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Global poverty

No longer an untouchable problem

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For generations, poverty has undermined the well-being of humanity. Victims of poverty often suffer from hunger, disease, violence, family disintegration, indignities and sometimes even death. Poverty has been so pervasive and persistent through the ages that people believed poverty was an inevitable fact of life or God's will; and therefore poor people were accepted and given help, though the level of help was seldom adequate (Kammerman and Kahn, 1997).

However, in the last 50 years the world has witnessed unprecedented growth and prosperity. The global economy has grown sevenfold. Correspondingly, poverty has fallen faster in the last 50 years than in the previous 500 years. More people today have access to clean water and sanitation facilities; more healthcare facilities are available; the adult illiteracy rate in developing countries has fallen sharply; and the infant mortality rate has decreased substantially. Although this success provides grounds for optimism, poverty still persists and oppresses its victims (UNDP, 1997). This article examines the nature and scope of poverty in developing countries and presents some policy options that can help achieve the goal of eradicating extreme poverty.

Defining the concept of poverty

Poverty is a difficult concept to define. Though people generally agree that poverty is defined as a condition of deprivation, there is

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limited agreement about how to conceptualize deprivation. A wide range of indicators have been developed and used by different countries to measure poverty. To no surprise, use of different indicators has produced different outcomes. Moreover, these indicators usually reflect the ideologies of the prevailing power of that society; thus the effort to define poverty is largely a political rather than an empirical activity. Although there is no agreed definition, the following two concepts are most often used to define poverty in the world (World Bank, 1999; Kangas and Ritakallio, 1998; Kammerman and Kahn, 1997; UNDP, 1997).

1. Income poverty. This has two variations:
   a. Absolute poverty. This measures the number of people with inadequate income to obtain basic necessities of life. The cost is calculated by pricing a standard 'market basket' of everyday consumer commodities needed by people in that society.
   b. Relative poverty. This concept relates to the inequalities of income distribution. Under this concept, people are defined as poor even if they have an adequate income for survival, so long as their income does not allow them to obtain goods and services at a 50 percent level of the societal standard.
2. Human Poverty Index (HPI).
   This concept (developed by the UN Development Programme) is based on the theory that poverty involves more than lack of income. It means denial of choices and opportunities for a tolerable life. Thus, rather than measuring poverty solely by income, it examines the most basic dimensions of deprivation, like early death, malnutrition, illiteracy, access to healthcare and safe water.

Although both these concepts are useful tools for understanding poverty, they suffer several limitations. For example, neither resolves the problem of establishing an objective guideline for poverty, or in other words, determining what is considered an adequate (or inadequate) level of subsistence. Comparability of data is another concern. Due to the lack of standardized data collection methodologies used by different countries, poverty figures can be somewhat confusing. Finally, these two concepts are largely insensitive to measuring income and goods obtained through home- and neighborhood-based resources.

Despite their deficiencies, these concepts are not without merit. The income indicator, for example, is more straightforward and easily workable, and is still the most commonly used indicator for measuring poverty among the various international organizations and scholars. For this reason, in this article the scope of poverty will be determined by use of the income indicator.

The magnitude of poverty

The data presented in this paper come from the World Bank and the United Nations. These two organizations draw socioeconomic information from various international organizations, including the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), to name a few. Although data collected from these organizations are usually reliable, issues of methodology, currency and comprehensiveness related to worldwide data collection may raise questions of reliability and standardization. Therefore, care must be taken to analyze and interpret the data.

To identify and compare the incidence of global poverty, the World Bank uses US$1 purchasing power parity (1985 PPP) per day, per person as the official international poverty line. Purchasing power parity is designed to measure the relative purchasing power of currencies across countries. This allows for the expression of common units across national boundaries. A poverty line of $2 per day is used in Latin America and the Caribbean. A poverty line of $4 (1990 PPP) per day is used in Eastern European countries. For the developed countries, the poverty line is set at $14.40 (1985 PPP) per day. This line also corresponds to the US poverty line (World Bank, 1999).

About 1.3 billion out of all people in developing countries live below the international poverty line of $1 per day. Though this figure is an improvement on previous centuries, uneven progress has raised disparities among different regions of the world. Table 1 shows that only 4 percent of the people in Arab states lived under $1 a day (PPP) in 1993, whereas 39 percent of all people in sub-Saharan Africa lived on $1 or less a day in the same period. Typically there are not only interregional variations, but also variations within regions. Zambia, as a case in point, reported that about 85 percent of the population lived in poverty, but the poverty rate for neighboring Tanzania was only 10.5 percent (Table 2).

