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Europe - Third World Centre  
Rue J.-C. Amat 6  
CH - 1202 Geneva  
Tel.: +41 (0)22 731 59 63 - Fax: +41 (0)22 731 91 52  
Email: [contact@cetim.ch](mailto:contact@cetim.ch) - Website: [www.cetim.ch](http://www.cetim.ch)

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## THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

by *Francine Mestrum*

*Ph.D in social sciences and the coordinator of Global Social Justice\**

and

*Melik Özden*

*Director of the CETIM Human Rights Programme and Permanent representative to the U.N.*

### INTRODUCTION

If one refers to the data of the World Bank, there are currently almost a billion and a half persons living in extreme poverty throughout the world, living on less than US\$ 1.25 per day, and another billion persons living on less than US\$ 2 per day – which corresponds to almost half of the human race. Although the World Bank's method of measuring poverty is questionable, (v. Chapter III), the fact nonetheless remains that, according to the United Nations specialized agencies, today, some one billion persons suffer from famine and malnutrition; just as many lack drinking water, and 2.5 billion have no access to sewerage systems and sanitation; scores of millions of persons lack housing, and more than a billion are inadequately housed; there are some 200 million unemployed and 900 million working poor<sup>1</sup>; nearly 800 million adults are illiterate; each year 6 million children under five die of illnesses that could be prevented...

For nearly a quarter of a century, the theme of poverty has occupied a prominent place on the international community's political agenda, and the fight against poverty has become the official priority of cooperation and development programs. It has also become a priority for the European Union and

\* Global Social Justice is an association studying social justice as related to international taxation. It is currently working on the conceptualization of a universal transformative social protection mechanism based on the protection needs of all, everywhere in the world, the importance of economic and social rights, the necessity of breaking the wall of neo-liberalism and of preparing a systematic change: [www.globalsocialjustice.eu](http://www.globalsocialjustice.eu)

<sup>1</sup> These are people who have a job (or even more than one job!) but cannot earn enough to live in dignity.

several governments. Such focus and effort are reassuring, yes, obviously, because poverty ought not exist in our world, a world that is so rich. At the same time, one must ask why poverty suddenly emerged as a priority theme. Why was it absent from the political agenda before 1990? And why are we still waiting to see any success for the strategies adopted in the fight against poverty?

Although there is a consensus on the need for poverty reduction, poverty definitions vary according to time, actors and place. This is why it has seemed useful for us, in the present critical report, to analyze the concept of poverty according to periods of history and the powers in place (Chapters I and II) as well as the strategies planned and developed to fight poverty (Chapters III and IV). It will be seen that the quantification of poverty (in figures sometimes) mask many realities (Chapter III). This is also the case for contemporary strategies of the fight against poverty that not only disregard inequality (Chapter III.E) but are bound to fail (Chapter V). The treatment of the subject from the angle of human rights opens unexplored perspectives and constitutes certainly the best strategy in the fight not only against poverty, but also against inequality, and a movement toward universal social protection (Chapter IV).

## **I. WHAT IS POVERTY?**

### **A. The Semantic Fog**

A natural occurrence, an individual problem, a social relation, a political – indeed cultural – problem, a multidimensional phenomenon, absolute poverty and relative poverty, linked or not linked to exclusion, to inequality, to marginal existence – such are the main features of the semantic field in which the concept of “poverty” seeks to position itself.

The choice of words reveals the ideology of those who chose them. For neo-liberals, poverty is, above all, a natural occurrence, an individual problem and a matter of exclusion from markets. The fight against poverty should thus be limited to absolute poverty, up to the level where individuals can take themselves in hand. For conservatives, poverty is a cultural and moral problem linked to marginal existence. For the left, poverty is a social relationship, indeed a social construction and a problem that cannot exist without its opposite: the accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of a minority. The fight against poverty ought not only concern poverty overall (absolute and relative) but also inequality.

It is obvious that these choices have considerable consequences for social and economic policies. What is to be measured? Income? Consumption? Health? Literacy? Vulnerability? What strategy should be developed to fight poverty? A respect for human rights? A social protection policy? A workfare policy putting people to work? What economic policies are to be promoted? A policy oriented to the domestic market or to exports? A policy based on everybody's essential needs or a consumer policy benefiting the interests of transnational corporations? Defense of a balanced budget or a policy of public service development?

It is striking to note that, in spite of the very great contradictions in the definitions and in the policies that emanate from them, it is always easy to obtain a consensus on the importance of the fight against poverty. However, it is improbable that the policies promoted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) will ever be shared by the NGOs working on development and concerned with the well-being of the world's populations.

The documents of the international organizations, just like those of the European Union and certain governments, often remain vague so that their deep meaning is not immediately discernible. In fact, the semantic fog has real advantages. It makes it possible to mask the intentions of the advocates of the fight against poverty, and it facilitates the building of a consensus on the matter. It is true that it is difficult to be “against” the fight against poverty. But this initial position ought to incite us to be

vigilant, in order to avoid being channeled into a course of action opposite to what we really want.

## **B. A Multidisciplinary field of research**

These opening remarks lead us to a second point: the multitude of disciplines engaged in the study of poverty. Poverty is studied by economists, sociologists, historians, psychologists, anthropologists... and each one has her/his own definitions and methodologies. There is no single theoretical framework, no common approach.

Certainly, the multidisciplinary approach could be useful if there were a reciprocal fertilization across the lines of the disciplines, but that is not the case. Economists continue to measure and research the relationships between various economic policies and the evolution of poverty, sociologists study the relationships between the various dimensions of poverty, historians analyze the past, anthropologists examine the “perception” of poverty, and psychologists explore the “internal wounds” that a situation of deprivation causes.

This brief description does not do justice to the real and well intentioned efforts of researchers. However, the fact remains that the research on poverty has long been particularly poor<sup>2</sup>. And one of the fundamental questions in this regard has never been answered: in what way does knowledge of what poverty consists of, of how it is experienced and of exactly how many persons are concerned in our societies, help us to reduce the number of poor? Almost all the definitions are normative and include the way that one believes poverty can be cured, but current research takes place, for the most part, in a closed compartment, apart from the society in which poverty is to be found.

## **C. What is Lacking in the Research**

On this point, the organization of the research reveals its weaknesses. Since, over the last decades, a major part of research was financed directly or indirectly by those who made the fight against poverty their priority, this research was inevitably characterized by their implicit ideological choices.

Thus, while it is not very difficult to find considerable research on the problems of measuring poverty; on multidimensional poverty; on the relation between poverty and gender; on the poverty of specific groups within society such as the elderly, children, indigenous peoples; on poverty and human rights; on poverty and the role of remittances from migrants; much rarer, if not downright inexistent, is the research on the relation between poverty and the labor market, between poverty and public services and social protection.<sup>3</sup> And one speaks just as rarely of the causes of poverty.

Today, three major tendencies continue to influence the thinking on poverty, but they do not all lead to useful research.

First of all, Marxism. For Marx, poverty is a necessary condition for capitalist production. It derives from a relative overpopulation, resulting from technological progress that makes it possible to adjust wages to a strict vital minimum. This overpopulation constitutes the industrial reserve army. Below it, one finds the dangerous classes that have ceased to be functional for capitalism (vagrants, criminals, beggars...).

Then, there is Malthusianism. For Malthus, poverty is related to the surplus working class population, which tends to grow beyond its means of subsistence. Help given to the poor only makes them more prolific. Thus, one creates more poor by helping them.

Finally, there is neo-liberalism (see also Chapter V). For its advocates such as Von Hayek and

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<sup>2</sup> Øyen, E. et al., *Poverty. A Global Review. Handbook on International Poverty Research*, Oslo, Scandinavian University Press, 1996, p.3.

<sup>3</sup> The matter of social protection (social security, in the broadest sense of the term) will be the subject of a later CETIM publication.

Friedman, the poor are those who have remained excluded from the labor market, and must thus be included as rapidly as possible so that they can contribute to producing the growth that the economy requires. This approach matches that of the exploitation of all raw materials, of the whole earth from natural resources to the human beings that people the planet.

#### **D. Multidimensional Poverty**

These divergences in the approach to poverty have the result of almost making us forget that there exists a real consensus on the subject. All, in Europe as in the countries of the South, among the Marxists as among the neo-liberals, agree in saying that “poverty is multidimensional”. By that, poverty as more than – or something other than – a mere lack of income or monetary resources is being emphasized. Poverty would thus be (also) a lack of access to medical care, a lack of training, a lack of adequate housing, a vulnerability, a lack of “voice” (ability to make oneself heard) and of *empowerment*, even a lack of friends and family, forcing one into a solitary existence.

This reasoning appears entirely logical, but it should nonetheless be questioned. First, because the World Bank has taken advantage of this multidimensionality to eliminate from its anti-poverty strategies the question of income. For the World Bank, not only has poverty become more and more “subjective” (notice the differences between its first report in 1990 and the second in 2000<sup>4</sup>), but *responsibility for income is the business of the poor themselves*. The public authorities and markets have as sole responsibility to give the poor the “opportunities” they need to enter the labor market. The conclusion of noteworthy participative research published by the World Bank 2000, states: “The poor do not speak of income.”<sup>5</sup> Literally, this is true, but in reality, the poor speak very much of prices and the high cost of living.

There is a real problem with “multidimensionality”. In fact, if one cannot deny that the poor suffer almost always from a whole panoply of other problems such as the lack of health care, the lack of education, mental illness etc., these problems cannot be considered as being constitutive of their poverty. These are causes or consequences of poverty. Most probably, many of these problems would disappear as soon as those suffering from them disposed of an income sufficient to live in dignity. Moreover, some of these problems can occur among the non-poor or “nearly poor”, who, however, are of no interest to the public authorities. The risk of a multidimensional approach is that it concentrates on all the other problems, which, in market economy, makes it impossible to overcome poverty. And one forgets that the first thing that can help the poor to escape from their fate is the guarantee of a decent income above the poverty line. If then specific problems remain, it is obvious that people must be helped to solve them. The fight against poverty will be multidimensional, but the goal must be to assure the poor of an entitlement or an opportunity to earn a decent wage. Today, an army of volunteers and professionals is focused on the poor without ever managing to make them autonomous nor allowing them to live in dignity for the simple reason that those poor have no steady income.

