

Eradicating Poverty: Moving Forward as One

The Bahá'í International Community's Statement on Poverty

14 February 2008

Part I

1. The crisis of global poverty has, at long last, been accorded a high priority on the international agenda. This propitious development has sparked a flurry of discussion and research concerning the means for eradicating this debilitating condition from human life. Yet as renewed pledges for action pour in from governments, as long-held theories and conventional approaches fail to quell long-held prejudices, conflicts, and exploitation, a feeling of rudderlessness looms over the global enterprise of poverty eradication. At the same time, a palpable optimism emerges from the attention and momentum generated by the search for solutions to this worldwide challenge.
2. The mechanisms of poverty eradication have long been defined in primarily material terms. Indeed, the central pillar of the international community's poverty alleviation efforts has been the transfer of financial resources. Approximately \$2.3 trillion have been spent on foreign aid over the last five decades. [\[1\]](#) Tragically, the aid, far from ushering in greater self-sufficiency, has often had a detrimental effect on recipient communities: increased dependency on foreign assistance, subservience to externally dictated priorities, misappropriation of funds and decreased pressure for governance reform. In a resolute push for change, the United Nations has sought to expand the mechanisms for assistance and to galvanize support for poverty alleviation through its Millennium Development Goals. [\[2\]](#)
3. It is now increasingly acknowledged that such conditions as the marginalization of girls and women, [\[3\]](#) poor governance, [\[4\]](#) ethnic and religious antipathy, [\[5\]](#) environmental degradation [\[6\]](#) and unemployment [\[7\]](#) constitute formidable obstacles to the progress and development of communities. These evidence a deeper crisis—one rooted in the values and attitudes that shape relationships at all levels of society. Viewed from this perspective, poverty can be described as the absence of those ethical, social and material resources needed to develop the moral, intellectual and social capacities of individuals, communities and institutions. Moral reasoning, group decision-making and freedom from racism, for example, are all essential tools for poverty alleviation. Such capacities must shape individual thinking as well as institutional arrangements and policy-making. To be clear, the goal at hand is not only to remove the ills of poverty but to engage the masses of humanity in the construction of a just global order.
4. Individuals and institutions must work in tandem to take up this task. One of the goals of poverty alleviation, then, centers on the individual: he must be helped to reclaim his dignity and sense of self-worth, must be encouraged to gain confidence to improve his condition and strive to realize his potential. Beyond the achievement of personal well-being, he must be nurtured to become a source of social good—of peace, happiness and advantage to

those around him. It is at the level of service to others that our humanity achieves its highest expression. The second goal centers on institutions: at every level of society, they must serve as channels through which the talents and energies of individuals can be harnessed in service to humanity. Resources that help to develop this individual and institutional capacity represent a true source of wealth to the community.

5. Much like the physical principles that govern the material world, the social world, too, is governed by moral principles, which underlie the functioning of an ordered society. Principles such as gender equality,[\[8\]](#) trustworthiness,[\[9\]](#) access to education, human rights and freedom of religion,[\[10\]](#) for example, tend to correlate positively with measures of socioeconomic well-being and stability. The interrelatedness of challenges stemming from poverty calls for the articulation of principles capable of guiding analysis, decision-making and the development of indicators to measure progress. The essential merit of a principle-based process is that it guides individuals and institutions away from a focus on isolated, short-term concerns to consider problems from a systemic and long-term perspective. For any decision to garner support and deliver results, the decision-making process itself must have integrity: it must involve those directly affected by the decisions and it must be governed by transparent, agreed-upon ethical standards.
6. It is in this context that the Bahá'í International Community would like to offer two principles as guides for efforts in the realm of poverty eradication: justice and unity. These principles underlie a vision of development in which material progress serves as a vehicle for the moral and cultural advancement of humanity. Justice provides the means capable of harnessing human potential to eradicate poverty from our midst, through the implementation of laws, the adjustment of economic systems, the redistribution of wealth and opportunity, and unfailing adherence to the highest ethical standards in private and public life. Unity asserts that progress is systemic and relational, that a concern for the integrity of the family unit and the local, national, and global community must guide poverty alleviation efforts.