Table 1 Income poverty in developing countries ($1/day per person, 1985 PPP)

	% of people below poverty line		% of poor people		No of poor (m)
Region	**1987**	**1993**	**1987**	**1993**	**1993**
Arab states	5	4	1	1	11
Asia	–	33*	77	73	965
Latin America & Caribbean**	22	24	7	9	110
Sub-Saharan Africa	38	39	15	17	219
Developing countries	34	32	100	100	1,301

Source: UNDP (1997), *Human Development Report 1997*, p. 27.
* Calculated by the author.
** Poverty line of $2 a day.

Examining the national poverty line is another way to understand the depth and prevalence of poverty. The national poverty line is determined by calculating the local price of goods and services. For this reason, the national poverty line is usually higher than the more extreme figure of $1 per day (1985 PPP) used to determine the international poverty line. This is particularly true in the more affluent countries whose standard of living is higher. As Table 2 shows, the national poverty rate for all but a few countries is noticeably higher than the international poverty rate. This is generally true for the more affluent regions like the Arab states. Though a small percentage of people in Arab states are found under the international poverty line, the national poverty rate for each country is 3–6 times greater than the international poverty rate. In contrast, the variation in poverty rates between national and international in the less affluent regions is much less. This figure suggests that significantly more income than $1 (1985 PPP) is needed in Arab states to maintain a minimum standard of living, whereas the region with the highest national poverty rate, sub-Saharan Africa, needs only slightly more than $1 (1985 PPP) per day to maintain a minimum standard of living.

Poverty is found in all parts of the world. Like in all developing countries, poverty has been a growing concern in Eastern European countries, where according to the UNDP (1997) report about 120 million people live below a poverty line of $4 a day (1990 PPP).

The report also indicates that Eastern Europeans are finding the transition from socialism to a free-market economy more costly and difficult than previously imagined. Consequently, these countries are unable to improve the economic health of their people.

Even the more developed countries are not without poverty. More than 100 million people in industrial countries live below a poverty line of $14.40 (1985 PPP) per day. Millions in the industrial countries are without jobs. Minorities such as women, children and the aged are especially vulnerable to malnutrition and illness. Millions more live in near poverty round the world. In all, the World Bank reports that there are roughly 3 billion people, or one-half of all people in the world, who live on $3 per day (World Bank, 1999).

Discussion

This article does not attempt to find new causes of poverty, rather it looks at a few key trends from the data that might affect poverty in the beginning of the 21st century. On the whole, advances have been made to reduce poverty, but several new trends threaten to further increase global poverty. Following are several concerns.

First, an economic stagnation, or even decline, appears to be taking place in several developing countries. To wage a more effective battle against poverty, global wealth must be increased. Sustained economic growth has helped reduce poverty in several Arab states and East Asian countries. Many of the successful countries have exceeded GNP growth per head by 3 percent or more each year, but the economic stagnation in different parts of the world is threatening to reverse this success. During the period 1980–93 GDP per head in all developing countries grew from $671 to $823. But in the same period, GDP per head in sub-Saharan Africa decreased from $674 to $507. In all, worldwide GDP per head grew only by a modest $200 during the 13-year period (UNDP, 1997).

Second, the presence of persistent income inequality in all parts of the world is another problem that can undermine efforts to reduce poverty. To sustain a more effective fight against poverty, each country must not only create wealth, but must also organize a method of equitable distribution of that wealth to all its citizens. Contrariwise, there appears to be growing inequality in many parts of the world. Table 2 shows that the richest 10 percent of the people in every country examined had about 10–20 times more income than the poorest 10 percent. Inequality in some countries