Poverty then is never considered in and of itself. It is always viewed in relation to other problems and specific social groups, as if poverty, as such, in fact, does not exist, as if there were an obstinate refusal to name it, define it and deal with it. Why?

## **II. THE LESSONS OF HISTORY: THE IDEOLOGY OF POVERTY**

The history of poverty and of the fight against poverty gives us the elements of a response to this question. Bronislaw Geremek<sup>6</sup> studied poverty over a span of five centuries. He noted that in each period, the approaches to poverty were different, the definitions and the solutions diverged. But he

<sup>4</sup> World Bank, *World Development Report 1990. Poverty*; World Bank, *World Development Report 2000/2001. Attacking Poverty*, Washington: The World Bank, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Narayan, D. et al., *Voices of the Poor. Can Anyone Hear Us?* New York: Oxford University Press for the World Bank, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Geremek, B., *La potence ou la pitié. L'Europe et les pauvres du Moyen Age à nos jours*, Paris: Gallimard, 1987.

also noted that there were invariables, attitudes regarding the poor that remained unchanged from one century to another. Chief among these was *the distinction made between “good” and “bad” poor, or in today's parlance, between the “undeserving” and the “truly needy”*.

The “good” are those who deserve our help, the “bad” are those who should be sanctioned. In our time, in Europe as in the Third World, the “good” poor are women, at least those who accept the most degraded working conditions and use their income to feed their families and pay for their children's schooling. In the West, the “bad” are unemployed young migrants who live on welfare to which, we are told, they should not be entitled.

Philippe Sassier<sup>7</sup> has noted that poverty never makes it to the political agenda for reasons directly related to the increase in poverty. The reasons for dealing with it as well as the circumstances in which it occurs are very specific and correspond in general to the need to legitimize those who are in power. This is exactly what happened in the 1990s with the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund). After a decade of “structural adjustment”, (see Chapter V.A.) that spawned social disasters in the indebted countries of the South (without these policies ever having been assessed in terms of poverty for the populations concerned<sup>8</sup>), these institutions needed a policy that would make it possible to forget their responsibility for this social regression. A second aspect can explain the attention paid to the poor by the international institutions: according to neo-liberal belief, social justice is a “mirage” and leads to “servitude”.<sup>9</sup> There is thus no justification for social security, and it most certainly ought not be supplied by public authorities. If people want to protect themselves, all they need do is buy insurance on the open market. On the other hand, the state has the duty to protect the life of its subjects and must – respecting the right to life – do everything to prevent people from dying of hunger. Thus, neo-liberals accept the fight against extreme poverty, but they constantly denounce social protection that includes public services and social insurance. The opposition between social protection and the fight against poverty remains highly significant and continues to orient social policies of neo-liberal inspiration.

Finally, Georg Simmel, the father of the sociology of poverty, reminds us that the poor are never the ultimate target of policies in the fight against poverty. For him, poverty is a concept that does not correspond to the needs of the poor but to the needs of those who dominate society: “If assistance were to be based on the interests of the poor, there would be, theoretically, no limit possible to the transfer of property to the poor, a transfer that would lead to the equality of all.”<sup>10</sup> However, this is not at all the goal. Rather, it is to “mitigate certain extreme manifestations of social differentiation in order to allow the social structure to continue to be based on this differentiation”. In this way, the poor are excluded from the teleological chain of aid to the poor.

This is why it is “so hard” to define poverty clearly and why poverty reached the political agenda of the international organizations and in particular that of the World Bank. Certainly, poverty is hard reality for millions of human beings – indeed, billions (depending on the figures one uses) – throughout the world. And this poverty must be fought. But we shall never know how to do it if we are not aware that poverty is also an ideology. It serves those who are in power, allowing them to legitimize themselves and to advocate anti-poverty policies that are merely a mask for other policies. In the case of the World Bank, the IMF and the European Union, the movement is toward introducing or reinforcing neo-liberal policies and delegitimizing social protection policies. Public money – ever rarer owing in particular to aid to the financial sector and tax policies favorable to the rich – must go to “those in need”. This perverse reasoning puts the poor in competition with workers, and workers in competition

<sup>7</sup> Sassier, P., *Du bon usage des pauvres. Histoire d'un thème politique XVI<sup>ème</sup>-XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle*, Paris: Fayard, 1990.

<sup>8</sup> In 1990, there were only very few statistics on poverty in the world. The question to be asked first of all is whether, with the lay-offs and the dismantling of public services, the victims are the poor or the middle classes, though there is no doubt that impoverishment had occurred.

<sup>9</sup> von Hayek, F., *Droit, législation et liberté. Le mirage de la justice sociale*, Paris: PUF, 1982.

<sup>10</sup> Simmel, G., *Les pauvres*, Paris, PUF, 1998 [1908], p. 49.

with the poor. It displaces the social conflict toward the bottom of society and leaves social relations with the rich intact. Even the left is often insensitive to the ideological use of poverty. In many cases, its language on poverty is limited to merely condemning capitalism and bad development. Thus, the left may have problems developing concrete proposals and actions to change the social relations.

### III. QUANTIFYING POVERTY

#### A. Measuring Monetary Poverty

To confirm all the aforesaid, it should be emphasized that at the time when the World Bank, in 1990, proposed to reorient development policies toward the fight against poverty, it had no statistics on poverty world-wide. It had studies on barely 22 countries and was working with estimations, extrapolations and generalizations.<sup>11</sup> It is also important to know that the international organizations dealing with development (the World Bank along with the United Nations and its specialized agencies) had never spoken of “poverty” before. Certainly, they had dealt with social problems, health problems, education problems, housing problems etc., but they had not not spoken of them in terms of “poverty”. The United Nations had already started to do reports on the world’s “social situation” in the 1950s. The World Bank had tried in 1972 to put the fight against poverty on the agenda, but it had failed. In 1990, it succeeded at the same time that the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) published its first report on “human development” and showed that the social situation of countries and their populations depended on the political will of their governments.

This reorientation of development policies by the World Bank, of course, also made it possible to forget the unchanging economic policies. These no longer derived from democratic process and governmental choice but became once again “mono-economic”<sup>12</sup>, set once and for all by the “Washington consensus”<sup>13</sup> and put into practice by the “markets”.<sup>14</sup>

Starting in 1990, the World Bank began to work on the statistics and its theory of poverty.<sup>15</sup> Overall, one can say that, for the World Bank, poverty is an individual problem that has nothing to do with inequality but that is, above all, the result of governmental policies – and pressures exercised by special interest groups (read workers with legal rights) – who block access of these individuals to the labor market. It is a multidimensional and world-wide problem, an original situation as much as a cyclical problem.

There are different possibilities for measuring poverty. The *World Bank* measures *absolute poverty*. This means it calculates the price of a basket of essential goods and takes that as the *poverty threshold*. The absolute threshold for extreme poverty is currently US\$ 1.25 per day. To determine poverty (including not only basic food to survive, but also other goods), the World Bank used to take

<sup>11</sup> The International Labor Organization had published what statistics were available on poverty in the Third World : Tabatabai, H., *Statistics on Poverty and Income Distribution. An ILO Compendium of data*, Geneva, ILO, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Hirschmann, A.O., “A Dissenter’s Confession: ‘The Strategy of Economic Development’ Revisited” in Meier, G.M. and Seers, D., *Pioneers in Development*, A World Bank Publication, New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.

<sup>13</sup> This term designates a tacit agreement among the financial institutions of Washington: the IMF, the World Bank, the Bank of the Federal Reserve (United States central bank) and the United States Treasury. It follows from this that the IMF and the World Bank grant aid to the countries of the South only on condition that they *reduce state intervention* in economic development policies. In fact, for these international institutions, development can work only within the framework of *trading relations on the private market* and, further, within *a liberalized world market*. *The elements of the “Washington consensus” are: budgetary discipline, a reduction of public expenditures, tax reform in favor of indirect taxes, financial liberalization, exchange rates favorable to exports, the liberalization of trade, measures in favor of foreign direct investment, generalized privatization and market deregulation, protection of property rights.* The purpose is as much political as economic: the reform of the state and the setting up of a world market (see inter alia: [http://www.toupie.org/Textes/Consensus\\_washington.htm](http://www.toupie.org/Textes/Consensus_washington.htm) – French only).

<sup>14</sup> The language of the World Bank is rich in metaphors presenting the economy and the markets as natural occurrences. See Mestrum, F., *Mondialisation et Pauvreté*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2002, p. 125.

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed analysis, see Mestrum, F., 2002, *op. cit.*

the double, US\$ 2 per day, as long as the extreme poverty threshold was US\$ 1 per day; today, the threshold for “extreme” poverty having been raised to US\$ 1.25 per day, the Bank has nonetheless retained US\$ 2 per day as the threshold for poverty.

The *United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)* also uses two poverty thresholds. One is called *indigence* (extreme poverty) and the other, which is double the first, *poverty*.

The *European Union*, on the other hand, measures “relative” poverty, meaning that it considers as being *at risk of being poor* those who earn less than 60% of the median income of each country. Implicitly, the EU takes inequality into account. However, the drawback of this measure is that, in practice, one can never “eradicate” poverty, for in every society, there is a group with earnings lower than others.

These measures can be expressed as “numerical indexes”, which give the number of poor persons or families, or an “incidence of poverty”, which gives the percentage of the population considered “poor”.

Apart from these “simple” measures<sup>16</sup>, one can calculate the poverty “*gap*” (also called the seriousness, the depth or the deficit of poverty), which is the calculation of the transfer of resources necessary to bring the income of every person up to the poverty level. This amount indicates what it would cost to completely eradicate poverty.

Another calculation deals with the *severity* of poverty, measuring inequality among the poor. One can thus give a greater weight to households farther from the poverty level.

“*Poverty profiles*” are also very popular. They constitute a dynamic approach, taking into account the life-cycle of persons. These profiles make it possible to aim policies to specific groups of the population.

These different measures all have their advantages and their disadvantages. The numerical indexes, for example, do not allow an evaluation of poverty over a long period reflecting demographic evolution. Small changes in the indicators can have enormous consequences at the statistical level. And there is nothing easier to make the poverty statistics drop than choosing to focus as a priority on those near the poverty level but who, in fact, have lesser needs than those who are far from it.

