

---

# Poverty Development and Wellbeing: Ethical Challenges

none

January 26, 2008

By **Ishara Mahat**

## **Poverty Development and Wellbeing: Ethical Challenges**

### Abstract:

Poverty is often seen as having low income and inability to access standardized services for living. However, poverty measures have failed to measure the deprivations which are more detrimental in achieving the human freedom and thereby their well being. Accordingly, development goal is intended to achieve the benefit that are materially sufficient and disregards the resources which are intrinsically important. Individual's intrinsic capabilities are often undermined that function for their overall well being. The challenges are then to increase the capabilities of the people with adequate freedom and choices that enable them to enjoy the positive state of life that they value.

### **Poverty and Development**

The relationship between poverty and development is a complex one. It is rather worth to examine poverty in terms of relative deprivations that create

absolute poverty. Poverty is created through multiple deprivations which reinforce each other (Allen and Thomas, 2000). Development becomes handicapped with multiple deprivations, and thus the relationship between poverty and development can not be only seen in terms of material advancement. Especially in this age of technocrats, development is often viewed as advancement in technology and spreading its effects all over the world including those in territories. However, there are some observations which reveal that the great danger to the poor seems to be the concentration of political power (Attwood, Bruneau, and Galaty, 1988). Economic development often comes ahead of social justice and equities. However, economic output does not always predict social performance. For instance, when comparing poorer nations having about equal GNP per capita, eg. South Asia and Sub Saharan Africa, the average life expectancy and literacy rate were higher in later one. Thus economic growth does not necessarily benefit the poor, but may reduce poverty as a whole (Attwood, et.al, 1988). As pointed out by Sen (1999a) development is more than the economic growth since it is contingent upon political, social, environmental, institutional and other many factors. Unless human beings are free from multiple deprivations their individual growth and well being is stagnant. The challenge of development thus consist elimination of continuing and widespread deprivation, and the prevention of sudden desperation (Sen, 1999b).

While the globalization is seen to be significantly contributing towards the development, its success is largely measured whether it diminishes poverty or inequality. The millennium development goals (MDGs) set by UN general assembly and World commission have also set the yardstick of legitimacy of globalization as to reduce the poverty and inequalities and increase the socio-economic security of poor countries (Vayrynen, 2005).

Poverty as an individual concept is described as a person living less than a dollar per day. However, such individualization of poverty has a little meaning, unless it addresses the pervasive inequalities (such as power relations among gender and class) which are largely persistent in every society that contributes to the absolute poverty (cited in Vayrynen, 2005). He further commented that “poverty is not a natural state of affairs but a function of deep inequities in the national and global systems” (Vayrynen, 2005: 11). Sahlins (1997) argues that “poverty is not a certain small amount of goods nor is it just a relation between means and ends. Poverty is a social status. It is the invention of civilization and has grown up with civilization” (1997: 19).

Poverty leads to insecurity leading to other conflicts such as demographic and environmental challenges, which makes it harder for political and institutional forces for promoting human development (Brainard, Chollet and Lafleur, 2007). For instance, the overuse of natural resources, the degradation of the ecosystem, and extreme climate events such as floods, droughts and hurricanes add to human vulnerability, and affect the livelihoods and human well being. For the chronically poor, poverty is more than having low income: it is about multiple deprivations – hunger, malnutrition, dirty drinking water, lack of education, having no access to health services, social isolation and exploitation (IFAD, 2001). IFAD (2001) reports that poverty and chronic deprivation have been tragic aspects of human society.