Part II

Governance

7. The question of poverty places particular responsibility on elected leaders and their governments. While some have argued that poverty itself leads to poor governance, causality often moves in the opposite direction: better governance leads to better development outcomes.[\[11\]](#) Central to the issue of governance is the inescapable question of character – the values that a leader brings to his or her office largely define the direction and fruits of his or her work. Trustworthiness is foremost among these, as it fosters credibility with the public and with other leaders, builds support for government initiatives and engenders stability and security. Effective leaders must not only exercise an impeccable ethic but also work to strengthen the character of the nation's economic, social, legal and educational institutions, to improve the regulatory framework, and to manage scarce resources effectively. Where earnings are concerned, they must be content with a lawful and modest remuneration. As the substance of politics becomes increasingly global, elected

leaders must show the vision and the courage to gradually align national interests with the requirements of the evolving global community.

Justice and human rights

8. The United Nations' efforts to link poverty eradication efforts with international human rights norms is a positive step in aligning the work of governments with the principles of justice. Our common heritage of human rights norms, encompassing the rights of the individual and of the family; the freedom to know and to believe; the equality of men and women and racial equality; the right to work and to education, among others, embodies the most significant moral accomplishments of the human race. Human rights, as endorsed by most governments of the world, must now enter into the community and legal culture and be systematically incorporated into domestic legislation. They must be translated into all languages and made accessible through media and educational institutions. In this way, the human rights norms can come to replace broken legal systems characterized by the oppressive and arbitrary application of laws, forced on people unaware of their rights and unable to articulate their needs.

Individual responsibility

9. A large share of the responsibility for poverty eradication rests with the individuals themselves. While poverty is the product of numerous factors: historic, economic, political and environmental, there is also a cultural dimension, which manifests itself in individual values and attitudes. Some of these – such as the subjugation of girls and women, the lack of value of education or of an individual's right to progress – can exacerbate conditions of poverty. The relevant human qualities such as honesty, willingness to work, and cooperation can be harnessed to accomplish enormously demanding goals when members of society trust that they are protected by standards of justice and assured of benefits that apply equally to all. The human rights approach, with its emphasis on the individual's entitlement to a set of rights, however, may prove challenging to implement without an accompanying moral influence necessary to inspire the accompanying changes in attitudes and behaviors.

Gender

10. The issue of gender equality is one such example: over the last two decades nations have repeatedly come together to acknowledge the critical role of women in advancing development imperatives. The natural and social sciences have laid to rest any bases for discrimination; most countries have enacted laws to afford women the same opportunities as men; conventions have been signed and ratified; new measures and social indicators have been put in place. Yet women's agency in the arenas of law, politics, science, commerce and religion, to name a few, is still grossly deficient. In areas where women have gained access to education, employment, and ownership opportunities, dramatic effects have been observed at many levels: at the level of the family, more equitable division of food, resources, and health care among girls and boys; higher rates of literacy among children; lower rates of fertility leading to better economic conditions and maternal health; and the injection of new concerns into public discourse. Female literacy, alone, has been shown to play a much more important role in promoting social well-being than other

variables related to the general level of wealth in a society.^[12] Indeed the well-being of the entire family has been dramatically altered where economic and social circumstances and societal attitudes have been favorable to women's advancement. Yet, the gradual transformation of attitudes has required much more than legal measures, it has required a fundamental change of belief about roles of men and women and courage to challenge traditional gender norms.

Economic activity

11. Undeniably, poverty is sustained by an interaction of social and material factors. This interaction determines the societal benefits of material resources, whether the resources are concentrated in the hands of a few or are equitably distributed, whether they are beneficial or harmful to the society at large. Today, much of economic activity and its institutional context is at odds with environmental sustainability, the advancement of women, the well-being of the family, the engagement of young people, the availability of employment, and the expansion of knowledge. For example, military expenditures exceeding \$1 trillion^[13] and global trade in illicit drugs in excess of \$300 billion^[14] far exceeds the estimated costs of meeting the United Nations' global development goals in areas of education, health, sustainability, and women's empowerment.^[15] The economic theories of impersonal markets, promoting self-centered actions of individuals, have not helped humanity escape the extremes of poverty on the one hand and over-consumption on the other. New economic theories for our time must be animated by a motive beyond just profit. They must be rooted in the very human and relational dimension of all economic activity, which binds us as families, as communities and as citizens of one world. They must be animated by a spirit of innovation rather than blind imitation, ennoblement rather than exploitation, and the full and confident participation of women.