A final problem deserves to be mentioned for the international measurements: how does one take into account the differences in purchasing power, and how does one find a common “monetary unit”? The solution used is that of the PPP (purchasing power parity), which is a conversion rate taking into account the differences of price levels among countries. As simple as this may seem, it is very difficult to put into practice with precision. The World Bank does not have data for all the countries that it integrates into its statistics. Estimates are made using econometric regression, assuming that economic relationships here are also valid there, while this assumption is not necessarily borne out by the facts.<sup>17</sup> This explains, for example, that the World Bank had to “correct” its statistics for China for 2007, admitting that it had overestimated the country's economy by... 40%. A slight variation in terms of PPP can considerably influence poverty statistics.

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<sup>16</sup> These measures are not at all “simple” but extremely complicated and very expensive to compute: what prices should be taken into account, those of towns or of rural areas; how does one calculate a person's income when it is particularly volatile; how does one integrate into it informal home production; how does one differentiate between the needs of adults and children within a family; what about different needs arising from work or climate etc.?

<sup>17</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Report 2001*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 133.

## B. Measuring Non-Monetary Poverty

Non-monetary measures of poverty produce even greater variations than those of monetary poverty. As poverty is considered “multidimensional”, one should measure the multiple dimensions at stake. Yet, while for some time now, there have been statistics on access to health care or education, the measuring becomes more difficult as one begins to take into account “lack of voice” (ability to make oneself heard) or *empowerment*.

In recent years, considerable effort has been expended on calculating composite indexes of this multidimensionality. The first example came from the UNDP, which began in 1990 with a human development index (HDI), taking into account gross income, literacy and life expectancy. A classification of countries according to this index gives highly different and surprising results, indicating that governments' social policies have a considerable influence.

In 1997, the UNDP calculated a “human poverty” index, leaving aside income per se but integrating into it life expectancy, literacy, malnutrition of children under five, lack of drinking water and health care and the maternal mortality level.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, in its 2011 report, the UNDP offered a new measurement and a multidimensional poverty index. This index comprised indicators on education, health and standard of living. For the first time, researchers also offered a comparison with monetary poverty, though this did not allow for clear conclusions. A certain tendency seems to be asserting itself in that in the very poor countries monetary poverty is greater while being less than non-monetary poverty in middle-income countries.

Nonetheless, these measurements are very controversial. One may consider that not having electricity and having few assets (radio, television, bicycle etc.), having a rather high infant mortality rate are indicators of “poverty”, yet the question is at what level one will be identified as ‘poor’ – or not. Here also, a slight shift in the indicators produces very different results. And why should one think that at a cut-off point of 30% deprivation – and not 27% or 34% – a person can be “multidimensionally” poor? Obviously, the choice of indicators and measurements are very arbitrary and cannot be defended with objective arguments.<sup>19</sup>

***Multidimensional measures of poverty are very difficult, indeed impossible, to establish.*** Martin Ravallion had strongly criticized the simplest of them: he shows that the HDI of the UNDP is totally biased because of weighting between its various elements. Further, if the correlation between national income and the HDI is very strong, the correlation between the changes of the two indicators is almost nil. The convergence of countries at the HDI level is real, whereas the income inequalities continue to grow. Theoretically, it is perfectly possible to have in Africa and in Eastern Europe comparable levels of literacy and mortality, while having considerable income disparity. Thus, there are reasons to question the UNDP's claim that “the world is a much better place to live in 2010 than it was in 1970...”<sup>20</sup>

A last “method” ought to be mentioned: that of the ***“perception” of poverty***. Building on the claim that only the poor can know what poverty is, the poor are directly questioned about their quality of life, their place in society or their income. It is obvious that this can pose a serious problem in that the responses will be highly subjective and will depend on the context within which the question is asked, whereas the concepts used do not necessarily have a concrete meaning for the person being questioned. Amartya Sen emphasizes also the importance of the informational base and the risk of

<sup>18</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Report 1997*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> Alkire, S. and Santos, M.E., *Acute Multidimensional Poverty: A new Index for Developing Countries*, OPHI Working Paper n° 38, July 2010; UNDP, *Human Development Report 2010*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Ravallion, Martin, *Troubling Trade-offs in the HDI*, Policy Research Working Paper 5484, Washington: The World Bank, November 2010; UNDP, *Human Development Trends since 1970: A Social Convergence Story*, UNDP, June 2010; UNDP, *Human Development Report 2010*.



subjective data that translate only the interiorized values of those questioned.<sup>21</sup> For example, a woman can claim to be “satisfied” with her life because her husband beats her only rarely, all while being extremely poor. One must not forget either that those who will be questioned are already considered poor. There is thus an initial selection already carried out, and the research has as its goal only to see “how” one is poor.

What about the *poverty of women*? Can one speak of a “feminization of poverty”? Even ignoring the difficulty of the definition of the concept (are women poorer than men; are poor women poorer than poor men; do women have a greater “risk of poverty”...?), it is difficult to respond to this question. Poverty is measured at the household level and tells us nothing about domestic income distribution within the household. There are many statistics on gender discrimination, everywhere in the world. Research is currently under way to know more about this, but one cannot at the present time justify speaking of the “feminization” of poverty except if one considers poverty as a non-monetary phenomenon. Regarding United Nations and particularly the UNDP documents that speak abundantly about the gender dimension, one can deduce that there is an attempt to make women into “deserving poor” who pay back their micro-credit, who take care of their children, who feed first their partner, and who accept the most abominable working conditions. Certainly, poverty is not neutral in terms of gender – we know that the correlation between income and poverty is different for men and for women – but we do not yet have sufficient elements to conclude that there is a greater proportion of women in poverty. There is research indicating even the opposite.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, we must look briefly at what one of the most important researchers of our time tells us about poverty. For Amartya Sen, poverty is also multidimensional, but in a way different from what the World Bank means by the term. His point of departure is the diversity of human beings and the realization that, in function of this diversity, there must be different “thresholds” so that all may have the same opportunities to convert the means that they dispose of into effective freedom. For him, poverty is not having an income that is too low but an income that is inadequate in terms of “capabilities”. Sen does not load the notion of “poverty” with a multitude of non-monetary “dimensions”, rather he reformulates the problem by integrating into it rights and freedoms. Freedom is not contrary to equality but becomes one of its constituent elements. In this way, Sen approaches the concept of citizenship. For him, this means being a full member of society, participating, making one's own decisions and being the actor of one's life and one's history.<sup>23</sup>

### C. The Poverty Figures<sup>24</sup>

#### *The Percentage of Poor in Developing Countries*

	1981	1984	1987	1990	1993	1996	1999	2002	2005	2008
<b>US\$1.00</b>	41.9	35.0	29.9	29.9	26.9	23.5	22.8	20.7	16.1	
<b>US\$125</b>	52.2	47.1	41.8	41.7	38.9	34.7	33.7	31.0	25.7	22.4
<b>US\$2.00</b>	69.5	67.7	64.2	63.1	61.4	58.3	57.1	53.6	47.6	42.4
<b>US\$2.50</b>	74.8	74.0	71.7	70.5	69.3	67.2	65.9	62.5	57.6	

<sup>21</sup> Sen, A.K., *La possibilité du choix social*. Lecture given on the occasion the receiving the Bank of Sweden prize in memory of Alfred Nobel, 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Chant, S., *Gender, Generation and Poverty. Exploring the “Feminisation of Poverty” in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Sen, A.K., *Inequality Revisited*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

<sup>24</sup> Source for the four tables: Chen, S. & Ravallion, M., *The Developing World is Poorer than we Thought, but no Less Successful in the Fight against Poverty*, PRWP 4703, August 2008 and: <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTPOVERTY/0,,menuPK:336998~pagePK:149018~piPK:149093~theSitePK:336992,00.html> (March 2012)

**The Number of Poor in Developing Countries (in millions)**

	1981	1984	1987	1990	1993	1996	1999	2002	2005	2008
<b>US\$1.00</b>	1,535	1,359	1,228	1,303	1,236	1,133	1,164	1,087	879	
<b>US\$1.25</b>	1,913	1,827	1,718	1,817	1,785	1,672	1,695	1,627	1,400	1,289
<b>US\$2.00</b>	2,546	2,625	2,638	2,754	2,816	2,807	2,872	2,808	2,598	2,437
<b>US\$2.50</b>	2,739	2,872	2,949	3,076	3,179	3,236	3,315	3,276	3,140	

**The Poor (<US\$1.25/day) by region (%)**

Region	1981	1984	1987	1990	1993	1996	1999	2002	2005	2008
East Asia & the Pacific	78.8	67.0	54.4	56.0	51.2	37.1	35.5	29.6	1.9	14.34
Eastern Europe & Central Asia	1.6	1.2	1.0	1.5	3.8	4.5	5.4	5.6	5.0	0.547
Latin America & Caribbean	12.3	13.9	12.4	10.7	10.8	11.5	11.6	10.1	8.2	6.47
Middle East & North Africa	8.6	6.8	6.9	5.4	5.2	5.3	5.8	4.7	4.6	2.7
Southern Asia	59.4	55.6	54.1	51.1	46.1	46.9	44.1	43.8	40.3	35.9
Sub-Saharan Africa	50.8	54.7	53.4	54.9	54.8	57.5	56.4	52.7	50.4	47.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>52.0</b>	<b>47.1</b>	<b>41.8</b>	<b>41.6</b>	<b>38.9</b>	<b>34.8</b>	<b>33.7</b>	<b>31.0</b>	<b>25.7</b>	<b>22.43</b>

**The Poor (<US\$1.25/day) by region (millions)**

Region	1981	1984	1987	1990	1993	1996	1999	2002	2005	2008
East Asia & the Pacific	1,088	969	826	893	852	642	636	544	337	284
Eastern Europe & Central Asia	6.6	5.0	4.3	7.0	17.8	21.1	25.7	26.7	23.9	2.23
Latin America & the Caribbean	44.9	54.3	51.4	46.7	49.7	56.0	58.8	53.7	45.1	36.85
Middle East & North Africa	14.9	12.9	14.3	12.2	12.7	13.7	16.0	13.5	14.0	8.64
Southern Asia	548.3	547.7	569	572	550	593	589	616	596	571
Sub-Saharan Africa	202	237	253	239	306	348	370	373	384	386
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,904</b>	<b>1,826</b>	<b>1,718</b>	<b>1,816</b>	<b>1,787</b>	<b>1,674</b>	<b>1,695</b>	<b>1,627</b>	<b>1,400</b>	<b>1,289</b>

How are these figures to be interpreted? We can note, first of all, that *the World Bank is the only institution compiling statistics on world-wide poverty*. There are other figures, such as those from the World Economic Forum (WEF), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and researchers such as Xavier Sala-i-Martin<sup>25</sup>, but these are less complete and in the end as controversial as those of the World Bank. All the figures pose problems.

