

HUMAN RIGHTS AND POVERTY

by Michaela Guthridge¹

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To live a life free from poverty, in dignity, and to full potential is fundamental to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

Poverty in this sense is not simply about a lack of adequate income. It is a multidimensional phenomenon that includes inequality, discrimination and social exclusion.

In the world today, we see the co-existence of what are seemingly polar extremes; greater progress and greater poverty. This only serves to highlight that the 'System', however you define it, has failed. It has failed because it has increased inequality. It has failed because it does not generate decent work.

And it has failed because it has destabilised global climate.

But humanity can decide to make a change. If we reframe our current economic systems of growth; accept, anticipate and mitigate the environmental reality; embrace the positive potential of globalisation to undo the inequality it created; and place a strong emphasis on women in the economy, we can eradicate poverty.



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However, for sustainability and social policies to be transformative, they must not be confined to the "emergency button". The relationship between economic policy and other policies cannot be one where growth is paramount and sustainability and social policies are merely corrective tools for

undesirable consequences of growth (such as "jobless growth"). Sustainability and social policies have to be viewed as an essential part of a transformative process that contributes to both growth and equality.

Inequality, discrimination and social exclusion are embedded in structures and systems that lead to degrading states of powerlessness and poverty. The ability of a person living in poverty to improve their material and non-material wellbeing depends upon the socio-political structure. Therefore, anti-discrimination policies, sustainability and social inclusion policies are essential components of any poverty reduction strategy.

In terms of inequality, we can consider two Australian experiences, race inequality and gender inequality.

Race inequality experienced by Indigenous Australians has led to higher rates of poverty, unemployment, infant mortality, lower life expectancy, poor living conditions, substance abuse, suicide and incarceration.

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As long as Indigenous men die 11 and a half years earlier than non-Indigenous men and Indigenous women die nearly 10 years earlier than non-Indigenous women, we have failed. As long as only under half of Indigenous young people complete secondary school; while access to healthcare remains poor and the literacy and numeracy gaps loom large, we have failed. As long as Indigenous children are dying at more than double the rate of non-Indigenous children, we have failed.



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Indigenous children today are caught in a continuing history of disadvantage, poverty and trauma as a result of a failure to re-dress past policies and practices that denied human rights and created poverty. However, rather than a progressive realisation of human rights, what we continue to witness today is, at times, a regressive realisation of rights.

In terms of gender inequality, Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand recently commissioned research into the labour rights of women in Australia.

This research highlights the part-time nature of women's work and the low paid status of their jobs. The high rates of casual work that women undertake means low job security and high vulnerability to unemployment and poverty.

Furthermore, Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service has also recently released research on "Microfinance and the Household Economy".

This research highlights that microfinance directly and positively impacts on financial inclusion, social and economic participation and

material wellbeing, and builds important foundations to assist the household to function. Through accumulation of assets, access to transport, linking people with their communities and improving financial confidence, microfinance has an important role to play in poverty eradication.

On the international scene, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) marked a defining moment of unprecedented commitment and global cooperation towards poverty eradication. They are the world's quantified, time-bound targets for addressing extreme poverty. They acknowledge the multi-dimensional nature of poverty, going beyond the simplistic measure of income.

The Millennium Development Goals have been an effective tool to mobilise governments and other development actors. However, they are a cautious approach to social development, do not directly address inequality, social and economic exclusion or discrimination, and provide no real means to target poverty within developed nations like Australia.

The United Nations also is now considering Guiding Principles on Human Rights and Poverty.

I was able to see Ms Magdalena Sepulveda, United Nations Independent Expert on Poverty and Human Rights when she spoke at the 49th Session of the Commission for Social Development earlier this year in New York. Ms Sepulveda asserted that current global multiple crises offer the opportunity to place humans and human rights back at the centre of social and economic development. Whilst in essence we can agree with this, I would caution against becoming overly human-centred and advocate for a more "people and planet"-centred approach.

The Guiding Principles firmly establish the inextricable link between poverty and human rights. However, we can rightfully question “what difference will they make?” Ms Sepulveda has said they will assist in implementing human rights for poverty eradication. However, if they remain guiding principles to human rights standards that nation states have already agreed to in legally binding international conventions, and are also not quantified and time-bound targets like the MDGs, it’s hard to imagine the Principles becoming anything more than rhetoric.

The recent food and energy crises made hundreds of millions more vulnerable to poverty. The World Bank estimated that in 2008 the food and energy crises alone pushed between 130 million and 155 million people into poverty. The current global financial and economic crisis threatens to wipe out the little progress in poverty reduction since the 2000 Millennium Summit.

We have seen in past weeks the world’s people taking their discontent to the streets, from Wall Street, to Greece, Spain and all over Europe, to here in Australia and beyond. The 99 per cent are expressing discontent with the system that has created inequality. They have been criticised for their lack of leadership and asking questions without suggesting answers. But their discontent reflects the multi-dimensional nature of poverty as they demand equality and inclusion in economic growth. What they are really asking for is simply human rights. What we are all asking for are the human rights we already have, but have yet to experience.



Kenyan children: courtesy 'Angela7dreams', flickr CC

We need to understand the lived experience of poverty and that everyone is at risk of experiencing this poverty at some point in their lives.

I know as a child my family would have been described as “income poor”. It seemed that all we ate were broad beans. We lived in an overcrowded house with eight in the family, so my room in high school was a bed in the kitchen stuck up against a noisy old fridge that buzzed all night. It was divided from the rest of the kitchen by a shower curtain my dad tacked up from the ceiling. We had a briquette heater for hot water. It was rare to have new clothes or shoes.

But even though we were “income poor” we were never disadvantaged because our human rights were lived. We were educated, we were healthy and we were included. And from this standpoint, my brothers and sisters were able to re-write a long history of deprivation and have gone on to become scientists, doctors, pilots and engineers. In one generation we were no longer poor and it’s because we had rights.

Eradicating poverty is simply about ensuring this fullness of life for all, not the fullness of the hip pockets for some. ■