Table 2 Poverty, income and debt of selected countries in the developing world

	Poverty (% of pop.)*		% Share of income**		External debt***		
	International $1/day (Survey year)	National (Survey year)	Lowest 10% (Survey year)	Highest 10% (Survey year)	% of GNP 1996	Total $m 1980	Total $m 1996
Arab states							
Algeria	< 2 (1995)	12.2 (1995)	2.8	26.8 (1995)	71	19,365	33,259
Egypt	7.6 (1991)	–	3.9	26.7 (1991)	35	19,131	31,407
Jordan	2.5	15.0 (1991)	2.4	34.7 (1991)	110	1,971	8,118
Morocco	< 2 (1991)	13.1 (1991)	2.8	30.5 (1991)	61	9,247	21,767
Tunisia	3.5 (1990)	14.1 (1990)	1.6	39.6	53	3,526	9,886
Asia							
China	22.2 (1995)	6.5 (1995)	2.2	30.9 (1995)	17	4,504	128,817
India	52.5 (1992)	35.0 (1994)	4.1	39.3 (1994)	22	20,581	89,827
Indonesia	11.8 (1995)	15.1 (1990)	3.6	28.3 (1995)	64	20,938	129,033
Nepal	50.3 (1995)	42.0 (1996)	3.2	29.7 (1996)	26	205	2,413
Philippines	28.6 (1991)	54.0 (1991)	24	33.5 (1994)	51	17,417	41,214

Latin America & Caribbean							
Brazil	23.6 (1995)	17.4 (1990)	0.8	47.9 (1995)	26	71,520	179,047
Dominican Republic	19.9 (1989)	20.6 (1992)	1.6	39.6 (1989)	33	2,002	4,310
Guatemala	26.3 (1991)	–	0.6	46.4 (1989)	23	1,166	3,785
Haiti	–	65.0 (1987)	–	–	20	303	897
Mexico	14.9 (1992)	10.1 (1988)	1.6	39.2 (1992)	26	71,520	179,047
Sub-Saharan Africa							
Ethiopia	46.0 (1982)	–	–	–	149	824	10,077
Rwanda	45.7 (1985)	51.2 (1993)	4.2	24.2 (1985)	47	190	1,034
Senegal	54.0 (1992)	–	1.4	42.8 (1991)	53	1,473	3,663
Tanzania	10.5 (1993)	51.1 (1991)	2.9	30.2 (1993)	114	2,542	7,412
Zambia	84.6 (1993)	86.0 (1993)	1.5	31.3 (1993)	161	3,236	7,113

Source: World Bank (1999) *World Development Report 1998–99*.
* Table 4, pp. 196–7.
** Table 5, pp. 198–9.
*** Table 21, pp. 230–1.

is even more dramatic. The richest 10 percent in Guatemala, for instance, have about 78 times more income than the poorest 10 percent. Birdsall (1999) notes that this pattern of inequality was already present in the 1970s and that the gap widened dramatically in the 1980s and continued to widen in the 1990s. Moreover, the gap between rich and poor countries is also becoming increasingly obvious. The ratio of average income for the richest countries and the poorest countries was 9:1 at the end of the 19th century, but today it is 60:1.

Third, the growth of external debt among developing countries is another threat to the efforts to reduce poverty. With debts come obligations. Because of creditor-imposed rules and heavy debt-service obligations, many indebted countries are unable to reform their economies and to wage an effective fight against poverty. For instance, before a country can repay other loans or invest in education or other development projects, debt owed to external debtors like the IMF or the World Bank must be paid. This rule has created an economic crisis and has placed a strain on the people of impoverished countries. For example, in 1996, Uganda spent $3 per person on health care, but spent $17 per person on external debt. This has led to increased childhood diseases and higher child mortality rates (Griesgraber, 1999). Moreover, due to heavy indebtedness, millions of children in sub-Saharan African countries receive little or no education. These governments could have provided education for all the children if they could have diverted only $2.5 billion from the $13 billion annual cost of debt service on external debts of about $200 billion (Sawyerr, 1997).

It does not appear that the poorest of the indebted countries will ever become debt-free. Table 2 shows the level of debt increase in every country surveyed in 1980–96. In some instances, external debt exceeded the countries' annual GNP (Ethiopia, 149 percent; Tanzania, 114 percent; Zambia, 161 percent; Jordan, 110 percent).

Fourth, commitment to education does not appear to be prominent in many parts of the world. If this does not change, long-term adverse consequences for the fight against poverty will result. Commitment to education must go hand-in-hand with poverty reduction efforts, because education remains one of the most effective ways to create wealth for individuals and society. But high-quality education requires long-term commitment. Unlike other development projects, the long-term benefits of education may not be realized until after many years of steady investment.