First, the methodology used is of a variable nature – this criticism had been formulated repeatedly, including by the United Nations.<sup>26</sup> Then, the figures from the past are constantly being revised

<sup>25</sup> UNCTAD, *LDC Report 2002, Escaping the Poverty Trap*, Geneva: United Nations, 2002; WEF: <http://www.weforum.org/issues#social-development>; Sala i Martin, X., *The World Distribution of Income: Fallini Poverty and ... Convergence, Period*, Columbia University, October 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Reddy, S. and Pogge, T., *How Not to Count the Poor*, 2002: [www.socialanalysis.org](http://www.socialanalysis.org); Went, R., *How (Not) to Measure Global Poverty and Inequality*, Paper for INEM Conference Amsterdam, 19-21 August 2004; United Nations, *Report on the World Social Situation 2010, Re-thinking Poverty*, New York: United Nations, 2010, p. 45.

upward. This can be the consequence of ever more accurate measuring, but it can also be an attempt to raise past figures in order to more easily reach a “reduction by one-half” in 2015, as required by the Millennium Development Goals (v. Chapter IV.C). This would also demonstrate the solid foundation of the policies imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions. Thus, for example, extreme poverty was estimated in 1980 as affecting 800 million persons. In 1990, the figure for 1985 was lowered to 633 million. From then on, it has only risen: in 2004, the extreme poverty of 1981 was estimated at 1.470 billion persons; this figure was revised upward in 2008 and reached 1.528 billion persons, then in 2012 to 1.912 billion.

What the most recent figures reveal is that extreme poverty has considerably decreased throughout the world, but with very significant geographic imbalances. The drop is essentially due to China and India<sup>27</sup>, whereas poverty has hardly diminished in Sub-Saharan Africa. One will also notice that, if the incidence of poverty is greatest in Sub-Saharan Africa, the number of poor is particularly high in southern Asia. The figures for 2010 remain fragmentary, and the World Bank admits that the economic crisis risks having had a significant negative effect on the reduction of poverty. The Bank has not yet calculated – or perhaps hesitates to publish – its results.

The same question arises for the use of the poverty line of US\$ 2.50 per day. As the World Bank has raised the threshold for extreme poverty from US\$ 1 to US\$ 1.25, the poverty level should also be doubled. But it is to be feared that that would give highly negative results, with at least half of the populations of the developing countries in poverty. In fact, it is to be feared that part of the 633 million persons who, the World Bank claimed, escaped from extreme poverty since 1990, are barely above this threshold and remain extremely vulnerable.

These global numbers are calculated with the “PPP” (Purchasing Power Parity) conversion rate<sup>28</sup> and in constant dollars, yet they remain very unreliable. Also, these poverty thresholds are clearly lower than those used, for example, in Latin America, where calculations are made on the basis of “national” thresholds. The World Bank estimate that extreme poverty in Latin America in 2008 was 6.47%, indicating 36.85 million persons but ECLAC estimates it to be 12.9% and 71 million persons.<sup>29</sup>

Poverty is also progressing in the West. We can take the example of Europe. As we have already noted, the European Union uses relative poverty thresholds, and it considers poverty as multidimensional. According to one of the most recent Eurostat reports<sup>30</sup>, in 2009, 16.9% of the population of the European Union, or 80 million persons, was living “with a risk of poverty” (less than 60% of the median income in each country), 10% with less than 50% of median income and 6% with less than 40% of the median income. The country with the smallest number of persons “at risk of poverty” was the Czech Republic, with 10%, and the one with the greatest number “at risk of poverty” was Romania, with 25%. France has 13.5% and Belgium 15% of its population ‘at risk of poverty’. An interesting point worth noting is that this Eurostat report mentions that, without social protection, poverty would be not 16.5% but 26%.

The most recent report gives a figure of 114 million poor, or 23% of the population, but that refers to the three indicators authorized by the “EU2020” program: the risk of poverty at 60% of the median income, material deprivation and the number of households without employment.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> The considerable drop in poverty in China is essentially due to the agriculture reform policies launched in the 1980s. Industrialization policies play only a secondary role. It should be noted that China had no structural adjustment policies from the Bretton Woods institutions. As for India, poverty has considerably diminished there owing to rural development during the 1980s and significant public expenditures. Since then, the reduction of poverty has somewhat stagnated, owing to ever greater inequalities.

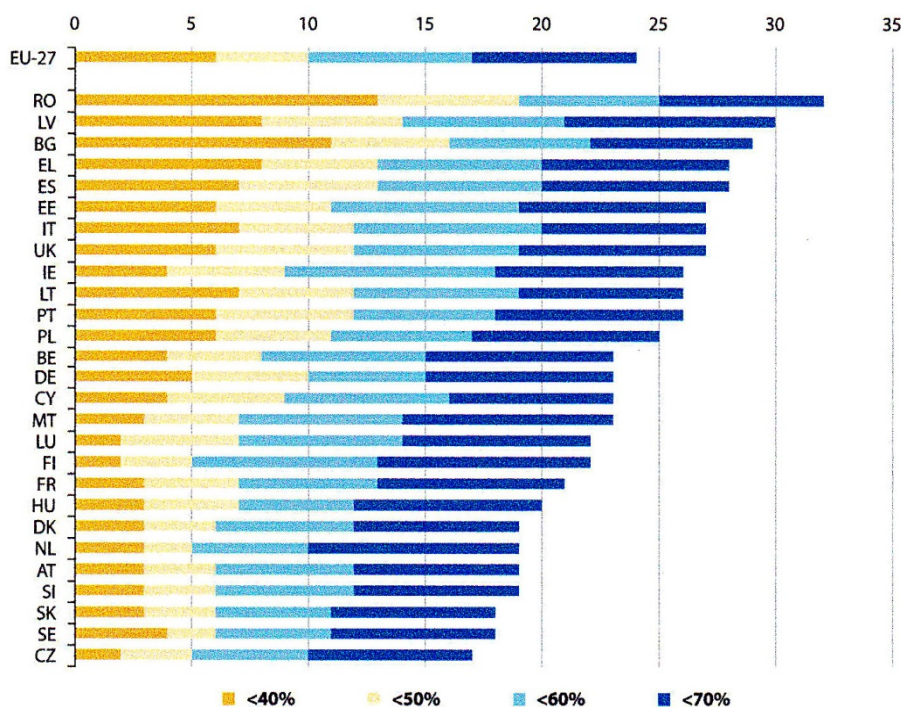
<sup>28</sup> V. Chapter III.A.

<sup>29</sup> CEPAL/ECLAC, *Social Panorama of Latin America 2011*, Santiago de Chile: United Nations, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Eurostat, *Income and Living Conditions in Europe*, Brussels: CCE, 2010.

<sup>31</sup> CCE, *Employment and Social Developments in Europe 2011*, Brussels: CCE, 2012.

## At-risk-of-poverty at various thresholds, 2007 (% of population)\*



\*The reference period for income concerns the year preceding the inquiry for the majority of the countries. The bases 40%; 50%; 60%; and 70% indicate the various brackets of “risk of poverty” under consideration, in percentage of median income.

Source: Eurostat, *Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion*, Figure 3.2, Brussels: CCE, 2010.

### D. How do These Figures Help Us?

There is no doubt that statistics are important and can help in defining better policies. However, questions arise with regard to poverty. Certainly, it is very useful to know which specific groups of the population deserve particular attention: children, the elderly, women, workers, small-holder farmers... It is also very important to know how income and consumption are evolving, in order to see how society is evolving, if poverty is increasing or diminishing, if inequalities are rising or falling.

This is particularly true for countries where poverty can be considered a “residual” problem and where carefully defined and targeted policies can help to eradicate the remaining pockets of poverty. Yet, there are fewer and fewer countries in this category, for poverty has again begun to increase with the unemployment crisis. *But for countries with poverty rates of 40, 50 or even 80 %, is it important to know if there are a million poor people more or less?* It is clear, first of all, that these countries do not need a “fight against poverty” but economic and social development. It can be interesting to see if poverty increases or diminishes, notably in relation to overall growth. If growth is significant without having an effect on poverty within the population, the distribution and social protection policies will have to be scrutinized. But the degree of precision of certain measures of poverty can leave one perplexed. What, exactly, is it all about? The identification of the poor? What is the relation between these measures and the policies that governments might implement? Often, one has the impression that the poor are in a sense guinea pigs in social experiments that will never benefit them.

This is also the impression one gets with the “hearings” of the poor in Europe. Constantly, the poor are asked to speak and make known their needs, to spread out their problems before the general public as for the researchers, for the poor, even if discursively raised to the level of rational human beings, remain, in spite of everything, unknown. They are “voiceless” and supposed to never have been able to express themselves. That is why we must construct knowledge, truth about the poor, why we must question them so that they say what we have to say to them: that they are poor, that they are the vic-

tims of erroneous social protection policies, that they want access to the market. Thus, putting poverty into words corresponds to the technique of the confession, denounced by Foucault as a mechanism of production of truth and of power.<sup>32</sup> It is a ritual that is deployed in a power play, a ritual that produces, among those who articulate it, intrinsic changes, promising salvation but often bringing punishment. It is the non-poor asking the poor to say who they are, how they live, but the interpretation of their words escapes the poor. If they use non-conventional words, if they demonstrate in the street to denounce inequalities and injustices, they are not heard. They will have a voice, but not the voice that one wants to hear – not unlike the World Bank that never hears the poor speak of “income”.

In short, the statistics are important, but one must always look at them with reserve. As the ECLAC emphasizes, poverty is only a descriptive term for a social situation. The poor do not constitute a social group, they are not a classificatory category.<sup>33</sup> Of course, everything depends on what one wants to do with the “fight against poverty”: promote social cohesion and avoid conflicts, eradicate or diminish poverty, promote political stability or reduce environmental problems, mask other policies...

