, the most highly motivated. The tendency on the part of many societies to dismiss them as immature, inexperienced and unreliable would therefore seem a misjudgement of

great magnitude.

Integration of the aged in anti-poverty measures is important for at least three reasons. One, along with the women and children, they are most likely to be among the poor. Any socio-economic measure supposedly on their behalf should, therefore, be designed and carried out with as much of their participation as possible. Two, many of the aged are still quite productive. This productivity should be utilized to the maximum. And, three, to involve the aged and to utilize their ability in their own interest, is a natural way of sustaining them as fully functioning members of a community or a society.

The last point I wish to make in connection with the strategy of integrating the poor is in the nature of a generalized re-statement of what have already been touched upon above, namely, their participation. This is a much studied and discussed subject so that one need not dwell on it. But a couple of observations bear reiteration.

It is often said, on the one hand, that the poor are too ignorant, too apathetic and too much in the grip of old habits and ways of life to be able to help themselves. It is said on the other hand, that it is no use pouring in assistance to them because their capacity to utilize it is limited. And many experiences in the anti-poverty drive would seem to support this view. But, in the region and elsewhere, there are instances which refute this view, instances of uneducated and apathetic poor communities propelling themselves out of their old trap. Among the factors which seemed to have made the difference in these latter instances are: (i) the right incentives, adequate and tangible enough to motivate the poor toward self mobilization. (ii) clearly, if flexibly, defined structure of participation which will enable them to mobilize purposefully and effectively: and (iii) external sup-

port which can be crucial in rendering their self-mobilization fruitful. There is no "Source book" which can tell us in full what such incentives, structures of participation and external support should be like, but one shortcut to finding out would be to put the questions to the poor themselves and let them find their own answers through a process of self-mobilization and participation. A priest with considerable experiences with the poor in South America once said to the effect that even the most illiterate knows what is good for him and he has no problem grasping the chance to attain it if such ever comes his way.

#### B. *Minimum Income Security Net*

Even while many of the poor may successfully engage in community-based economic activities and others not so based, for those who are not entrepreneurs themselves but wage workers, employment *per se* is no guarantee against poverty. Millions of people including women, children and the aged are in jobs which perpetuate them in poverty. It is unfair on any scale that someone giving everything one has on a job should be paid for his effort a small fraction of what goes to another person perhaps doing his best on another job or on the other side of the employer-employee relationship. This unfair practice of income sharing is usually rationalized on the basis of the principle of supply and demand and the cost competitiveness, in other words, on market principle. But it is well known that market principle in its strict sense is not really operative anywhere any more, if it ever was. Even if it were, it is one of the most dehumanizing principles man had in his nature to invest and adhere to. If the ultimate aim of human activities is to make us and our societies more truly human, continued reliance on this principle to rationalize our societies'

indifference to human suffering and debasement would be self-defeating, to say the least. Specifically with reference to making a product cost competitive, what seems to be usually left out of consideration is the possibility of narrowing capital's share of the profit. There is no reason why cost competitiveness should be achieved primarily on low wages. There is the question of capital investment needs, but in this day and age, how many entrepreneurs rely on their own capital only? In fact, major industries, especially in developing countries, depend on government guaranteed loans and subsidies, which is to say, on public support. Capital investment needs as such, therefore, cannot entirely justify the below subsistence level wages of many countries.

Along with the argument in favour of a living wage, a case can be made in support of a need-based or family size-based wage system. But this too is a familiar argument requiring no elaboration. What matters is that our societies must come up with a plan to assure a minimum adequate level of living to all their members. This means that the more conventional "social security" measures consisting of social insurance, public assistance etc., must be expanded in coverage, significantly raised in benefit level, and augmented by measures of income supplement, free education, low cost health service, housing, public transportation, day care services, and other appropriate measures. As a matter of practicality, and as a matter of principle, our societies can no longer afford to let the poor wait until the development process reaches them in its own good time.

#### C. *Other Systemic Changes*

As either pre-conditions or concomitant of the above two strategies, at least four other types of systemic change would seem to be called for. To cite without ela-

boration, they are:

- (a) Abolition of all types of class systems which prevent upward mobility on the part of those belonging to the wrong category;
- (b) abolition of Socio-cultural mores and taboos which deprive a large population sector of the opportunities for fuller economic and social participation;
- (c) changing the political structure to make it responsive to the needs of the majority which are also often poor and underprivileged; and
- (d) changing the existing international economic order in favour of the poor nations, particularly their poor sectors.

It is more than three decades since the world community has resolved to conquer poverty through "development". While some countries have made conspicuous headways in this direction, most are still far from reaching their goal. Furthermore, in the overall world context of unprecedented material affluence, the gap between the rich and the poor is wider today des-

pite the massive infusion of resources into numerous development programmes all over the world. This failure of past development efforts to eradicate poverty perhaps attests that without redressing the inadequacies of existing socio-economic and political systems, no amount of development programmes and related resource inputs can reach the poor. In the foregoing, certain systemic changes to modify or compensate for these inadequacies have been suggested. But, clearly, these changes cannot occur without first reordering the global and national development priorities in favour of the poor nations and the poor sectors.

It has been said that such reordering of priorities will necessitate above all a political will on the part of the societies concerned. But if "political will" carries the connotation of a value choice or a moral decision, then I am obliged to assert that such a view is misleading because, today, eradication of poverty is not a matter of moral or ethical obligation but one of pragmatic necessity in both the economic and political sense. It is this necessity which dictates the reordering of development priorities in favour of the poor.