As pointed out by Chambers (1997) development is about a good change and it must bring positive changes such as increase living standards, improve health and well being for all, and good achievement for society at large. Development in modern era has been constantly focused on human development focusing on the overall well beings of human beings (UNDP, 1997). Human development is the process of enhancing individual and collective quality of life

in a manner that satisfies minimum basic needs, which are economically, environmentally and socially sustainable. And the people must have a considerable degree of control over the process through the access to the means of accumulating social power (Simon, 1999). Accordingly, the aid agencies have made their shift in program development focusing on human side of development, such as education, health and other services (Mosse, 2005). However, aids have empowered the authorities instead of people in most of the third world countries. It is because the authorities are most of the time detached from rural areas having located centrally and the administrative cost is so high at central level leaving a minimum for program activities at grassroots (Huntington, 1988). The ethics of development mission is to ensure that development funds are symmetrically distributed and the hopes of poor are alive (Chambers, 1997). However, the disappointments are increasing largely as aids have often created inequalities between the very poor and the elites. The effectiveness of aid and development assistance has been a major issue in reducing global poverty (World, Bank, 1998). Indeed, the aid policies in last two decades are very project-centered rather than people-centered contributing to the poverty of thinking and the loss of ownership (Sobhan, 2001). It is often observed that poverty is likely to be continued unless there is a second view on designing the development policy for mainstreaming poverty (Sobhan, 2006). The poor are often associated with certain inherited structural arrangements such as “insufficient access to productive assets as well as human resources, unequal capacity to participate in both domestic and global markets, and undemocratic access to political power” (2006:39). These structural features of poverty systematically exclude the poor from participating in the benefits of development. An unequal command over both economic and political resources within a society, and the unjust nature of social order perpetuates the inequities.

Sen (1982, 1989) views poverty in terms of absence of freedoms that restricts their capabilities and fail to participate in human society. It is very necessary to correct such structural injustice that perpetuates inequalities and poverty.

Development does not only mean combating poverty but restoring or enhancing human capabilities and freedoms. A practical framework would be thus required to enhance the capacities of poor in order to enable them to participate and contribute equitably in the process of development (Sobhan, 2006).

## **Well being and Development**

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is often a measure of the wellbeing of countries based exclusively on material wealth. However, insufficient income is only one dimension of under development (Berenger, 2006). Alternative socio-economic indicators in the past have failed to incorporate social and human dimensions of development. Lately in 1990, the human development report acknowledged the multidimensional aspects of development moving from promotion of growth to promotion of the well being. The HDI 1990 was based on Sen's capability approach, which emphasized on the broad concept of human development incorporating the non monetary indicators. World Bank (2006) has also adopted the notion of "quality of the growth" and "pro poor growth" that reflect the non-monetary dimensions of well being.

Sen (1985) focuses on four components: commodities or resources and functioning or capabilities. Resources include all good and services and capabilities represent the being and doings that functions out of the resources. In this sense, it is also the freedom of choice one can lead their life out of the opportunities they have. Thus capabilities are the combinations of functioning that the person can achieve. Functioning is directly related to the achievement

while the capabilities are the abilities to produce it and thus is based on the notion of freedom (Sen, 1999). Based on Sen's approach UNDP (1997) defines human development as increasing people's choices based on human capabilities and opportunities. Under-development is thus not an absence of basic needs but deprivation of basic capabilities or freedoms that restrict an individual's chances to enjoy the positive state of life (Sen, 1992). According to Sen, the aim of development is to enhance the human capabilities to lead full, productive and satisfying lives. Sen (1999) contends that well being is not represented by the possessions of resources but by their transformation into "functioning" which depends upon personal, social and environmental factors. Sen further argues that countries with high GDP per capita has not indicated in enrichment of the human lives and thus it can not be a measure of human development. Hence, the well being measure should be based on other indicators that determine the improved live qualities of people such as reduction in workload, improved in health condition. Human well being is a central focus of Sen's capability approach.