### **E. And Inequality**

It is interesting to observe that inequality does not really seem to preoccupy the World Bank – except when it threatens growth! This, in any event, is what its researchers claim, who, since the beginning of this century, have been pointing out that “the high rate of inequality can disadvantage efficiency and growth”.<sup>34</sup>

From a political point of view, one must ask whether poverty is a more serious problem than inequality. Is not inequality the source of poverty? Various international organizations have studied the question and all note that inequality is increasing alarmingly throughout the world.

The *United Nations Development Programme* (UNDP) has always emphasized inequality, both monetary and non-monetary. In 1992, it published the famous “glass of champagne” showing that the world's richest 20% had 82.7% of overall income, whereas the world's poorest 20% received only 1.5% of overall income.<sup>35</sup> Since then, each year, the UNDP has given shocking figures on rising inequality, without ever specifically suggesting that it be decreased.

The *International Labor Office* (ILO), for its part, notes that there has been above all a redistribution of income in favor of income from capital. Over 20 years, and in 51 of 73 countries examined, the income share derived from labor has diminished. This tendency was particularly strong in Latin America. Another growing gap is that between salaried managers and workers. In the United States, the income of business managers has grown by a factor of 500 in 20 years. In six other countries studied, these managers earned – without bonuses – between 71 and 183 times the average wage of an employee in their company. The ILO notes also that between 1990 and 2005, income inequality increased in two thirds of the world's countries: “Financial liberalization contributed considerably to the spectacular increase of the highest 1% of incomes”.<sup>36</sup>

The rich countries club, the *Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD), has just published a study on inequality.<sup>37</sup> It notes that for the past 30 years, income inequality has been rising, threatening the social contract. The advantages of economic growth go almost entirely to the upper classes. Although the gap between the richest 10% and the poorest 10% in the 1980s in Germany, Denmark and Sweden was 5 to 1, today, the average gap for the OECD member states is 9 to 1,

<sup>32</sup> Foucault, Michel, *Histoire de la sexualité, I. La volonté de savoir*, Paris: Gallimard, 1976.

<sup>33</sup> CEPAL, *Panorama social de América latina 1994*, Santiago de Chile: United Nations, 1994.

<sup>34</sup> Ravallion, Martin, *Growth, Inequality and Poverty: Looking beyond Averages*, World Bank, no date; World Bank, *World Development Report 2003*, Washington: The World Bank, p. 53.

<sup>35</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Report 1992*, cover: <http://hdr.undp.org/fr/rapports/mondial/rdh1992/>

<sup>36</sup> ILO, *Income Inequalities in the Age of Financial Globalization*, Geneva: ILO, 2008.

<sup>37</sup> OECD, *Divided We Stand*, Paris: OECD, 2011.

with extremes of 27 to 1 in Mexico and Chili and 14 to 1 in Turkey, the United States and Israel. In France and Belgium, inequality has remained more or less unchanged. The explanation for this increasing gap lies in the increasing gap in wages. High wages have rapidly increased, whereas on the bottom of the scale, wage have been dropping, among other reasons, because of temporary and part-time work. This is what explains also the increasing number of working poor. The OECD notes also that taxes and social allowances are today less redistributive than in the past.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, faced with 1.3 billion extremely poor people in developing countries, one must also take into account 10.9 million extremely rich persons, the “high net worth individuals” (“HNWIs”), with net financial assets totaling some US\$ 42,700 billion. In 2010, the richest million among them possessed net financial assets of more than US\$ 15,000 billion (15 trillion).<sup>39</sup>

These figures need no comment and explain better than a thousand speeches why there are so many oppressed and exploited persons in the world whom one continues to characterize as “poor”. They call out for the political authorities to take urgent measures to change the course of events.

## **IV. STRATEGIES IN THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY**

### **A. From St Francis of Assisi to the Great Confinement**

Poverty has no doubt always existed, egalitarian societies being and having been rather rare in the history of humanity. But the way one looks at poverty varies from one period to another. The novel *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco explains admirably well the great discussions that took place in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries of our era in Europe and that fashioned our view on poverty. Saint Francis of Assisi preached “the poverty of Christ” and the great virtues associated with this poverty.<sup>40</sup> Yet, it is in this same period that the first “capitalists” begin to appear on the scene, the merchants of the Italian cities. The first question that arises then is if collective property is as forbidden, shameful and sinful as individual wealth. In 1323, Pope John XXII decided that the Franciscans were wrong and that poverty – and certainly voluntary poverty – could not be considered the supreme virtue. Wealth was not to be condemned. Power was passed from the kings to the merchants and bankers, and the Church chose its camp. Since then, the goal has been the accumulation of wealth. Poverty became deviation, it was humiliating and a source of specific sins: envy, laziness, debauchery. And thus began the distinction between the deserving poor, worthy of alms, and those who deserved nothing.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century there emerged ideological theories that would nurture modern social thought. With the great impoverishment related to the expansion of the merchant economy, an awareness of social problems occurred. With the Edict of Charles V of 1531, the prerogatives of aid to the poor passed once and for all to lay institutions. This reform of welfare, at the same time, put an end to the power of the guilds, the first examples of “social protection” from cradle to grave.

At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the *Poor Laws* were adopted in England, remaining in force until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A special tax was introduced to allow municipalities to assist the poor who could not work.

Everywhere in Europe, there was a secularization of welfare, except in Spain. Over time, social reforms became a precious tool of modern states. They made possible social control and condemned idleness. More and more, poverty was identified with a series of problems related to the emerging modern world: beggars, the insane, prostitutes... All those who did not adapt easily to the new times and new rules were isolated, literally and symbolically. They were embarked on the 'Ship of Fools' and excluded from society.

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<sup>38</sup> OECD, 2011, *op. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> Merrill Lynch, *World Wealth Report 2011*, no date, no place of publication.

<sup>40</sup> This philosophy is to be found in other beliefs such as Hinduism, for example.

When poverty continued to grow under the effect of low wages and unemployment, another approach became necessary. The poor were to be locked up in asylums and work houses, thus moving into the punishment and education phase.

### **B. From Mandeville and Marx to social citizenship**

Starting in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, questions began to be asked about the causes of poverty, and the first efforts at measuring poverty were undertaken. Mandeville declared that “in a free nation, where possessing slaves is not permitted, the most secure wealth consists of being able to dispose of a multitude of poor”.<sup>41</sup> Marx explained later on that, in point of fact, poverty is the necessary condition of capitalist production and the accumulation of wealth. Little by little, the poor become “a dangerous class” and a philanthropic movement in favor of the poor willing to work for miserable wages began to develop.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the emergence of social protection systems based on rights and involving social citizenship. This citizenship was theorized by T. H. Marshall, who explained that economic inequalities made civil and political rights meaningless. This demonstrated moreover, if need were, the indivisibility of human rights and the importance of implementing economic, social and cultural rights. These rights are thus the complement indispensable to giving meaning and content to political citizenship. Even if poverty has not been eradicated in Western Europe, it had become (after the second World War) a problem regarded as “residual”, with the great majority of the population having access to properly remunerated employment as well as to public and social services making it possible to guarantee a decent standard of living, even in case of illness or unemployment. These are systems that, currently, are threatened and that risk disappearing. The “social” dimension of neo-liberalism has penetrated into Europe and can create there the same results as elsewhere in the world. It does not attack, first and foremost, the poor, but the middle classes, the workers with decent wages and “acquired rights” and who are considered “privileged”. They risk joining the ranks of the poor or living with income just above, or just below, the poverty level. In keeping with the slogan “the money should go to those who really need it”, social protection programs and public services are dismantled to force all the unemployed to accept any ill paid job.

### **C. From the ILO to the U.N. and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

The founding of the ILO (1919) and the United Nations (1945) were major events that have greatly influenced our view of poverty, and they have made it possible to treat this question from the angle of social justice and human rights. The preamble of the *ILO Constitution*, noting that “conditions of labor exist involving such *injustice, hardship and privation* to large numbers of people as to produce unrest so great that the peace and harmony of the world are imperiled”, affirms that “*universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice*” [emphasis added].

The *United Nations Charter*, while emphasizing in its preamble its ambition “to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom”, lists among its purposes “promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion” (Article 1.3). It also aims for, among its purposes, “higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development” (Article 55.1).

As for the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), it proclaims as the highest aspiration of humankind, “the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and *freedom from fear and want*” (Preamble, emphasis added). This first international human rights instrument, which all United Nations member states have adopted and are bound to honor, enshrines all the basic needs of every individual. According to Article 25: “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of

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<sup>41</sup> Quoted by Geremek, B., *op. cit.*, p. 294.

unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”

These founding documents have guided, and continue to guide, the United Nations human rights bodies and the codifying of a body of human rights called “international human rights law”.

Since the end of the 1980s, a series of activities concerning poverty has been undertaken within the United Nations, beginning within the General Assembly. Among these, it is worth mentioning in particular the work of the United Nations human rights bodies, for these bring the fight against poverty out of the area of charity and into that of rights.

### **1. The United Nations Human Rights Bodies**

In a declaration dealing with poverty, the *Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (CESCR)<sup>42</sup>, states that “*poverty is a human rights issue*” and defines poverty as “a human condition characterized by sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights”<sup>43</sup>

For the Committee, “a minimum core obligation to ensure the satisfaction of, at the very least, minimum essential levels of each of the rights [enshrined in the *Covenant*] is incumbent upon every State party [to the *Covenant*]. Thus, a state party in which, for example, there are many persons lacking fulfillment of essential needs, be they food, primary medical care, adequate housing or education, is a state neglecting the obligations incumbent upon it by virtue of the *Covenant*.”<sup>44</sup>

The first specific study of the question of poverty, within the United Nations, from the point of view of human rights, was carried out during the 1990s by the *Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities*<sup>45</sup>. This study comports very interesting analyses such as that of the effect of extreme poverty on human rights, and in particular on economic, social and cultural rights, and, unsurprisingly, reaches the conclusion that “extreme poverty involves the denial, not of a single right or a given category of rights, but of human rights as a whole”.<sup>46</sup> It must also be emphasized that this study opened the way to other studies and/or mandates within the United Nations.

