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**A HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO POVERTY ERADICATION:  
STRATEGIES AND EXPERIENCES FROM THE FIELD**

**Let me start by saying that there is no doubt in my mind that if human rights were carried out to the full implications of their potential, then poverty would be eradicated. Not only extreme poverty, but poverty in general. Also, new discourses and new values would be created that would help make the situation created by human rights sustainable.**

**Let me also say that if torture is a human rights violation, then extreme poverty is also a violation of human rights. Experiencing all kinds of deprivation 24 hours a day, day in and day out over months and years, and maybe also in generations, is torture, slow and painful torture, and as such must qualify as a violation of social, economic and political rights.**

**This said, there are a whole set of dilemmas built into the understanding and implementations of human rights into poverty eradication that need to be spelled out. Even if they are unpleasant for those who believe in the ideology built into human rights and use their lives to implement human rights.**

**To understand these dilemmas better and to be able to cope with them, we need to move out of the ideological sphere and into independent and critical research. Let me give you examples of 3 kinds of dilemmas.**

**1. Let me call the first one *the dilemma of fragmentation*. The human rights approach is an individual approach based on the initiative of collective actors such as the state, the courts, international organisations, social movements and NGOs. The role of each of these collective actors in relation to the implementation of human rights is different. They have different kinds of people involved, use different strategies and have different targets, command different resources, use different arenas, emphasise different agendas and different ideologies, and they are given different legitimacies. The outcome of these very different actors is bound to be different. But exactly how different we do not know. And we know next to nothing about the interplay between the different actors on the human rights scene. To lump them together according to their shared interest, that of implementing human rights, is to lose information, and accordingly to lose the**

understanding of how their impact can be fortified. This is in itself a huge and under-researched area which needs more attention if we are to proceed further.

If the different roles and perspectives were better integrated a major force towards the full implementation of human rights would have been created. I see this Forum as an attempt to create such an integrated force to strike out for a common goal. The ideology is assumed to be in place. However, I see and listen when I wander around at the Forum and here at the Roundtable, that the different actors have very different agendas for their participation.

From outside it looks like the many different actors are seen as working in tandem. Each provides their input, small or large, and each one makes a choice as to which groups to target or which part of the human rights spectrum to prioritise. The expectations seem to be that if each and every one does his or her little bit, then we are moving forward in poverty eradication. Every little step in the right direction counts and should be appreciated, whether carried out by a small local NGO or a huge international organisation. The many fragments are seen as finally fitting together some time in the future. This is democracy in practice. This is mobilisation of the empowered and disempowered joining hands.

At this stage I should say that I know all the organisations represented here are doing an important job of reducing poverty through the implementation of human rights or other means. That is not the issue. The point is: we do not know what the actual outcome of your efforts is. How much poverty of which kind has been eradicated during the last 5 years for example? How sustainable can your inputs be considered to be, and for how long? Is it really poverty eradication or is it poverty reduction, or even poverty alleviation? How much of the organisation's resources are used towards the implementation of human rights? Are those resources used optimally? Are these institutions re-enforcing each other, or are they actually competing for the same resources and public attention? How can they be held accountable within a human rights framework and how can they actually document their part in poverty eradication?

Maybe this model of fragmented inputs and fragmented outputs is not the most efficient to eradicate poverty? Maybe it is? Or maybe we just have to live with what we got, because all these institutions and organisations are already there, partly for other purposes, so we may as well try to make the most of them!

The more I think about this dilemma of fragmentation the more I see the need for more knowledge about what is going on inside the many organisations taking part in this process of human rights implementation. If we want to know about how human rights and poverty are perceived and acted upon within the central actors on this arena we need to study them closer. The way I see it they are a central target for future research on poverty eradication.

2. Let me call the second dilemma that of *individual targeting vs. a universalistic approach*.

One of several consequences of the human rights approach being an individual approach is a minimising of collective solutions.