Instead of increasing, global expenditure on public education decreased from 5.5 percent of the total government expenditure in 1980 to 5.4 percent in 1993–4. In the same period, expenditure on public education in industrialized countries fell from 5.8 percent to 5.4 percent, whereas in developing countries education spending decreased from 3.8 percent to 3.6 percent. As for Africa, education spending per head decreased from $41 to $26 between 1980 and 1985. The spending for education in 1995 was $28. If the 1995 figure is adjusted for inflation, the actual spending would be even smaller (Sawyerr, 1997).

Poverty reduction strategies

Given the scope of the poverty in developing countries and the presence of growing threats that can reverse the progress, poverty reduction strategies must consider several factors, since no single factor can resolve the problem. Anti-poverty strategies that rely on resources allocation, economic growth or any other approach have not always been effective. Lessons learned from previous efforts show that an anti-poverty approach must be based on multiple foundations, and it must be sustainable. For instance, economic growth and capital formation are necessary for sustained development, but they are not sufficient. If long-term development is to take place, growth-inhibiting problems like political corruption and unmanageable debts must be eliminated, and growth-promoting activities like human capital development, fair trade, health promotion, equity and the like must be enhanced. To believe otherwise would only bring frustration and disappointment. Economic growth, international support, and social investment are the three most promising strategies that can address the issues of sustained development.

Economic growth

Economic growth is essential to reducing poverty. Well-managed growth and equitable distribution of wealth could double income within one generation, and under the right circumstances, it could cut poverty in half. Strong economic growth has reduced poverty rates in China, South Korea, Malaysia and other emerging Asian economies. Although economic growth can have an important effect on poverty, economic growth and poverty reduction do not always go hand-in-hand. In many typical situations, economic growth generally benefits a fortunate few, but not all. For example, Honduras, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States have all had steady economic growth since the 1950s, yet the inequality between rich and the poor has widened, and unemployment and poverty have persisted (UNDP, 1997). To achieve meaningful poverty reduction, the following economic issues must be considered.

Growth with equity Economic growth must lead to expanding opportunities for the poor to climb out of poverty. This can be achieved by making poverty eradication a central part of economic growth strategy. Economic growth has resulted in a large poverty reduction in Indonesia, Malaysia and South Korea because of their growth strategy, included expanding economic opportunities for poor people and allocating these expanded resources to health, education and other human development efforts. In contrast, Brazil, which has only considered industrial development, has had no significant poverty reduction, and only a few have actually benefited from this type of approach. This type of development does not help the poor because capital-intensive development usually distorts prices, interest rates and exchange rates to favor those who are already better off (UNDP, 1997). A growth strategy is best when it is based on growth with equity. Economic growth must benefit both rich and poor.

Micro-enterprise Development of labor-intensive micro-enterprise should be supported. Small-scale businesses and agricultural activities are essential to the financial well-being of poor people because substantial income and staple foods are typically generated from these informal economic sectors in developing countries. It has been shown that through credit, savings and technical support, poor people have been able to start or expand income-producing self-employment (Yunus, 1999). Yunus (1994) reported that about 1.6 million women living in poverty were able to create jobs and accumulate capital through micro-enterprise strategies. Micro-enterprise strategy not only contributes to economic growth, it accomplishes its objectives with less investment and less complex management requirements.

Job creation A job-creation policy must be supported. Economic growth alone does not eradicate poverty; it only accounts for about half of poverty reductions. It may also take place at the expense of social disruptions such as volatile employment patterns, changing prices and social dislocations (Lal and Myint, 1996). These can harm already vulnerable people, who may lose their jobs or have their income reduced. For this reason, an equitable social policy must be put in place to protect and compensate those who have been harmed by inequitable growth. A job-creation approach is one such policy that can help the poor. Targeted job creation for the poor in private and public sectors through tax policies and legislation has been a successful anti-poverty measure in developing countries. This is particularly true when the job-creation policy is accompanied by job training, savings and health and other support services (Lipton, 1998). This kind of policy would likely lead to productivity and self-sufficiency among marginal workers.

International cooperation

Although the primary responsibility for fighting poverty rests with the national effort, international involvement is critical for a successful outcome. Poverty, like the economy, is no longer only a national concern, but is also now a global issue. The global integration of economy, culture and politics has blurred national boundaries and responsibilities and strengthened global influences. The rapid globalization which has occurred in the 20th century has brought both opportunities and challenges. Although globalization has led to growth and prosperity for some, it has also pushed others into poverty and dependence. To reduce global poverty and strengthen global relationships, international communities must rectify the growing problems of trade imbalance, external debts and foreign aid issues.