Also within this body, which had become the Sub-Commission for the Promotion and the Protection of Human Rights<sup>47</sup>, draft guiding principles on “Extreme poverty and human rights: the rights of the poor”<sup>48</sup> were written by a special group of experts<sup>49</sup>. In this document, while repeating the definition

<sup>42</sup> The United Nations body entrusted with overseeing compliance with the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*. For further information see the website of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cescr/index.htm>

<sup>43</sup> *Substantive Issues Arising in the Implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Poverty and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, §§ 1 and 8, 10 May 2001, E/C.12/2001/10: <http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/0/518e88bfb89822c9c1256a4e004df048?Opendocument>

<sup>44</sup> *General Comment 3: The Nature of States Parties Obligations, (Art. 2, para. 1 of the Covenant)*, § 10, adopted in 1990 by the fifth session of the Committee: <http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/%28Symbol%29/94bdbaf59b43a424c12563ed0052b664?Opendocument>

<sup>45</sup> V. also *Final report on human rights and extreme poverty, submitted by the Special Rapporteur, Mr. Leandro Despouy*, E/CN.4/Sub.2/1996/13, 28 June 1996. We regret that this study dealt only with extreme poverty. In fact, the distinction made between poverty and extreme poverty does not help those who want to really fight against poverty, given that it is very difficult to measure poverty with the measures and indicators suggested, as explained above.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, § 176.

<sup>47</sup> This body was replaced by the Advisory Committee of the Human Rights Council with the creation of the Human Rights Council in 2006. V. CETIM Critical Report N° 1, *The Human Rights Council and its Mechanisms*, February 2008: [http://www.cetim.ch/en/documents/report\\_1.pdf](http://www.cetim.ch/en/documents/report_1.pdf)

<sup>48</sup> *Implementation of existing human rights norms and standards in the context of the fight against extreme poverty: Final report* submitted by José Bengoa, coordinator of the ad hoc group of experts, Annex, A/HRC/Sub.1/58/16.

<sup>49</sup> Iulia Antoanella Motoc, José Bengoa (coordinator), Emmanuel Decaux, El-Hadji Guissé and Yozo Yokota.



of poverty given by the Committee (above), the Sub-Commission experts affirmed that “**extreme poverty and exclusion from society constitute a violation of human dignity**”<sup>50</sup> These principles also highlight the obligations of governments and international cooperation in this area: “States and the international community, as well as all the organs of society at the local, national, regional and international level have an obligation to take effective action to eliminate extreme poverty. ... International cooperation must be combined with appropriate action in international trade, market and investment promotion, weapons dealing and labor market regulation to ensure that such cooperation yields results and does not accentuate the cycle of extreme poverty. Cancellation of foreign debt, reduced rates of interest and similar measures should be part of States' international cooperation policies and operations.” (§§ 42 and 43) While these principles are not free from criticism<sup>51</sup>, they bring a human rights perspective to the fight against poverty. From this point of view, this contribution is praiseworthy. Adopted by the Sub-Commission during its 58<sup>th</sup> and last session (August 2006), these principles were submitted to the Human Rights Council for study. At the request of the Council, several seminars and consultations were organized. The final version of the principles was to be adopted during the 21<sup>st</sup> session of the Council (September 2012).<sup>52</sup>

Since the end of the 1980s, the Commission on Human Rights (now the Human Rights Council)<sup>53</sup> dealt with the question of poverty, or more exactly, extreme poverty, and mandated its subsidiary body to carry out the aforementioned preliminary study. In its many resolutions, the Commission always affirmed that “extreme poverty and exclusion from society constitute a violation of human dignity and that urgent national and international action is therefore required to eliminate them”<sup>54</sup>. In 1998, the Human Rights Commission appointed an independent expert on the question of “human rights and extreme poverty”, mandated, inter alia, to “evaluate the relationship between the promotion and protection of human rights and extreme poverty, including through the evaluation of measures taken at the national and international levels to promote the full enjoyment of human rights by persons living in extreme poverty”.<sup>55</sup> This mandate (since renamed *Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights*<sup>56</sup> was regularly renewed by the former Commission then by the Human Rights Council.

The holders of this mandate have studied different aspects of the question and made proposals to combat extreme poverty.<sup>57</sup> Among the proposals, we might mention, inter alia the following.

- ***The Effect of Cash Transfer Programs (CTPs)***<sup>58</sup> on the implementation of the human rights of beneficiaries. The Special Rapporteur reckons that “CTPs are not necessarily the most appropriate and effective means of tackling extreme poverty and protecting human rights in all contexts. CTPs should be seen as only one component of social assistance policies. As such, they must be integrated within social protection systems and grounded by solid legal and institutional frameworks framed by human rights standards and principles”<sup>59</sup>.

<sup>50</sup> §§ 1 and 2 of the guiding principles in the annex to *Implementation of existing human rights norms and standards*, A/HRC/Sub.1/58/16 (emphasis added).

<sup>51</sup> V. in this regard the written statement of the CETIM, “Is poverty a violation of human rights?”, HRC/6/NGO/48, to the 6<sup>th</sup> session of the Human Rights Council (2007): [http://www.cetim.ch/en/interventions\\_details.php?iid=290](http://www.cetim.ch/en/interventions_details.php?iid=290)

<sup>52</sup> At the time of the writing of this report, the final version was still not available. Thus, we cannot express any opinion on it.

<sup>53</sup> V. note 47.

<sup>54</sup> V. inter alia, Resolution 1998/25, 17 April 1998, § 1.a, and also Resolution 1999/26, 26 April 1999.

<sup>55</sup> Resolution 1998/25, 17 April 1998, § 6.a, adopted by a vote of 51 in favor and 1 against (the United States).

<sup>56</sup> Human Rights Council Resolution 17/13, adopted without a vote, 17 June 2011. To simplify the reading of the text in this report, we use the term Rapporteur Special.

<sup>57</sup> Since 2008, this mandate has been held by Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona. For further information on this mandate and the activities of the Special Rapporteur, consult the website of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Poverty/Pages/SRExtremePovertyIndex.aspx>

<sup>58</sup> “CTPs (whether conditional or not) are a component of social assistance policies which aim to establish 'safety net programs' or 'social welfare programs'.” *Report of the independent expert on the question of human rights and extreme poverty, Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona*, A/HRC/11/9, 27 March 2009, 11<sup>th</sup> session of the Human Rights Council, §19.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, Summary, § 3.

- ***The Effect of Social Pensions*** (also called non-contributory pensions) on the living conditions of older people. For the Special Rapporteur, “Non-contributory pensions can significantly reduce poverty and vulnerability among old people”. In the same report, the independent expert also examines the role of assistance and of international cooperation in the area of social security.<sup>60</sup>
- ***The Effect of World Economic and Financial Crises on the Poor.*** According to the Special Rapporteur, “should these inequalities persevere, the result could be increasing social unrest and conflict”. The way out, she suggests, is the establishment of a minimum level of social protection, the promotion employment and decent work, The overhaul of the tax system in favor of the general interest and the implementation of economic, social and cultural rights (the fight against tax evasion, the elimination of tax exemptions that exaggeratedly benefit the wealthy, the regulation of the activities of banking and financial institutions, the creation of a tax on financial transactions...<sup>61</sup>
- ***The Criminalization of the Poor.*** In her most recent report, the Special Rapporteur analyzed “several laws, regulations and practices, which have become increasingly common in developed and developing countries, that punish, segregate, control and undermine the autonomy of persons living in poverty”. For her, such measures currently represent a serious threat to the enjoyment of human rights by persons living in poverty. The Special Rapporteur is particularly worried by “(a) laws, regulations and practices which unduly restrict the performance of life-sustaining behaviors in public spaces by persons living in poverty; (b) urban planning regulations and measures related to the gentrification and privatization of public spaces that disproportionately impact persons living in poverty; (c) requirements and conditions imposed on access to public services and social benefits which interfere with the autonomy, privacy and family life of persons living in poverty; and (d) excessive and arbitrary use of detention and incarceration that threatens the liberty and personal security of persons living in poverty.”<sup>62</sup>

## 2. *The United Nations General Assembly*

Many resolutions of the General Assembly affirm that “extreme poverty and exclusion from society constitute a violation of human dignity”<sup>63</sup>. This affirmation found consensus among all the United Nations member states during the ***World Conference on Human Rights*** held in Vienna in June 1993. The final declaration of this conference reaffirmed that: “extreme poverty and social exclusion constitute a violation of human dignity”.<sup>64</sup>

Among the purposes of the United Nations is “higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development” (*Charter*, Article 55.1). Thus, the United Nations has adopted many declarations, charters and resolutions dealing with the questions of development, trade, cooperation, the right to self-determination of peoples etc. Since it is not possible to mention all these documents within the framework of the present report, we shall limit ourselves to a few of them (in chronological order).

The 1969 ***United Nations Declaration on Social Progress and Development*** affirmed that “social progress and development shall be founded on respect for the dignity and value of the human person and shall ensure the promotion of human rights and social justice, which requires: (a) the immediate and final elimination of all forms of inequality, exploitation of peoples and individuals, colonialism

<sup>60</sup> A/HRC/14/31, 31 March 2010, 14<sup>th</sup> session of the Human Rights Council, Summary.

<sup>61</sup> A/HRC/17/34, 17 March 2011, 17<sup>th</sup> session of the Human Rights Council, § 58.

<sup>62</sup> A/66/265, 4 August 2011, § 1 and Summary, presented to the United Nations General Assembly: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Poverty/Pages/AnnualReports.aspx>

<sup>63</sup> V. inter alia, General Assembly Resolution A/RES/47/134, 18 December 1992, § 1, and Resolution A/RES/55/106, 4 December 2000.

<sup>64</sup> *Vienna Declaration and Program of Action*, 12 July 1993, § 25: <http://www.unhchr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/%28symbol%29/a.conf.157.23.en>

and racism, including Nazism and *apartheid* and all other policies and ideologies opposed to the purposes and principles of the United Nations; (b) the recognition and effective implementation of civil and political rights as well as economic, social and cultural rights without any discrimination”<sup>65</sup>.

