



"When you get up in the morning without knowing where you will go, with nothing to feed your children, that is violence. When you are forced to fight to defend the little that you possess, that is violence. When every day you are forced to lower your head, to close your eyes, not to speak, that is violence." Grassroots activist, Haiti

Ending the violence of extreme poverty - a must for sustainable societies Proposals for Rio + 20

Context heading towards Rio...

The sustainable development challenges faced by people living in poverty around the world vary greatly from one country or region to another. One common thing they strive for is the right for their dignity as a human being to be respected. Yet extreme poverty places this fundamental right in peril on a daily basis, whether they be fighting to secure a safe environment for their children in a New York housing project, to obtain clean water and sanitation in an illegal settlement alongside a railway line in Guatemala or to produce enough food to sustain their family in rural Burkina Faso.

Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation emphasize poverty eradication as a prerequisite for sustainable development. Nevertheless, in spite of progress in some countries over the last two decades, poverty levels remain high. According to the Multidimensional Poverty Index, used in the UNDP's Human Development Report, 1.7 billion people experienced acute deprivations in health, education, and standard of living in 2011. Even in 'rich' countries, economic growth has not eradicated poverty nor extreme poverty: nearly 1 in 7 people are at risk of poverty within the European Union and the USA. In order for the outcomes from Rio +20 to mark a decisive step in moving towards sustainable development, ending the violence of extreme poverty must be a central concern.

"I have never liked getting handouts. I've got my dignity and I don't expect someone else's crumbs when I, as a human being, can achieve things for myself, for my home, for my family."
Grassroots activist, Guatemala.

Moving towards sustainable societies centred on the equal dignity of every person

In addition to being excluded from the benefits of the prevailing model of production and consumption that has a negative consequences for the environment, people living in extreme poverty bear the burden of environmental degradation which creates additional obstacles for them to enjoy their rights and reach levels of sustainable livelihood. They work and live in the most precarious and dangerous conditions, exposed to contamination of air and water, landslides, floods and droughts, being forced to move from one place to another, with no security in terms of livelihood, health or education.

Yet it would be incorrect to judge them as passive victims. They are on the front-line of action to deal with environmental crises, building their resistance with very few means, but with the knowledge and experience of those who have been living in hardship for generation. Unfortunately, this knowledge is rarely taken into account when it comes to addressing sustainable development challenges. Worse still, sustainability programmes that are not designed and implemented in partnership with people living in extreme poverty may often exacerbate poverty and social exclusion.

"I saw a mother completely abandoned, lacking the strength to carry on with her life. With tears in her eyes she said: 'I don't have anything to feed my children. I can't work any more, they have forbidden us to take sand from the river.'"
Grassroots activist, Honduras

Building sustainability means taking into account the different relations between people and the environment, respecting their knowledge and experience, understanding the root causes of problems and creating the conditions for collective action.

We have to demand that our poverty is not used to manipulate us. We're not only people to give charity to, but we're also people whose opinion has to be sought." Grassroots activist, Guatemala

A development framework founded on equal enjoyment of all human rights for all

Poverty eradication is a key theme for Rio +20. Extreme poverty has long been recognised as a violation of human dignity and as inhibiting the full and effective enjoyment of human rights. A new sustainable development framework emerging from Rio should be based on internationally agreed upon human rights principles and standards. The work of the Human Rights Council in developing Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights provides a useful reference in developing a human-rights based approach to sustainable development and poverty eradication.

Taking a human-rights based approach necessitates the three dimensions of sustainable development – environmental, economic and social – being addressed equally and holistically. People in extreme poverty do not compartmentalise the challenges they face. When floods leave them homeless, they often lose not only the roof over their heads but their livelihood and sources of income. The shocks they experience are proof of the indivisibility and interrelated nature of human rights and a pressing argument for conference outcomes to be based on internationally agreed human rights principles and standards.

"We didn't have work, we didn't have food, we didn't have beds, we slept on the ground, on a few little mattresses with blankets that we'd been given (...) we just had to be there, lying in bed, listening to what other people were saying, but we didn't have the chance or the right to an opinion." Parent in temporary shelter following a hurricane, Honduras."

A sustainable development underpinned by an equity approach and accepted human rights principles will ensure the following:

- ✓ **Specific attention is given to the poorest and most vulnerable people** ensuring sustainable development measures reach and benefit people living in extreme poverty.

- ✓ **All sectors of society are able to participate** in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of sustainable development policies and programmes, including people living in extreme poverty.
- ✓ Programmes and measures are informed by the knowledge and expertise of those directly concerned by the challenges of sustainable development through a **transparent and accountable framework** that builds on local knowledge and capacities.

Eradicating extreme poverty is a the core of creating the Future We Want...

Sustainable development policies and programs, including future Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), must focus on achieving full and equal enjoyment of the rights of all people, including people in extreme poverty. It must address in a holistic and equitable manner economic, environmental and social dimensions to ensure a sustainable development framework that has at its core the eradication of extreme poverty.

The process for designing SDGs must be part of a wider process of developing a post-2015 framework to succeed the Millennium Development Goals. It is vital that this process delivers a framework that is holistic, equitable, inclusive and universal. The process must recognise and built upon the knowledge people living in poverty, in both the global north and south, possess of what constitutes genuinely sustainable development policies and programmes that leave nobody behind.

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