Fair trade The trade balance between rich and poor countries must be minimized. Open markets and a free flow of technology and information have created tremendous global wealth for some, but others have benefited little or not at all. The UNDP (1997) reported that from 1970 to 1991 the share of trade for Asian countries grew from 4.6 percent to 12.5 percent, and the share of trade for the least developed countries dropped to 0.3 percent. Though the principles of the open market were embraced by the world, the embrace was not always extended to poor countries.

The poor macroeconomic policies of developing countries may have contributed to the trade imbalance, but a more important explanation may be found in the terms and rules of international trade practices. For instance, because of their poor credit ratings, impoverished countries are charged interest rates up to four times higher than more affluent countries. As a consequence, impoverished countries have had to transfer funds from already limited domestic spending to pay the extra interest on credit. In addition to these unfavorable financial terms, poor countries typically end up paying higher tariffs on exported goods despite attempts to reduce tariff barriers through the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Under the Uruguay Round, tariff barriers were largely removed from various goods, but the tariffs on the products most often exported by developing countries, such as textiles, leathers and agricultural commodities, remained higher (UNDP, 1997). Because the spirit of the Uruguay Round was not meant to create winners and losers, the trade rules must become more uniform and fair to all.

Debt relief The crushing burden of foreign debt must be relieved from poor countries. Many poor countries are so deep in debt that implementing sound economic policies is very difficult or almost impossible. When reforms are implemented, they are often so restrictive and severe they harm the poorest of the poor and create political instability in the society. But debts can be relieved in several ways. The principal can be cut, the length of the loan can be extended, the interest rate can be reduced and ultimately, the entire debt can be forgiven. Though these actions may create future credit problems for indebted countries, serious consideration must be given to relieve the debts of those countries that are earnestly making an effort to reform their economies and pay their debts. Without such action, creditors may not get anything back if the economies of the indebted countries collapse and they are unable to pay. With the money saved, poor countries would be able to invest in education, health and other development projects (Griesgraber, 1999).

Foreign aid Poverty-reduction efforts can be facilitated through more and better-directed international aid from more affluent countries. Though foreign aid has been, at times, grossly mismanaged and has become an instrument of imperialism, it has also brought stability and growth to many poor countries (Weaver, 1999; Beinart, 1999). For instance, following the Second World War under the Marshall plan, grants, low-interest loans and technical assistance given to allies and enemies alike rebuilt Europe and lifted millions out of poverty. Similar efforts in recent years greatly helped the poor countries in East Asia. For this reason, another round of a global Marshall plan approach might save indebted and faltering countries from falling into economic and social disaster (Piel, 1999; Beinart, 1999).

Social investment

A successful anti-poverty approach integrates economic growth with social investment. A successful partnership between economic growth and social development enables people to deal more effectively with changing economic environments and political priorities. Many international organizations, including UNICEF, UNESCO, the World Bank and the IMF, support the work of strengthening the poor through delivery of basic social services. Investing in people has sustained equitable growth and wealth for even resource-poor countries like Switzerland, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan (Birdsall, 1999). To ensure that funds are made available for social investment, the Oslo Consensus on 20/20 was adopted in 1996. Under this provision, a government allocates 20 percent of its budget to social services and 20 percent of the donor's aid will be targeted to social service programs (UNDP, 1997). Social service spending, which provides opportunities for self-reliance, contributes to long-term benefits for people and society. Provision of social services such as education, health and human capital development is an important counter-cyclical measure against poverty.

Education One of the most important ways to fight poverty is to educate the poor, since education opens up a wide range of economic opportunities for people. Without an educated labor force, neither individuals nor countries may be able to compete effectively in the global labor market and cope with ever-changing economic environments. This is true of present information- and technology-oriented economies. Chung (1994) notes the success found in Zimbabwe, South Korea and other countries in expanding educational opportunities for their citizens. Birdsall (1999) found that education was a factor in the more equitable distribution of the benefits obtained from growth. She notes that during the 1970s the wage inequality between the college-educated workers and non-college-educated workers in South Korea diminished because more and more people in South Korea completed secondary education. In contrast, wage inequality in Brazil grew because education gaps increased in the work force.