In the *Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order*, the United Nations member states solemnly proclaimed their “united determination to work urgently for the establishment of a new international economic order based on equity, sovereign equity, interdependence, common interest and cooperation among all States, irrespective of their economic and social systems which shall correct inequalities and redress existing injustices, make it possible to eliminate the widening gap between the developed and the developing countries and ensure steadily accelerating economic and social development and peace and justice for present and future generations.” This new order was to be based on, inter alia, “the broadest cooperation of all the States members of the international community, based on equity, whereby the prevailing disparities in the world may be banished and prosperity secured for all”.<sup>66</sup>

*The Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition* adopted in 1974 by the World Food Conference stated that “the grave food crisis that is afflicting the peoples of the developing countries where most of the world's hungry and ill-nourished live and where more than two thirds of the world's population produce about one third of the world's food – an imbalance which threatens to increase in the next 10 years – is not only fraught with grave economic and social implications, but also acutely jeopardizes the most fundamental principles and values associated with the right to life and human dignity as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”<sup>67</sup>.

The conference solemnly proclaimed: “Every man, woman and child has the inalienable right to be free from hunger and malnutrition in order to develop fully and maintain their physical and mental faculties. Society today already possesses sufficient resources, organizational ability and technology and hence the competence to achieve this objective. Accordingly, the eradication of hunger is a common objective of all the countries of the international community, especially of the developed countries and others in a position to help” (§ 1).

By virtue of the *Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States*, the United Nations member states committed themselves to “the attainment of wider prosperity among all countries and of higher standards of living for all peoples”<sup>68</sup>.

The *Declaration on the Right to Development* emphasizes that “the human person is the central subject of development and should be the active participant and beneficiary of the right to development” (Article 2, §1)<sup>69</sup>. It also emphasizes the right and the duty of each state to “formulate appropriate national development policies that aim at the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals, on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of the benefits resulting therefrom” (Article 2, § 3).

<sup>65</sup> United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 2542 (XXIV), Article 2.

<sup>66</sup> General Assembly Resolution 3201 (S-VI), 1 May 1974, Preamble and § 4.b respectively:

[http://www.un.org/french/documents/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/3201%20%28S-VI%29](http://www.un.org/french/documents/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/3201%20%28S-VI%29)

It should be noted that this Declaration was accompanied by a detailed Program of Action concerning the creation of a new international economic world order. V. General Assembly Resolution 3202 (S-VI):

[http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=a/res/3202%28S-VI%29&referer=http://untreaty.un.org/cod/avl/ha/ga\\_3201/ga\\_3201.html&Lang=F](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=a/res/3202%28S-VI%29&referer=http://untreaty.un.org/cod/avl/ha/ga_3201/ga_3201.html&Lang=F)

<sup>67</sup> Adopted 16 November 1974 by the World Food Conference, organized by the United Nations pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 3180 (XXIX), 17 December 1973, and which the General Assembly adopted as its own as General Assembly Resolution 3281 (XXIX), 17 December 1974: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/malnutrition.htm>

<sup>68</sup> General Assembly Resolution 3281 (XXIX), 12 December 1974, Preamble (a):

<http://www.un-documents.net/a29r3281.htm>

<sup>69</sup> Adopted 4 December 1986 by the United Nations General Assembly. V. also in this regard the CETIM booklet *The Right to Development*, 2007: [http://www.cetim.ch/en/publications\\_ddevelop.php](http://www.cetim.ch/en/publications_ddevelop.php)

Among the declarations adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, that of the *World Summit for Social Development* (Copenhagen, 1995) is of particular importance given that it advocates social development for all without any discrimination and undertakes commitments for the elimination of poverty.

First of all, the *Declaration and Program of Action* of the Summit define poverty as follows: “Poverty has various manifestations, including lack of income and productive resources sufficient to ensure sustainable livelihoods; hunger and malnutrition; ill health; limited or lack of access to education and other basic services; increased morbidity and mortality from illness; homelessness and inadequate housing; unsafe environments; and social discrimination and exclusion. It is also characterized by a lack of participation in decision-making and in civil, social and cultural life.”<sup>70</sup> Then, “poverty, unemployment and social exclusion” are identified as “profound social problems.”<sup>71</sup> For the member states, poverty is intimately related to the absence of control over resources, especially land, education and training, knowledge and information, capital and influential social relations.

By adopting the *Declaration and Program of Action*, the governments committed themselves, inter alia, to:

- “the goal of eradicating poverty in the world, through decisive national actions and international cooperation, as an ethical, social, political and economic imperative of humankind”;
- “focus our efforts and policies to address the root causes of poverty and to provide for the basic needs of all. These efforts should include the elimination of hunger and malnutrition; the provision of food security, education, employment and livelihood, primary health-care services including reproductive health care, safe drinking water and sanitation, and adequate shelter; and participation in social and cultural life. Special priority will be given to the needs and rights of women and children, who often bear the greatest burden of poverty, and to the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and persons”;
- “ensure that national budgets and policies are oriented, as necessary, to meeting basic needs, reducing inequalities and targeting poverty, as a strategic objective ;
- guarantee “basic social protection”;
- “promoting the goal of full employment” and favoring social integration<sup>72</sup>.

Moreover, the General Assembly has adopted four resolutions (1961, 1970, 1980, 1990) regarding, respectively, the first, the second, the third and the fourth development “decade”. 1996 was declared the *International Year for the Eradication of Poverty* and was the beginning of the first *United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty*<sup>73</sup>. In December 2007, the General Assembly adopted a resolution on the United Nations' “Second Decade” on the eradication of poverty (2008-2017)<sup>74</sup>.

In 2002, the General Assembly also created a *World Solidarity Fund* for the elimination of poverty. For now, this fund is not operational.<sup>75</sup>

Although these affirmations and commitments constitute, in a sense, a road map for the member states and are still valid, they are not implemented. In fact, the General Assembly has not managed to break through the wall of neo-liberal policies. The problem is that the current powerful member states are longstanding supporters of these policies and impose them upon the entire world through, in

<sup>70</sup> A/CONF.166/9 (Chapter II, § 19), 19 April 1995: <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/conf166/aconf166-9.htm>

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., Annex I, § 2.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., Commitments n° 2, n° 3, n° 4, respectively.

<sup>73</sup> General Assembly Resolution A/RES/50/107, 26 January 1996.

<sup>74</sup> General Assembly Resolution A/RES/62/205, 10 March 2008.

<sup>75</sup> General Assembly Resolution A/RES/56/207, 26 February 2002.

particular, the international financial institutions (the Bretton Woods institutions), which they dominate. This is why for some fifteen years now, one sees the influence of neo-liberal ideology in texts adopted during the world summit meetings organized by the General Assembly. The Millennium Development Goals, which are supposed to “reduce poverty”, are among these texts and constitute not only a regression relative to the aforementioned commitments but also a dilatory maneuver to avoid implementing them (v. Chapter V.B).

## V. THE BREAK WITH NEO-LIBERALISM AND ITS REPERCUSSIONS WITHIN THE UNITED NATIONS

In the preceding pages, we have analyzed the inconsistency and incoherence of the World Bank in “its fight” against poverty, given that the economic policies and development promoted by this institution cause an increase in poverty. In this chapter, it is worth looking at the ideology that sustains the World Bank and its influence within the United Nations.

### A. Debt, Structural Adjustment Programs, the World Bank and Its Claim to Fight Poverty

*Neo-liberalism* is characterized by: a limit on the role of the state in economic, social and legal matters; the opening of new areas of activity to free-market principles; a vision of the individual as “an entrepreneur” or “human capital” that this individual will manage to develop and bring to fruition if she/he knows how to adapt, innovate... Neo-liberalism – its advocates present it as being the object of a consensus and as being without any alternative. Its consequences must be perceived as inevitable phenomena that must be accepted. Ideas opposed to neo-liberalism are denounced as archaic.<sup>76</sup>

Neo-liberal policies have been implemented since Margaret Thatcher acceded to power in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States at the beginning of the 1980s and have been progressively imposed on the countries of the world through the conditions (structural adjustment programs) set by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

*Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs)* are intimately linked to the question of debt.<sup>77</sup>, for they were conceived and imposed by the IMF/World Bank duo upon the countries of the Third World, officially “as a response to imbalances in the economy, particularly deficits in a country's balance of payments”<sup>78</sup>, following the debt repayment crisis at the beginning of the 1980s.<sup>79</sup>

Such is the philosophy introduced from the 1990s by the World Bank in order to carry on the “fight against poverty”. It in no way meant giving a “human face” to the Washington Consensus, rather it reinforced the principles of this consensus through a policy billed as “social” but oriented to dismantling existing social protections and public services.<sup>80</sup>

Mandated with lifting the poor out of poverty, the World Bank imposed upon countries policies that aggravated their situation. It forbade any form of subsidies, supports to small holder agriculture, aid for housing, minimum wages etc. The rules were to be decided by “the market”, the state's role being to help the market work better. This state must implement a “stable” macro-economic policy and the

<sup>76</sup> V. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neoliberalism>

<sup>77</sup> For further information on debt, see also the CETIM booklet *Debt and Human Rights*, 2007: [http://www.cetim.ch/en/publications\\_dette.php](http://www.cetim.ch/en/publications_dette.php) and *Let's Launch an Enquiry into the Debt*, published jointly by the CETIM and the CADTIM, 2006: [http://www.cetim.ch/en/publications\\_ouvrages/140/let-s-launch-an-enquiry-into-the-debt-a-manual-on-how-to-organise-audits-on-third-world-debts](http://www.cetim.ch/en/publications_ouvrages/140/let-s-launch-an-enquiry-into-the-debt-a-manual-on-how-to-organise-audits-on-third-world-debts)

<sup>78</sup> Report of the Secretary General, E/CN.4/Sub.2/1995/10, 4 July 1995, § 11, submitted to the 47<sup>th</sup> session of the Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities: <http://www.unhcr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/%28Symbol%29/E.CN.4.Sub.2.1995.10.En?Opendocument>

<sup>79</sup> As in Greece, Portugal and Ireland, policies similar to SAPs are now being imposed on countries of the North by the “Troika” (European Commission, IMF and the European Central Bank).

<sup>80</sup> For a detailed analysis v. Mestrum, F., *op. cit.*, Chapter 5.

rule of law; it must fight inflation and foster competition; it must eliminate customs tariffs as well as barriers to the free movement of capital; it must privatize social services and accept that the cost of those services be paid by “users”; it must deregulate the labor market.