Extremes of wealth

12. Economic considerations underlying poverty alleviation efforts have generally focused on the creation of wealth but have not yet fully considered the parallel problem of the over-concentration of wealth. In an interconnected world, where the wealth of many of the world's richest individuals exceeds the Gross Domestic Product of entire nations, extreme poverty and extreme wealth exist side by side. While much of the focus of remedial efforts is directed towards the poorest, it is the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few that is in urgent need of attention. Indeed, the tremendous wealth generated by transnational corporations could be an integral part of the solution to tackle poverty, through strict regulation to ensure good global citizenship, adherence to human rights norms and the distribution of wealth for the benefit of the larger society. Where a nation's wealth is concerned, the question becomes one of social value rather than gross dollar measures. The Gross Domestic Product, for example, aggregates the sum total of all economic activity – including the production of guns, cigarettes, etc. – regardless of its social worth or environmental impact. New measures that account for pollutants and economic ills and add unmeasured, unremunerated benefits are needed for a more accurate picture of a nation's economic health and wealth.^[16]

Sustainable development

13. It has been widely acknowledged that economic prosperity has come at a tremendous cost to our natural environment.^[27] In fact, no country has emerged as a major industrial power without a legacy of significant environmental damage, affecting the security and well-being of its own populations and, equally significantly, those of developing nations. The growth-driven economic paradigm rooted in national interests at the expense of social and environmental variables and international well-being is under increasing scrutiny. Challenging ethical questions of resource distribution and responsibility for damages force governments to develop institutional mechanisms and implement policies that consider the prosperity and health of the global community and that of future generations. On an institutional level, a global entity with a strong scientific advisory capacity is needed to streamline reporting and decision-making processes, including the voices of non-state actors. It must coherently link environmental issues to social and economic priorities, for none of these can advance in isolation.^[18] At the educational level, curricula must seek to develop a sense of responsibility towards the natural environment as well as foster a spirit of inquiry and innovation so that the diversity of human experience can be brought to bear on the challenge of creating an environmentally sustainable development pathway.

Agriculture

14. A core element of a strategy of sustainable development is the reform of agricultural policies and processes. Food production and agriculture is the world's single largest source of employment; nearly 70% of the poor in developing countries live in rural areas and depend on agriculture for their livelihoods.^[19] Although farming has been devalued by manufacturing and a rapidly expanding urban population, agriculture still represents the fundamental basis of economic and community life: malnourishment and food insecurity suffocate all attempts at development and progress. Despite this pivotal role, poverty is often concentrated in rural areas. Damage to natural resources, poor information and infrastructure often result in food insecurity, premature deaths and mass migration to urban areas in search of a better life. The farmer must be accorded his or her rightful place in the processes of development and civilization building: as the villages are reconstructed, the cities will follow.

Employment

15. The provision of meaningful work represents an essential component of poverty alleviation efforts. The meaningful engagement of young people becomes even more important as urban populations swell and, with them, the increase of slums, rising crime rates, use of drugs, unemployment, breakdown of family structures and social isolation. Today, young people between the ages of 15-29 account for nearly half of all adults in 100 economically disadvantaged nations.^[20] Lack of meaningful employment only feeds their hopelessness and frustration. Yet it is not only the quantity but also the quality and meaning of work that needs to be reconsidered. Whether tilling the soil or selling goods, one's work should not be reduced to a means for acquiring more goods or as an expendable cost of production. One's work is the means of developing one's craft, of refining one's character, and contributing to the welfare and progress of society. Indeed, the fight against underemployment must begin

with the dignity and value of all human labor, even if it is humble, insecure, unprofitable or unremunerated.

Knowledge

16. Underlying the meaningful participation in the advancement of society and the higher aims of civilization is the bulwark of education. While many poverty eradication programs have focused on increasing enrollment in primary and secondary education – which is the first step – the long-term goal must also be articulated: namely to create a society in which the production, diffusion and application of knowledge infuses all facets of human activity. This requires interventions at all levels including child-rearing practices that foster questioning; equal educational opportunities for boys and girls; development of independent media sources; translation of texts from other cultures and the promotion of innovation and scientific research. In order to be free to innovate, to devise solutions to complex problems, the human mind must be free to know.