Health Investment in healthcare is another important strategy that can be used to resist poverty. Investment in education must go hand-in-hand with good health. Although poor health does not cause poverty, there appears to be a two-way relationship between health and poverty. Prolonged illness, disease and malnutrition can potentially destroy economic and social stability. Conversely, poverty, unemployment and economic disintegration can create the potential for malnutrition, disease and illness. The health of the public must be protected to ensure that its productive capacity is not undermined. When people die prematurely or experience serious health complications from preventable diseases, potential economic growth and development may be severely compromised (Gaiha, 1993).

Human capital Human capital stock is one of the major determinants of workers' success in the labor market. A high level of human capital stock enhances workers' ability to obtain a wide range of employment and increase their income. In order to remain productive and enjoy mobility in the labor market, the human capital stock of workers must be strengthened continuously. This is particularly true in the changing knowledge- and technology-oriented economic environment of today. Ideally, a well-educated labor force has these competences and enjoys security and prosperity. But because many workers are unable to obtain more than a basic education, they should receive training. Investment in training programs on the job or apprenticeships and vocational education and rehabilitation would be most useful.

Social work action

The social work profession is uniquely qualified to deal with poverty issues. For many decades, social workers have worked with the impoverished and have fought poverty at local and international levels. Though they have not always been successful in eradicating poverty, they have laid the groundwork for the next generation of social workers. Given the nature and scope of global poverty, the following social work actions are recommended.

First, the social work profession must more fully embrace principles of social and political justice. For too long, the social work profession has operated within the comfort of classical professionalism and the framework of the bureaucratic process. Holding on to the charity-based intervention of earlier years and focusing only on one-practice orientation (case work, group work or community organization) have created intellectual shortsightedness and political illiteracy among workers (Jacob, 1990). As a consequence, social work's influence and identity have diminished, and to some degree the social work profession has failed in its responsibility towards the poor. To better meet the needs of people in poverty, the social work profession must continue to serve them according to the tenets of the social work mission. The NASW code of ethics is instructive, for instance it mandates: 'Social workers should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to resources, employment, services and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully' (NASW, 1996).

Second, schools of social work must become more active agents of social change. In addition to educating students and pursuing academic interests, schools of social work must take a leadership role in solving problems like poverty. Cloward (1998) believes that too many schools of social work are paying more attention to building up research records than improving practice skills to solve social problems. He therefore argues that schools should become working partners with professions and community agencies to participate in efforts towards social change. Almanzor (1990) suggests the following to strengthen schools' commitments to service and social change.

1. Promote an ongoing dialogue among students, faculty and professions through conferences and workshops.
2. Design curriculums that foster social change.
3. Design extracurricular activities that promote awareness, service, and social change.
4. Cultivate social values like justice, equity, fairness, love of truth, and respect for others.
5. Encourage academics to work with the marginalized sector of the community.

Third, social workers must increase their efforts to interact with international bodies like the UN, World Bank, the IMF, FAO and other similar NGOs. Cox (1990) believes that the solution to global poverty must come from the international setting, and he therefore urges social workers to collaborate with well-established international organizations. It is unproductive to do everything alone or duplicate the efforts of others. Together, much more powerful and coherent voices can be raised to fight poverty. Because the problem of poverty is complex and is embedded in an international structure, no single profession or discipline has sufficient resources or influences to eradicate poverty.

Fourth, social workers must facilitate the building of political solidarity among poor people. Although economic growth is essential to the well-being of the poor, it is politics that ultimately determines how those economic benefits are distributed (UNDP, 1997). To advance their cause, people must be able to articulate their issues in the public forum. As a group, they can more effectively influence policies and directives through boycotts, demonstrations, lobbying and petitions; but little benefit will be gained if these efforts are attempted by individuals or fragmented groups. Social workers can support people's efforts by helping to build a coalition of diverse groups and to articulate their common vision. Building partnerships with trade unions, media, community agencies and academic institutions would also be useful (Atal and Oyen, 1995; Robb, 1999).

Conclusion

Despite unprecedented progress made to reduce poverty in the last 50 years, about 1.3 billion people in the world still live in abject poverty. Nearly half of all poor people live in South Asia. The poverty rate is increasing in sub-Saharan Africa. Poor people not only suffer from economic hardships, but many also suffer from malnutrition, illiteracy, poor health, premature death and broken spirit. It is imperative that the fight against poverty be accelerated. The cost of inaction is increased misery and deprivation.

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