The discourse developed by the World Bank between 1990 and 1995 served to put into place this “knowledge”, this new “truth” about poverty and about the possibilities of reducing it. Social policies strictly speaking are not dealt with in this “order of discourse”. At the most, there is some reference to education and health policies. It is to be emphasized once more that the Washington Consensus policies did not in any way change.

The fight against poverty is presented as being in the common interest, whereas social protection is a matter of individual interests. This approach by the World Bank to the fight against poverty puts an end to modernization and social progress, which were at the heart of development thinking in the post-war (second World War) period.

In 1999, the IMF accepted this priority of poverty reduction and replaced its Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility (ESAF) with a Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF). This allowed for a better division of tasks between the two Bretton Woods institutions, the IMF taking care of macro-economic stability policies, the World Bank taking care of structural policies. Together, they were to require poor countries to set up a poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP) that had to be drafted with the participation of the “stakeholders”. This document had then to be approved by the Joint Staff of the two institutions and, if agreed, would result in a restructuring, a reduction, indeed a cancellation of the foreign debt and financing at a reduced rate of interest.

Of course, the agreement of the two institutions made impossible any policy that might not respect neo-liberal ideology. The participation exercise was given short shrift. As social movements were excluded from the exercise, they began to draft their own documents. A report of the Independent Evaluation Office of the IMF, confirmed the deficiencies of the program: the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility should have been more than a change of label, but the IMF continued business as usual. The report denounced the fact that most of the aid provided could not be used but served mainly for debt repayment and for building up reserves.<sup>81</sup>

The 1999 judgment on structural adjustment programs of Fantu Cheru, an independent expert of the former Commission on Human Rights, is irrefutable and retains all its pertinence today. For him, structural adjustment, which made possible the neo-liberal revolution, “goes beyond the simple imposition of a set of macroeconomic policies at the domestic level. It represents a political project, a conscious strategy of social transformation at the global level, primarily to make the world safe for transnational corporations. In short, structural adjustment programs (SAPs) serve as 'a transmission-belt' to facilitate the process of globalization, through liberalization, deregulation, and reducing the role of the State in national development.”<sup>82</sup> It goes without saying that this analysis is valid not only for the countries of the South but also now for the countries of the North, especially those within the European Union.

### **A. Millennium Development Goals: A Story of a Failure Foretold**

It is in this context that the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals must be analyzed. This also explains why the aforementioned 1995 World Summit for Social Development had no durable results. One year later, in 1996, the OECD published its “international development objectives”<sup>83</sup> which, in 2000, became the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): reduce extreme poverty and

<sup>81</sup> IMF, *The IMF and Aid to Sub-Saharan Africa*, Independent Evaluation Office, Washington, 2007 MF.

<sup>82</sup> *Effects of structural adjustment policies on the full enjoyment of human rights, Report by the Independent Expert, Mr. Fantu Cheru*, to the 55<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on Human Rights, E/CN.4/1999/50, 24 February 1999, § 31.

<sup>83</sup> OCDE, *Development Co-operation Report, 1996*, OECD, Paris, 1996.

hunger by half; provide primary education for all; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce infant mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other illnesses; ensure environmental stability; set up a global partnership for development.

These grand goals are accompanied by 21 “targets” and 60 indicators. They attracted much attention in the rich countries and mobilized major groups among the young for cooperation and development. However, they deserve serious criticism, which is beginning to be heard only today, at a time when it is becoming clear to everybody that they will not be met by 2015.

First, there is a series of elements that has considerably lowered the level of ambition : the reference year of 1990 for the statistics on poverty instead of 2000, the “percentage” of poor and not the number of poor, for example.<sup>84</sup>

Second, the MDGs totally ignore the structural causes of poverty. If overall aid to development were devoted to the MDGs, poverty could nonetheless continue to increase. The world context in which poverty is emerging is also totally ignored.

Third, the MDGs were imposed top down, in spite of all the speeches about ownership by the poor countries of their future. These countries had no choice. This is why they must acquire as soon as possible political autonomy and to define for themselves their development priorities, as the UNCTAD advises them to do.

Fourth, the poverty reduction as imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions continues to push for privatization and deregulation. These policies cannot produce an infinite growth much less reduce poverty. After twenty years of structural adjustments (see above), their economic and social outcomes are negative.<sup>85</sup>

Fifth, the poor countries, it is said, are lacking “good governance”. This is quite true, and it is inevitable after more than twenty years of policies that weaken the state structure and reduce its resources. However, can one speak of good governance without denouncing generalized bad governance, in particular that of the G8, of the IMF, of the World Bank and, generally, of the rich dominant countries?

Sixth, these MDGs will not be reached owing to lack of resources. According to Jeffrey Sachs, the director of the United Nations Millennium Program, the rich countries should be spending between 0.45% and 0.54% of their PIB on aid to development. In spite of the 0.7% objective set by the United Nations 30 years ago, aid is once again shrinking.

Seventh, it is striking to note how precise all the figures for all the MDGs are – except for Goal 8, which refers to the commitments of the rich countries.

Eighth, it is obvious now that these goals have nothing to do with development, neither economically nor socially. They are far from being ambitious and testify to the constant lowering of the ambitions of the rich countries.

Ninth, in spite of the human rights objectives in the Millennium Declaration from which these goals have come, human rights have not been incorporated into the world program. The MDGs do not include any reference to work, either, the reference to “decent work” having been added only in 2005.

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<sup>84</sup> Pogge, T., *The First UN Millennium Development Goal : a Cause for Celebration?*, 2003: [www.etikk.no/globaljustice](http://www.etikk.no/globaljustice)

<sup>85</sup> Weisbrot, M. et al., *The Scoreboard on Development: 25 years of diminished progress*, Washington, Center for Economic and Policy Research, September 2005.

Tenth and last, from the ethical point of view, it is difficult to understand that one is satisfied with reducing by half extreme poverty, a poverty that kills. In a world that is immensely rich, should we wait 25 years to save people from hunger and destitution?

## CONCLUSION

One must face the facts: such as it is conceived now, poverty reduction policies cannot succeed, and this in spite of the well-intentioned efforts of thousands of social workers and volunteers.

How can one claim to fight poverty if, at the same time, one is carrying out policies that create poverty? By privatizing public services and charging those who use them, by laying off workers and reducing unemployment compensation, by maintaining social assistance below the poverty level, by privatizing pensions... one can only increase the number of poor. By the same token, in the Third World, by selling huge tracts of land and chasing small-holders from their lands, by leaving the way open to huge transnational corporations that are not obliged to respect any social, environmental, fiscal, human rights policies, by underpaying the workers, one can only make poverty permanent.

But, perhaps, the purpose of these strategies is it not to eliminate poverty? Perhaps, one might be satisfied just to avoid conflicts, to maintain a certain social cohesion and to help the poor to better formulate their social demands? In that case, the poor are certainly helped and will be better able to evaluate their situation themselves and to present their demands; as for their poverty, it will not be diminished for all that.

The only real solution to poverty is to **end the process of impoverishment**. That means setting up an economic and social system subject to democratic control, which will correct the inequalities and rectify the injustices, an economic system respectful of decent work standards, of the environment, and of human rights. That will also mean creating a system of social protection<sup>86</sup> and public services. The “pursuit of growth” is a dead-end.

That means above all that poverty must be viewed not as a problem of the poor but as a problem of society overall. If one wants to fight effectively against poverty, the crying inequalities of our society must be fought. In 1992, the 20% richest persons in the world had 82.7% of the overall income. Today, 1% of them controls 50% of the world's wealth. In 20 years, there has been a concentration of wealth (and power) in the hands of a tiny minority. It is one more proof – if any more were needed – that poverty cannot be eliminated without an equitable sharing of wealth, without a fair tax system, without **income redistribution**. The fight against poverty and against inequality is not possible through charity.<sup>87</sup> It will never succeed without radical changes: it is the current system that produces ever greater inequality.

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<sup>86</sup> Today, faced with the failure of the various anti-poverty programs, the United Nations is beginning to talk once again about universal social protection and even about a transformative social protection: UNDESA, *Re-thinking Poverty*: <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/rwss/docs/2010/fullreport.pdf>; UNRISD, *Combating Poverty and Inequality*: [http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/\(httpAuxPages/92B1D5057F43149CC125779600434441?OpenDocument&panel=additional](http://www.unrisd.org/unrisd/website/document.nsf/(httpAuxPages/92B1D5057F43149CC125779600434441?OpenDocument&panel=additional); The ILO, for its part, adopted in June 2012 a recommendation on “a social protection floor” related to its campaign for universal social security coverage, cf. ILO, International Labor Conference, 101st Session 2012, Report IV (2B), *Social protection floors for social justice and a fair globalization*: [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms\\_174637.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_174637.pdf)

<sup>87</sup> The rich love philanthropy and spend ever more on it. The 50 biggest donors in the United States spent some US\$ 10.4 billion last year. The great foundations such as Bill and Melinda Gates, Bono, Rockefeller and Ford, give away more than many national governments. Philanthropy concerns only a tiny part of their income and puts them under no obligations. They can give what – and to whomever – they want, and there is no control over their priorities nor over their choices. On the other hand, the powerful of the world (whether legal or physical persons) have recourse to all sorts of maneuvers to avoid paying taxes, to avoid observing regulations protective of safety in the work place, of the environment and of human rights.



Poverty is a denial of human rights (civil, political, economic, social and cultural), as the United Nations human rights bodies affirm. Treating the question of poverty from the perspective of human rights makes it possible to take the fight against poverty out of the realm of charity where it is presently situated. Moreover, poverty cannot disappear without the respect of all human rights, which implies the elimination of all discrimination<sup>88</sup>, the right to an adequate standard of living allowing for health, education, housing etc. These last elements are listed in the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Political Rights*, and governments are under obligation to respect them, to see that they are respected by others (financial and international trade institutions as well as transnational corporations, for example) and to implement them, at both the national and the international level.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> In this regard, see the CETIM booklet *The Right to Non-Discrimination*, June 2011:  
[http://www.cetim.ch/en/publications\\_non-discrimination.php](http://www.cetim.ch/en/publications_non-discrimination.php)

<sup>89</sup> Regarding governments' obligations, see the CETIM booklets on various rights (to food, to health, to adequate housing, to education etc.): [http://www.cetim.ch/en/publications\\_brochures.php](http://www.cetim.ch/en/publications_brochures.php)