

Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights

Bahá'í International Community's comment on the United Nations' "Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights"

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The Bahá'í International Community welcomes the opportunity to offer its comments regarding the United Nations' draft guiding principles on extreme poverty and human rights [1] as per the Human Rights Council Resolution 2/2 regarding "human rights and extreme poverty." [2] We commend the Human Rights Council for taking this important step to address poverty from a human rights perspective – linking poverty reduction to questions of justice and obligation rather than charity. In this way, the moral basis of efforts related to poverty reduction is sharpened and the values underlying such efforts, as embodied in the international law of human rights, are made explicit. With a view to upholding justice as the organizing principle of human activity, the Bahá'í International Community offers the following comments on the draft "Guiding Principles."

In preparing this submission, the Bahá'í International Community responded to the United Nations' call for the participation of those directly affected by or living in conditions of poverty. We organized discussions with Bahá'í communities in 10 countries [3], spanning five continents, and will continue to follow and learn from these as responses are received. The outcomes of discussions received so far, namely from Guyana, Namibia, and Brazil, are incorporated into this statement.

Definition of poverty. Definitions of poverty and prescriptions for its elimination are shaped by assumptions about the nature of the human being and the purpose of development, or more broadly, the purpose of civilization itself. While the UN Draft Guidelines provide a multi-faceted definition of poverty, [4] participants in the poverty discussions expanded on this definition in two ways: (a) by casting poverty as a problem for all of humanity, not just for the poor; and (b) by acknowledging a 'meaning' and 'purpose' dimension that is central to human life. Along with the deprivation of resources and opportunities, poverty was described primarily in non-material terms: among the economically disadvantaged, it manifested as "a state of mind"; the degree to which a person is unaware of her potential and of "what her dignity might be"; the deprivation of the capacity to reflect on one's own condition; a lack of knowledge; and as the lack of capacity to claim one's rights. Among the economically advantaged, participants described a "poverty of the spirit" – a blindness to the needs of those living next to us; a loss of "capacity to be indignant, to be ashamed" of the surrounding "wretched conditions" and "absolute penury." Being "wealthy" was not only characterized as improving one's own condition but also helping others to survive, to live in dignity, with a view to promoting the well-being of all mankind.

The Bahá'í International Community understands poverty as a symptom of a system of economic and social relationships – in the family, the community, the nation, and the world – that promote the advantage of the few at the expense of the many. As such, remedies to this complex issue must be rooted in a systemic approach that directly addresses the harmful and destructive values driving human attitudes, behaviors, and decision-making. In light of this perspective, we conceive of poverty as the absence of resources – material, social, and ethical – necessary for the establishment of conditions, which promote the moral, material, and creative capacities of individuals, communities, and institutions.

Human rights approach. In order for the human rights approach to play an effective role in establishing justice as the organizing principle of human relationships, the promotion of human rights must be freed from the false dichotomies: the concept of "rights" neither justifies a rampant individualism nor an elevation of the state as the sole source of human well-being. Rather, the relationship between the individual and the state is one of trusteeship – each member of the human race comes into the world as trust of the whole, which includes the family, the community, the nation, and the world. It is this trusteeship that constitutes the moral foundation of most other rights. [5] From this perspective, the entire burden of poverty alleviation cannot fall on the state; a portion of the responsibility needs to be assigned to the people, their family, and their community. While conditions of poverty arise and persist for various historic, economic and political reasons, they are equally exacerbated by human values, such as those regarding cultural integration, the rights of women, education, and an individual's right to progress. As such, a human rights approach to poverty alleviation must consider the appropriate responsibilities of all actors in the community.

New guiding principle: the equality of men and women. While guiding principle "A. Participation by the poor," includes a section regarding women in poverty, the persistently disproportionate number of women among the world's poor, including elderly women, the systemic violation of girls' and women's rights, and the gross under-representation of women in governance at all levels, merits the creation of a separate principle termed, "equality of men and women," to guide all poverty alleviation efforts. The aim of this principle is not only to call attention to the dire condition of women but also to remind states that the full and confident participation of women in legal, political, economic, academic, social and artistic arenas is a prerequisite for a more just and peaceful development pathway. Their participation, in turn, opens up opportunities for men and boys to excel as fathers, husbands, workers, community members and leaders in ways that do not exist today.

Right to education and culture. In order for a society to progress, human beings must be free to know, to create, and to believe. First, with the understanding that knowledge can provide the means to alleviate poverty and achieve the higher moral goals of human justice and dignity, the state should work to ensure that knowledge diffusion, production and application become a valued dimension of all aspects of human activity. Lack of education mercilessly depletes the intellectual, creative and ethical potential of human beings, so desperately needed to generate solutions to the problems at hand. One participant commented, "...whoever has knowledge consequently holds power. The first thing is to invest in education so that everybody will have the knowledge and the capacity to interpret what is going on."

Second, human beings must have access to the cultural and scientific attainments of humanity and their applications. Third, the freedom of religion or belief must be upheld and protected, as the right to hold beliefs, to share them, and to change them is central to the individual's search for meaning and fundamental to protecting the dignity of the human being.

Right to work. The provision of meaningful work should be a cornerstone of any poverty alleviation efforts. One's work, however, should not be reduced to an instrumental dimension of acquiring means for the consumption of available goods or an expendable cost of production. Thus, the role and meaning of one's work need to be reconsidered. One's work is no less than the means of developing one's craft, of refining one's character, achieving self-subsistence, and being of service to others. Today, young people between the ages of 15 to 29 account for nearly half of all adults in 100 economically disadvantaged nations^[6] and their potential for innovation as well their intellectual and moral engagement in the well-being of their country must become a focal concern in policy making.

The persistence of extreme poverty in the face of increasing and extreme wealth in parts of the world suggests that the problem must be addressed systemically: the responsibilities of all actors – the international community, governments, businesses, media, civil society, the family and the individual – need to be articulated. In order for justice to become the organizing principle of collective life, these principles need to take hold both legally and ethically: nations must be assisted and held accountable for their efforts vis-à-vis the poor; at the same time, the underlying values must take root on a personal level so that behavior is ultimately guided by a sense of responsibility towards other human beings and not only a fear of consequences from breaking the law.

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[1] Draft Guiding Principles "Extreme poverty and human rights: the rights of the poor," pp.29-38 (Annex). Report of the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights on its Fifty-Eighth Session. 11 September 2006. UN Document # A/HRC/2/2.

[2] Human Rights Council Resolution 2/2. Human Rights and extreme poverty. 27 November 2006.

[3] Brazil, Canada, Fiji, Guyana, Haiti, India, Namibia, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States

[4] The draft guiding principles define poverty as "a human condition characterized by sustained or chronic deprivation of 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." See note 1.

[5] The security of the family and the home, the ownership of property, and the right to privacy are all implied in such a trusteeship. The obligations on the part of the community extend to the provision of employment, mental and physical health care, social security, fair wages, rest and recreation, and a host of other reasonable expectations on the part of the individual members of society.

[6] U.N. Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision* (New York: 2005).

