

THE CHALLENGE OF GLOBAL POVERTY: STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL OF COUNTRIES IN THE FRONT-LINE

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I am deeply honored to speak at the 2010 annual symposium of World Goodwill, an organized movement that is working for decades to establish right human relations through the use of the power of goodwill. On this very day such symposia are also taking place in Geneva and London. I am delighted that I am the keynote speaker at the New York event.

Nearly 15 years ago, the General Assembly of the United Nations declared that “Eradicating poverty is an ethical, social, political and economic imperative of humankind.” Following the end of the UN-declared First Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006), the General Assembly proclaimed in 2007 a Second United Nations Decade (2008-2017) reiterating that eradicating poverty is the greatest global challenge facing the world and a core requirement for sustainable development, especially for developing countries. The First Decade has generated greater awareness about the nature of poverty and greater acknowledgement of the intrinsic links between eradication of poverty and achievement of global peace and security. The Second Decade has set “Full employment and decent work for all” as its theme and also called for a more coherent and integrated UN system-wide response to poverty. Reiteration of global partnership for poverty eradication was expressed at the highest levels of world leadership at the UN Millennium Summit in 2000 committing to the goal of bringing down the level of global poverty by half, and the subsequent two five-yearly UN-convened Summits in 2005 and this September as well as the global conferences devoted to addressing the needs of the world’s most vulnerable countries – the least developed, the landlocked and the small islands are all a testimony – a least in principle - of the international solidarity in fight against poverty.

Despite all these commitments at the highest levels, poverty eradication continues to be THE challenge of our time. It is a shame that more than a billion people out of world’s six and a half billion are languishing in extreme poverty and widespread hunger and are witnessing serious environmental degradation and demographic challenges when we have reached the heights of material progress. Can we be truly proud of that progress, when such misery and deprivation pervade our world? As we know, poverty has many different faces and affects particularly women and children in most dramatic ways.

Poverty constitutes a barrier to human progress. Feminization of poverty makes that even worse.

The definition of poverty has evolved over time. The invaluable work of Nobel Prize winning economist Professor Amartya Sen – a fellow Bengali, I am proud to say - has contributed to a crucial paradigm shift by focusing international attention on a different, multidimensional concept of poverty and development:

- from measuring development in terms of GDP per capita and poverty in terms of mere income deprivation,
- to a characterization of human development in terms of expansion of valuable human capabilities, with a great emphasis on individual freedoms and rights.

Professor Sen sees “development as freedom”. Hunger and poverty deprive human beings of their dignity and self-esteem, leaving them hopeless and incapable of achieving the kind of life they value and desire. Against this view, “freedom from hunger” is not a rhetorical cry. Poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social exclusion and deprivation, all constitute major sources of what we can call “un-freedom”.

This multidimensional concept of poverty and development goes beyond the meaning of poverty as merely inadequate income. It goes beyond human development to show that poverty is also vulnerability and lack of voice, power and representation.

Widespread discrimination, marginalization, exploitation and abuse based on ethnicity, gender or religion, social turbulence, repression, violence, terror and conflict are all closely linked to poverty and the concurrent lack of basic freedoms.

It is now widely accepted that the eradication of poverty and global peace and stability are two sides of the same coin. In today's world, these continue to be huge and persistent problems, which require, as never before, the international community to stand united in a collective response.

To fight poverty in this all embracing perspective is to ensure *HUMAN SECURITY*. In our ever more interdependent world, this means:

- to protect the vital freedoms of people from critical and pervasive threats deriving from deprivation, economic downturns, and diseases, and
- to empower them to cope with such dangers, so as to enable them to fulfill their strengths and aspirations.

A human rights approach to poverty reduction is now being increasingly recognized and gradually implemented internationally. Such an approach links poverty reduction to obligation, rather than as pity or charity and requires policy makers to identify the most vulnerable people to come out of poverty and destitution. As has been said often, "The poor are seldom poor by choice. Very few people in this world enjoy living on handouts. Most poor people know that they are quite capable of earning their living by their own efforts, and are eager to do so. But they must be given a fair chance to participate".

Nothing could be more depriving than denial of a fair opportunity. It is the right of every human being to be given a reasonable opportunity, a fair chance to come out of poverty. It is the poverty not of earnings but of opportunity that is most crushing. Just think of how the millions of illiterate rural women in abject poverty and discriminated by the society in my country Bangladesh and 60 other countries have brought their families out of poverty and found human dignity through the window of opportunity opened for them only by a paltry microcredit.

Countries that face the most compounded challenges of human security and human development - they all suffer from extreme vulnerabilities that greatly hamper their efforts to achieve sustainable development. The nature of these vulnerabilities range from extreme poverty in the case of LDCs; susceptibility to environmental hazards in the case of LDCs and Small Islands; to physical remoteness from global markets in the case of both Landlocked Countries and the Small Islands. These three categories recognized by the UN as the most vulnerable countries number around 90 countries almost one-third of the Organization's membership of 192 countries.