The well being of a person can be seen in terms of a person's functioning and capabilities, "what he or she is able to do or be" (e.g., the ability to be well nourished, to avoid escapable morbidity or mortality, to read and write and communicate, to take part in the life of the community, to appear in public without shame) ("Sen, 1987, pg. 8). Functioning represents the state of a person in particular the various things that he or she manages to do or be in leading a life. Sen (1992) claims that gender inequality can be best understood with a capability approach, since women's ability is restricted with the existing gender gap in the access to resources. It is their intrinsic capability that matters much than the availability of resources as means. The issue of gender inequality is one of the disparate freedoms. The capability of a person reflects the alternative

combination of functioning the person can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection. Sen argues the importance of extension of human capabilities which are intrinsic and constitute of human freedom for well being and quality of life (Sen, 1997: 21). Wellbeing can not be reflected by the characteristics of goods possessed by a person, but by his or her achievements: “how well is his or her being? “. Thus he commends that well being can be best seen as an index of the person’s functioning (1985:25).

Sen further differentiates between well being and agency aspects, as well being is concerned with own well being of individual, and the agency may be related with other’s well being. It is also an individual’s perception of other’s well being. Sen asserts that a person may have different goals and objectives, other than pursuing their own well being. And such others related pursuits are part of agency aspect of human. It is in fact an integral part of one’s well being to be attentive to other’s well being. Smith (1976) provides a bridge between a well being and agency aspect of human. “The man who is himself at ease can best attend to the distress of others” (Smith, 1976: pg. 153). Sen also argues that human beings are not “rational fools” only to be motivated by production and exchange, but they could be equally moved by other regarded values of justices and fairness in the distribution (Sen, 1983). This idea combines the agency and well being into one. Freedom is an end state, but without the self-development of actors and institutions from freedom to responsibility, there will be very little resources left to rescue human wellbeing. Thus freedom of choice is central to human well being as asserted by Sen (1987, 1999).

## **Development Ethics**

Development as emphasized in Human Development Report (1997) and

World Development Report (1997) is to make the world better place especially for the poor with appropriate policies and actions (Chamber, 1997). It is not only about examining the development agenda, but examining our own behavior “how we think, how we change and what we do and not do” (1997: 1744). Sachs (1992) views development as “ruin in intellectual landscape” (cited in Chambers, 1997). The emphasis is on building infrastructures and adding resources: human as well as financial which are measurable, but undermines the “other aspects” (non measurable) which matter much for the people (Chambers, 1997; Sen, 1982). The other aspects are the dimensions of deprivations such as vulnerability, physical weaknesses, powerlessness, humiliations, and social exclusion.

The developmental paradigm in the past has been dominated by the idea that the role of the state or civil society is only to provide what poor people lack. i.e. material resources, however, undermines the resources in which “poor people often are rich: their own knowledge”. Development in last century has adopted poor as ‘resource poor people’ – “As if knowledge is not a resource, or as if poor people have no knowledge” (Gupta, 2007).

As expressed by Chambers, whose reality counts, poor people should be able to express their complex and the diverse realities and become active agents of development. Chambers in his development vision emphasizes two things: livelihood and capabilities as a means and as an end, and well being as an overarching end (Chambers, 2005). Livelihoods are basic for well being such as having enough food, clothes and so on and capabilities are the means of well being. Chambers further commends that livelihood should be equitable and sustainable. Capabilities are what people can do and be, which are intrinsic and not what they can consume (Chambers, 2005; Sen, 1999). Friedmann (1992: 32) in his alternative development approach focused on improving the conditions of