**The individual is in focus. He and she are allocated certain rights that they at present are missing, and those rights then have to be installed. It means that only those in want of certain rights are the target for human rights efforts. The underlying principle is that of targeting the deprived population as the major strategy. Looking at mass poverty world wide and the depth of extreme poverty it is easy to agree with this position.**

**However, if we turn around and look at some of those strategies that over time have been successful in both eradicating poverty and taking human rights into account, the universal strategies have been the most efficient, while the targeted strategies have lost out. A universal strategy is one which is directed towards the entire population.**

**With fear of being chauvinistic I chose my example from the Norwegian welfare state. A century before oil became a major revenue, Norway was the poorest country in Europe and mass poverty reigned. The rights' perspective came to the fore through the mobilisation of voluntary groups, the church, politicians, labour unions and concerned individuals arguing that all citizens should be treated equally and have the same right to political participation, education, health care, old age pension etc. (This is a very minimalistic version of the history of the welfare state!). Targeting was seen as stigmatising. Funding was to be according to means and the state was to be the main implementer. Very few resources were available, but the principles survived throughout and slowly one universal programme after the other was established. As a result poverty was not only reduced but virtually eradicated. Targeting was not only seen as degrading. Later research has shown that targeted programmes tend not to be sustainable, because the non-poor not profiting from those programmes are less willing to support programmes in which they do not have a stake. Studies also show that targeting increases the marginalisation of already marginalised people.**

**If the principle of universality has supremacy over targeting as a poverty eradicating strategy, and if the fight for human rights is directed mainly towards the poorest segments of the population, we are faced with a dilemma.**

**The opposite side of the dilemma arises when acknowledging that cultural rights more than the other human rights need to be targeted. In Bolivia for example a majority of the population are indigenous peoples with a variety of cultural backgrounds. Targeting their cultural rights are essential for their continued existence, while economic and social rights need to be made universal if poverty is to be overcome on a sustainable basis.**

**Pragmatically it can be argued that targeting is a short term strategy while universalistic measures can be considered a long term strategy. Let me leave it that for the time being and only stress that here we have still another area that needs some keen researchers.**

**3. The third dilemma may be named *the dilemma of boundlessness*, or, when is enough enough? Implementation of human rights and poverty eradication are both unending strategies. There is no way one can say that now, right now, we have reached the point where it can be said: the level of human rights have now reached a point where nothing more is needed, and poverty, however defined, no longer exists. Poverty definitions cover now such a vast range of aspects of human life that fulfilment may never be**

reached. There is always that little extra want or need that can be included in deprivation for some human beings.

Those working with both implementation of human rights and eradication of poverty have a double challenge: neither human rights nor poverty are absolute variables. They can be seen as goals one can move towards, but it is not clear when the final goal has been reached because they are open-ended and boundless quantities.

When speaking of the dilemmas of fragmentation I stressed the fact that the mass of actors in this field is very heterogeneous and have different ambitions for their organisations. Pertinent questions are here: how much poverty eradication do the different actors want and how much can they cope with politically and emotionally? To move from 1 dollar a day to 2 dollars a day is an enormous achievement in itself, and the successful fulfilment of the Millennium Development Goals is an even larger achievement. They are also politically acceptable goals, at least verbally. Still, those goals are just a small step up a very steep incline. What comes after? What kind of scenario do we visualise after 2015? Still more steps in a peaceful transition from mass poverty to somewhat less poverty in a world with a wider spread of human rights?

Where do the different actors stand in this picture? How much poverty eradication and freedom for the masses of the poor can they take? What are the visions they work by, or are there not any visions but just an implicit hope that an incremental model will lead the somewhat less poor into the same kind of world that we see today?

I believe it is necessary to try to understand better the implication of those visions and go beyond the fairly modest visions we now have of the future. Four fifth of the world's population are invited to make use of the human rights framework to struggle out of poverty. What does it really mean? Changes are bound to come within the next generation or so, even if we do nothing. But here we are trying to induce a change, the outcome of which we can only guess.

Once more, you can make good use of researchers to sort out some of these dilemmas and provide better data than those available at present. I have presented you with only 3 kinds of dilemmas. There are plenty others out there in the meeting place between the implementation of human rights and the eradication of poverty.

Comments to questions asked in the audience about the Norwegian model:

It is commonly assumed that once economic growth has been achieved, then it is time to discuss distributional measures towards the alleviation of poverty. The way I see it, this is the wrong order of events. Distributing the windfalls of economic growth post festum is likely to create more conflict and the poor are likely to lose out, because the upper and middle classes are in a stronger position to make their case heard. When the visions about a fairer distribution have been outlined and the principles agreed on before economic growth has yielded results, the level of conflict is likely to be lower and the poor stand a better chance of getting their share of the new wealth.

The World Bank has not analysed the welfare state model or taken into account the possible implications of those human rights' principles that have in effect led to eradication of extreme poverty and poverty in general. In the Bank's publication *World*

***Development Report 2000-2001: Attacking Poverty*** the welfare state is only referred to with a few lines in a publication of more than three hundred pages. Those principles have not been on the Bank's agenda so far.