The core of global deprivation is found in the forty-nine countries languishing in abysmal poverty classified by the United Nations as "least developed". Thirty-three of these are located in the African continent.

When the group of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) was created by the General Assembly in 1971, those were 25 in number. Since then, the number of LDCs doubled. These countries are the poorest

amongst the poor, the weakest segment of the international community. Despite rich natural resources in a number of these, they are too often torn apart by devastating conflicts or exposed to natural disasters.

While globally the average annual rate of population growth has decreased, that growth rate for LDCs has remained high at 2.4 per cent. The combined population of LDCs is expected to nearly triple between 2000 and 2050, rising from 658 million to 1.8 billion. These countries are least able to provide for growing population, which in turn threaten sustainable development and produce further deterioration in standards of living and quality of life. The combination of extreme poverty, population pressures and environmental degradation is a powerful destabilizing factor in ways more than one.

In 2008, as the world leaders were coming for their annual gathering at the UN, the New York Times in its editorial “Failing the World’s Poor” lamented the disappointing performance of the international community in helping the world’s poorest nations. It goes on to say “... whatever gains have been made against the most abject poverty, they risk being undone by the rising price of food.” The same focus is equally fitting now as the world leaders converged for the Millennium Development Goals stock-taking summit at the United Nations in New York. The LDCs tried best to attract their attention to their difficulties that have been made more unbearable as a result of the on-going food, fuel and financial crises.

The LDCs continue to be the voiceless, marginalized and most vulnerable countries of the world since the category was established. These countries do not attract world’s attention unless they are engulfed in conflict or devastated by natural disasters, as was evidenced in recent years in cases of Maldives for tsunami or Haiti for earthquake. The recent world-wide rise in food and fuel prices compounded by the ongoing financial crisis have accentuated that vulnerability seriously jeopardizing the domestic programmes that aim at reducing poverty and meeting the basic needs of these nations’ own vulnerable and disadvantaged.

Nearly all of the LDCs are considered by the UN to be food-deficit, and 20 to be in food crisis. Malnourishment is pervasive and increasing, threatening to undercut recent gains in LDC health and education. This has prompted the UN to identify 26 LDCs to be subject to political instability.

Another example of a “shock” that is generated largely outside of the LDCs but affects them perhaps the most severely is climate change.

Together the LDCs emit less than one half of one per cent of global greenhouse gases. But they are paying a very high portion of the human price. The most populous LDC, again my country, the low-lying Bangladesh, is threatened by inundation due to rising sea levels, as are half a dozen Pacific and Indian ocean small island LDCs. The majority of the LDCs are located in sub-Saharan Africa and their recent vibrant economic pick-up is threatened by the prospect of global warming, drought and desertification.

To regain some credibility, the United Nations and its Secretary-General should be at the helm steering the international community’s efforts to get these countries out of the morass made worse by, in his own terms, the global “development crisis”. Secretary-General had announced early in his office to focus on alleviating the plight of the “bottom billion”. If that catchy description has to be meaningful, then the 800 million – fifty percent of whom barely survive on less than a dollar a day – living in LDCs should get the wholehearted and priority support of the UN system. His leadership for LDCs should be visible in all dimensions of the organization’s work.

Also, what is missing most noticeably from this picture is a mechanism to cushion the external shocks of the terrible “CCs” – climate change, credit crunch and commodity costs – in many cases, compounded by

unplanned man-made and natural disasters. National efforts by the LDCs need to receive adequate, reliable and continuing support by international cooperation. A better future for all mankind is the responsibility of all – it is in the best interest of us all. As long as billions of people have little hope of a better life, our world has no hope of being stable, secure and peaceful.

A world that can afford almost a trillion dollar a year for military expenses MUST afford to mobilize the resources needed to help the developing world fight poverty, inequality and injustice. We MUST resolve to eradicate poverty because the cause of development is the cause of peace.

Let me bring in my concluding thoughts by recollecting what I had said standing in front of the Meditation Room of the UN as I received in May this year a petition signed by more than 50,000 people from 168 countries appealing to the world body to declare an annual Global Oneness Day recognizing humanity's inner unity. I said "I believe that unless we have that sense of solidarity among the peoples of the world, all our efforts of development and peace and security will go nowhere." I added that oneness brings about an appreciation of humanity's interdependence, which supports tolerance, understanding and solidarity, necessary steps toward peace. I joined these well-meaning people this year to observe the first Global Oneness Day on 24 October on the United Nations Day.

I am delighted to say that soon after the event at the UN, on 24 May 2010 the New York State Assembly unanimously passed a resolution affirming that "The United States and other nations must recognize humanity's underlying oneness for the sake of world peace". The resolution declared that "It is of the utmost and urgent importance to the common interests of the entire state of New York, the United States of America and the international community to strengthen the ideals of unity, diversity, harmony and compassion within and among all nations and peoples."

I would therefore wholeheartedly join all of you in your mission that emphasizes that "GOODWILL is the touchstone that will transform the world!"