people's lives and livelihood that starts from the household. Development is more about empowering individuals, households and communities. It is thus a process of social change, in which the development agencies both individuals and households continue to make efforts to promote their own vision of development (Allen and Thomas, 2000). A good leadership and vision is required to empower the people and thus a great cooperation and action is needed from the powerful and wealthy people, for the responsible well being. It is them who needed to be changed for well being to be responsible. The greatest challenge of development is for those with more wealth and power is to accept less and welcome it as a means of well being and to a better quality of life (Chambers, 1997). As pointed out by the Goulet (1995) the essence of development ethics is to call for those powerful to be responsible for the marginal other and the poor. For instance, "while millions suffer deficiency diseases caused by malnutrition, a favored few fall prey to hitherto unknown degenerative diseases induced by excessive food and drink" (Goulet, 1995:56). The calling of development ethics and ethical thinking is to cultivate our identity with marginalized poor. Goulet further argues: "As with individuals who are undernourished, insensitive individuals are stunted human beings . . . 'Human quality' consists in perceiving reality as it truly is and in feeling compassion for fellow humans" (ibid.:59). Goulet challenges us to realize: "Because the rich are responsible for abolishing the absolute poverty of their fellow human beings, to refuse to do so is only at the price of stunting their own humanity" (ibid.:60). In the similar line, Hamelink (1997) argues that "Development Ethics should confront those of us who belong to the lucky billion with a moral challenge to our

personal behavior. Ethical reflection should break through our common complacency and make us feel less comfortable about our own (individual and collective) unwillingness to allow even normal threats to our prosperity and the future of our children” (1997:11). Kothari (1993) challenges that, beyond social, ecological and political domains, there is a need to enlist human sensitivity on behalf of the poor at more basic levels. Kothari further argues that the ethical calling of poverty is part of a “larger reawakening and restructuring of civil society” that involves concrete interventions on our part (ibid.:166). Such an imperative is particularly urgent at present when “we seem to have arrived at a moment in history in which positioning ourselves vis-à-vis the poor has increasingly meant that leaving them out of the purview of the State and the development process is not only considered both economically and politically necessary but also legitimate . . .” (ibid.:171). The development ethics challenges self cultivation of both the poor and the rich, who have to be involved in the transformation process continuously. The challenge is a challenge of cultivating humility and self-emptying process (Wilfred, 1996) on the part of development professionals who have both knowledge and power. Similarly, the challenge is also to realize that “power hinders learning and thus uppers must make themselves vulnerable” (Chambers, 1997:32). Habermas (1994) also argues that the capability to be vulnerable and humble in one’s relationship with poor is an important part of self care in the field of development.

## **Conclusion**

Poverty has multidimensional impact on the wellbeing of individuals and on human development. Low income is only one aspects of poverty that can be instrumental in achieving the wellbeing. However, there are other aspects which are intrinsically important (e.g being able to take part in community life, being inclusive in decision making process) that shape the capabilities for the well being of the people. It is thus important to rebuild the capabilities of individual by providing enough opportunities and choices that allow them to function for their well being.

It is especially important on the part of development planners to reexamine their practices in dealing with the poor who are deprived not only with the low income but with multiple vulnerabilities that come across on their ways. A human sensitivity is very much required in dealing with poor at basic levels so as to help them to increase their intrinsic capabilities. We the fortunate one should be willing to accept the less and ensure that resources are in place to help the poor to be empowered. We should develop our inner values to achieve the “common goal” of development to address the problems at grassroots than only focusing on our “own” development.

## **References**

- Attwood, W.D., Bruneau, C.T. and Galaty, J.G. (1988) ‘Introduction’ in Attwood, W.D., Bruneau, C.T. and Galaty, J.G. (Eds.) *Power and Poverty*, West View

Press.

Brainard, L., Chollet, D., and Lafleur, V. (2007) 'The Tangled Web: The Poverty-Insecurity Nexus', in (Eds.) *Global Poverty, Conflict, and Security in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C.

Berenger, V. (2007) 'Multidimensional Measures of Well-Being: Standard of Living and Quality of Life Across Countries' *World Development* Vol. 35 (7) pg. 1259-1276.

Cecelski, E. (2000) *The Role of Women in Sustainable Energy Development*, National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL), Boulder, Colorado, USA.

Chambers, R. (2005) *Ideas for Development*, Earthscan, London

Chambers, R. (1997) 'Editorial: Responsible Well-Being-A Personal Agenda for Development', *World Development*, Vol. 25 (11) pp. 1743-54.