Religion

17. The concept of knowledge now needed to guide poverty alleviation efforts must be adequate to address both the poverty of means and the poverty of spirit. Material resources are essential, to be sure, yet they alone cannot generate a vision of the full measure of human prosperity; they cannot provide answers to the deepest questions about human nature or the purpose of our existence. Most importantly, the material and technical dimensions alone will not compel the fundamental changes in human character and belief needed to overcome the destructive behaviors which have led to present day conditions. They will not galvanize and sustain the human will to persevere, to strive for excellence, to humbly serve, to create, to seek knowledge, to cultivate beauty and to seek the well-being of all humankind. To encompass the spiritual dimension and its expression in the religions of the world is not to return to superstition or fanaticism or to denounce rational inquiry in any way. Rather, it is to build into poverty alleviation efforts, in an integrated manner, recognition of all the dimensions of human experience and an understanding of how poverty manifests in the material and spiritual dimensions of human life.
18. In our efforts to eradicate poverty, we are experiencing no less than the birth pangs of a truly global civilization: new modes of thought, new standards and new legal and institutional arrangements are struggling to take hold. As our understanding of the problems and their possible solutions expands, an unprecedented global consensus and accompanying capacity for international cooperation pave the way for an outcome far greater than any we have been able to achieve. Yet, to generate the knowledge and commitment needed to overcome poverty, the full spectrum of human spiritual and intellectual potential will need to be summoned for the task. And as the fullness of our humanity is engaged, it will regenerate the fabric of civilization.

[1] Easterly, William. *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and so Little Good*. The Penguin Press: New York, 2006.

[2] The United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, launched in the 2000, represent the United Nations' strategy to halve extreme poverty by 2015. The eight time-bound targets include: eradication of extreme hunger and poverty; promotion of gender equality; reduction of child mortality; improvement of maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; developing a global partnership for development.

[3] Mason, Andrew D. and Elizabeth M. King. *Engendering Development through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources, and Voice*. A World Bank Research Report. World Bank: Washington, DC, 2001; *Towards Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women*. International Center on Research for Women: Washington, DC, 2005; Chen, M. et al. *Progress of the World's Women 2005: Women, Work & Poverty*. United Nations Fund for Women: New York, 2005.

[4] Kaufmann, Daniel, Aart Kraay and Massimo Mastruzzi. *Governance Matters IV: Governance Indicators for 1996 – 2004*. World Bank: Washington, DC, 2005; *Arab Human Development Report 2004: Towards Freedom in the Arab World*. United Nations Development Programme: New York, 2004; On September 17, 2007, the United Nations News Centre reported that one quarter of the gross domestic product of African States – or \$148 billion – is lost to corruption yearly.

[5] *Human Development Report 2004. Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World*. United Nations Development Programme: New York, 2004.

[6] Stern, Nicholas. *Stern Review: The Economics of Climate Change*, HM Treasury: London, 2006.

[7] *World Employment Report 2004-2005. Employment, Productivity and Poverty Reduction*. International Labor Organization: Geneva, 2004.

[8] See note 3.

[9] See note 4.

[10] "The Failed States Index," *Foreign Policy*, July/August 2007, 55-63.

[11] See note 2 above.

[12] Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. Anchor: New York, 2000.

[13] *United Nations Peacekeeping Operations Background Note*. United Nations Department of Public Information: New York. 30 November 2005. (Dollar amounts in 2005 US dollars.)

[14] *World Drug Report 2007*. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime: New York, 2007.

[15] The United Nations Millennium Project estimates that the costs of meeting the Millennium Development Goals in all countries are approximately \$121 billion in 2006, rising to \$189 billion in 2015. (UN Millennium Project 2005. *Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Overview*. United Nations Development Programme: New York, 2005.)

[16] Alternative means for calculating national wealth are being explored by various scholars. The “Genuine Progress Indicator” (GPI) is one such initiative. Unlike the conventional Gross Domestic Product (GDP) measure, the GPI attempts to subtract out pollution and economic ills and adds previously unmeasured benefits (e.g. household work and parenting) to calculate a more accurate measure of a nation’s wealth. For 2002 (the most recent year with GPI data), the U.S. non-governmental organization Redefining Progress calculated that between 1972 and 2002, while GDP per capita grew by 79 percent, the GPI grew by just 1 percent (Jason Venetoulis and Cliff Cobb. *The Genuine Progress Indicator 1950-2002 (2004 Update)*. Redefining Progress: Oakland, CA, 2004.)

[17] Reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (established in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Environment Programme) are widely cited in climate change debates. The most recent reports under the title, *Climate Change 2007* include: *The Physical Science Basis; Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability;* and *Mitigation of Climate Change;* and are published by Cambridge University Press, 2007.

[18] At the national level, the voluminous reporting requirements must be streamlined and consolidated so as to enable countries to meet their obligations in an efficient and coherent manner.

[19] Dixon, John, Aidan Gulliver and David Gibbon. *Farming Systems and Poverty: improving farmers' livelihoods in a changing world*. A joint study by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Bank: Rome and Washington, DC, 2001. URL: <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/003/y1860e/y1860e00.pdf>.

[20] World Watch Institute, *Vital Signs 2007-2008*, p.74.