

Why are People Still Poor?

BAHA'I INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY



Poverty eradication has been a goal of the United Nations for decades, yet lasting solutions have proved elusive.

As representatives gather [for the 55th Session of the Commission for Social Development at the United Nations—25 January 2017] to seek “strategies for the eradication of poverty to achieve sustainable development for all,” we must ask ourselves, frankly and honestly, why sizable segments of the global population still lack basic material necessities.

The range of deeply rooted challenges seen today testifies to an economic order growing increasingly dysfunctional. Ills such as extremes of wealth and poverty, growing inequality, and systemic corruption are destabilizing societies and tearing at the fabric of far too many communities. And these challenges highlight, in turn, the scarcity of any true social consensus about fundamental aspects of contemporary economic arrangements, such as the nature of work, the purpose of wealth, and one’s duties to others and to the community. It is only natural, for example, for a society which aggressively lauds material wealth to become grossly unequal, or for moneyed interests, unmoored from a compelling sense of social responsibility, to shape laws in ways that perpetuate intractable forms of inequality.

Addressing structural issues such as these will require innovative approaches from quarters that have not traditionally been seen as sources of answers. In this regard, the Baha’i International Community suggests that it will be vital for the United Nations system to develop its ability to see capacity and strength in populations that, at times, may have been given labels such as “marginalized.” Put more simply, lasting progress toward the eradication of poverty will require moving from a deficit mentality to a mentality of abundance:

When we see poverty allowed to reach a condition of starvation it is a sure sign that somewhere we shall find tyranny. Men must bestir themselves in this matter, and no longer delay in altering conditions which bring the misery of grinding poverty to a very large

number of the people. The rich must give of their abundance, they must soften their hearts and cultivate a compassionate intelligence, taking thought for those sad ones who are suffering from lack of the very necessities of life.

There must be special laws made, dealing with these extremes of riches and of want. The members of the Government should consider the laws of God when they are framing plans for the ruling of the people. The general rights of mankind must be guarded and preserved. The government of the countries should conform to the Divine Law which gives equal justice to all. This is the only way in which the deplorable superfluity of great wealth and miserable, demoralizing, degrading poverty can be abolished. Not until this is done will the Law of God be obeyed. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, pp. 153-154.

Movement in this direction has already begun, at least at the level of discourse. Discussions in the development arena increasingly affirm that communities with limited financial resources are not silent and devoid of activity until international actors arrive. At the same time, interaction with such populations is frequently framed in terms of needs, challenges, shortcomings, and shortages. The agency of low-income communities is acknowledged at the level of concept. But functionally, they are often approached primarily as recipients of services and assistance consulted to a degree about their views and preferences, but rarely embraced as capable and equal partners in a collaborative enterprise.

This dichotomy hampers efforts to address the roots of poverty. Assumptions, biases, and prejudices result in productive capacity being squandered and steps forward being overlooked or dismissed. The application of low-tech innovation provides one example. Notable advances in energy efficiency and the production of renewable power are arising in the context of rural patterns of life. These developments are universally significant, as energy consumption will need to become more sustainable in countries at all levels of income. Yet such innovations are often seen as relevant only to the kinds of places in which they appear suitable, perhaps, for “south-south cooperation,” but irrelevant to the needs and realities of industrialized societies. Beyond their capacity for technological innovation, low-income populations hold potential for social innovation as well.

[This statement from the Baha’i International Community was presented to the United Nations’ 55th Session of the Commission for Social Development on January 25, 2017. Quotes from the Baha’i teachings have been added.]