Goulet, D. (1995) *Development Ethics*. London: Zed Books.

Gupta, A. (2007) *Anil Gupta and the Honey Bee Network*, World Changing Model.

Habermas, Jurgen (1994) "Overcoming the Past: Conversations with Adam Michnik", *New Left Review* 203.

Huntington, R. (1988) 'Memories of Development: The Rise and Fall of a Participatory Project Among the Dinka', 1977-1981, in Attwood, W.D., Bruneau, C.T. and Galaty, J.G. (Eds.) *Power and Poverty*, West View Press.

Hamelink, C.J. (1997) "Making Moral Choices in Development Cooperation: The Agenda of Ethics", in C.J. Hamelink, (ed.), *Ethics and Development*. The Netherlands; Ga Campen, pp. 11-24.

IFAD (2001) *The Challenge of Ending Rural Poverty*, Oxford University Press.

Kothari, R. (1993) *The Growing Amnesia: Poverty and Human Consciousness*. Delhi: Penguin Books.

Mosse, D. (2005) 'Global Governance and The Ethnography of International Aid' in Mosse, D. and Lewis, D. (Eds) *The Aid Effect*, Pluto Press, London.

Najam, A. and Cleveland C.J. (2003) 'Energy and Sustainable Development at Global Environmental Summits; An Evolving Agenda', *Environment, Development and Sustainability* (5) 117-138,

NPC (2005) *The Eleventh Plan (2008-2013)* His Majesty Government, National Planning Commission, Kathmandu, Nepal

Practical Action (2004) Practical Action Nepal, Country Strategy, 2004-2008.

Vayrynen, R. (2005) 'Global Inequality, Poverty and Justice: Empirical and Policy Issues' in Cheru, F. and Bradford, C. (Eds.) *The Millennium Development Goals: Raising the Resources to Tackle World Poverty*, Zed Books,

London.

Sachs, W. (1992) *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, Zed Books, London.

Sahlins, M. (1997) 'The Original Affluent Society', in Rahnema, M. and Bawtree, V. (Eds.) *The Post Development Reader*, pp. 3-21, Zed Books London.

Sen, A. (1999a) *Development as Freedom*, Oxford Press.

Sen A. (1999b), *Beyond the Crisis, Development Strategies in Asia*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.

Sen, A. (1992). *Inequality re-examined*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sen, A. (1985). *Commodities and Capabilities*. Amsterdam: North Holland.

Sen, A. K. (1983). "Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioural Foundations of Economic Theory." In A. K. Sen (Ed.), *Choice, Welfare and Measurement*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher, pp. 84-106.

Simon, D. (1999) *Development Revisited: Thinking about, Practicing and Teaching Development after the Cold War*, in Simon, D and Narman, A. (Eds.) *Development as Theory and Practice: Current Perspectives on Development and Development Cooperation*. Pearson Education.

Sobhan, R. (2006) 'Challenging the Injustices of Poverty: Rethinking Aid Strategies' in Folke, S. and Nielsen, H. (Eds.) *Aid Impact and Poverty Reduction*, Danish Institute of International Studies Palgrave Macmillan.

Sobhan, R. (2001) *Eradicating Rural Poverty: Moving From A Micro To A Macro Policy Agenda*, IFAD/FAO/WFP Public Lecture Series, Rome

UNDP (2005) *Energizing the Millennium Development Goals: A Guide to Energy's Role in reducing Poverty*, United Nations Development Program, New York.

UNDP (2004) *Human Development Report*, Nepal.

UNDP (1997) *Human Development Report*, New York.

Wilfred, F. (1996) *Leave the Temple: Indian Paths to Human Liberation*. Trichy:  
Carmell Publications.

---

**From:** Z Net - The Spirit Of Resistance Lives

**URL:** <http://www.zcommunications.org/poverty-development-and-well-being-ethical-challenges-by-ishara-mahat>