

**“Reducing Poverty: how human rights can help”**

**Pierre Sané – UNESCO Assistant Director General for Social and Human  
Sciences**

**Thursday 20 January 2005**

**Abstract**

The striking feature of our civilization, as it globalises around the aspiration to unprecedented prosperity, is the persistence and even increase of poverty, which affects half the world's population. We care, justifiably, about the victims of genocide and of natural disasters. But there is no coherent basis for the ethical double standard whereby we accept the poverty manufactured by our society, even though it kills more surely and methodically than machetes and militias, more widely and systematically than floods or earthquakes. To address the contradiction between the equality proclaimed in the granting of rights and growing inequality in access to life-giving resources is essential for the preservation of our own humanity. And the only way to do this is to recognise that poverty is, by its very nature, a violation of human rights, which thus cries out not for alleviation or even eradication, but for abolition.

## **Poverty, the next frontier in the struggle for human rights**

**Pierre Sané**

My theme here is a straightforward, deceptively simple proposal: poverty will only cease when it is recognised as a violation of human rights and, as such, abolished.

One should be aware that the striking feature of our civilization, as it globalises around the aspiration to unprecedented prosperity, is the persistence and even increase of poverty. It is an overwhelming fact: poverty affects half the world's population. It is spreading: the vast majority of the two to three thousand million human beings who will be added to the world's population before the end of the century will be exposed to it. It is putting alarming pressure on the environment and global equilibrium. The figures are apocalyptic: 8 million children die each year because of poverty, 150 million children under the age of five suffer from extreme malnutrition, 100 million children live in the streets. Every three seconds, poverty kills a child somewhere. And our world puts up with it.

When, in 1994, 800,000 corpses of Tutsi and opposition Hutu victims of genocide in Rwanda were carried on rivers of blood through the country of a thousand hills, the world held its breath. We all felt guilty. We wished that action had been taken to prevent it. We all said, once again, "never again!" The United Nations established an International Tribunal to establish the truth and hand down justice. "We cannot bring back the dead, but the guilty shall pay. International law will prevail. Morality is safe." But what about the 8 million children who die each year from poverty-related diseases? We are well aware of these figures and they are probably underestimated. We will not be taken by surprise again and, furthermore, we could prevent the slaughter with means that, in the final analysis, are fairly limited.

What, then, is the basis of the ethical double standard which leads us to accept the poverty manufactured by our society, even though it kills more surely and methodically than machetes and militias? Is there a single moral or ethical justification for this central contradiction between the equality proclaimed in the

granting of rights and growing inequality in access to life-giving resources? To address this question is essential for the preservation of our own humanity.

It would seem, however, that the famous “standards of decency” are changing. Thus, the international community has set, as a priority for the millennium, Millennium Development Goals [MDGs], the first of which is eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. The quantitative target, by which success in poverty eradication will be measured, is to reduce by half, in 15 years, the number of people living in extreme poverty.

This approach, however laudable in itself, does not exhaust the issue. For one thing, the intended target will not easily be reached. But even if it were successfully achieved, the basic question would remain untouched: can persistent poverty be tolerated at all?

This problem has been tackled from another angle. As long as we consider poverty as a quantitative, natural deficit to be made up, the political will to reduce it will not be energised. Poverty will only cease when it is recognised as a violation of human rights and, as such, abolished. This is why; and this is how.

When poverty is defined in relative terms, it is at once infinite and incurable. We are forced, at the same time, to consent to it indefinitely and to exhaust, in vain, unending resources in seeking to reduce it. This relativistic approach can only determine an arbitrary poverty line which is adopted as an artificial horizon. But such a bogus horizon remains unbearable: what do one or two dollars a day mean, and above all, what right do we have to make do with such a figure? For poverty is not a fate to be alleviated by international charity or aid. Nor does poverty reflect poor people’s lack of self-reliance or their inability to compete in a free-for-all of supposedly equal opportunities. Poverty does not persist solely because of incompetent, corrupt governments that are insensitive to the fate of their population. No. Fundamentally, poverty is not a standard of living or even certain kinds of living conditions: it is at once the cause and the effect of the total or partial denial of human rights.

Of the five families of human rights – civic, political, cultural, economic and social – proclaimed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as inherent to the human person, poverty violates the fifth, always; the fourth, generally; often the third; sometimes the second, or even the first.

Reciprocally, the systematic violation of any one of these rights degenerates rapidly into poverty. As was recognised at the International Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna, in 1993, there is an organic link between poverty and violation of human rights.

And yet, human rights are inalienable and inseparable. Their violation is a fundamental infringement of human dignity as a whole, and not a regrettable inconvenience to be endured by distant neighbours. It must therefore cease, and the imperative takes a simple form: poverty must be abolished. The claim sounds naive; and may even bring a smile to your lips.

Condescension would however be misguided as well as inappropriate. There is nothing to smile at in distress, misery, dereliction and death which march in grim parade with poverty. We should, indeed, be ashamed. But the issue is also substantive: the abolition of poverty is the only fulcrum that offers the leverage to defeat poverty.

Leverage, in this case, comes from investment, national and international reforms, and policies to remedy the deficiencies of all kinds that are the backdrop to poverty. Fortunately, humanity now has the means to answer the challenge: never have we been so rich, so technically competent and so well informed. But in the absence of a fulcrum, these forces cannot act as effectively as they might.

If, however, poverty were declared to be abolished, as it should with regard to its status as a massive, systematic and continuous violation of human rights, its persistence would no longer be a regrettable feature of the nature of things. It would become a denial of justice. The burden of proof would shift. The poor, once they

have been recognised as the injured party, would acquire a right to reparation for which governments, the international community and, ultimately, each citizen would be jointly liable. A strong interest would thus be established in eliminating, as a matter of urgency, the grounds of liability, which might be expected to unleash much stronger forces than compassion, charity, or even concern for one's own security, are likely to mobilise for the benefit of others.

By endowing the poor with rights, the abolition of poverty would obviously not cause poverty to disappear overnight. It would, however, create the conditions for the cause of poverty to be enshrined as the highest of priorities and as the common interest of all – not just as a secondary concern for the enlightened or merely charitable. No more than the abolition of slavery caused the crime to vanish, no more than the abolition of domestic violence or genocide have eliminated such violations of the human conscience, the legal abolition of poverty will not, then, make poverty disappear. But it will place poverty in the conscience of humankind at the same level as those past injustices the present survival of which challenges us, shocks us, and calls us to action.

The principle of justice thus implemented and the force of law mobilised in its service are of enormous power. This, after all, is how slavery, colonialism and apartheid were ended. But while slavery and apartheid were actively struggled against, poverty dehumanises half the planet to a chorus of utter indifference. It is, undoubtedly, the most acute moral question of the new century to understand how such massive and systematic violations, day in, day out, do not trouble the conscience of the good people who look down upon them. While equality of rights is proclaimed, growing inequalities in the distribution of goods persist and are entrenched by unjust economic and social policies at national and global level. To deal with poverty as a violation of human rights means going beyond the idea of international justice – which is concerned with relations between states and nations – towards the creation of global justice, which applies to relations between human beings living in a global society and enjoying absolute and inalienable rights – such as the right to life – that are guaranteed by the international community. Such rights do not belong to the citizens of states but, universally, to

human beings as such, for whom they are the necessary condition of life on the planet. The obligation to denounce violations and to ensure respect, protection and effective enjoyment of rights is incumbent on all, without distinction of race, country, or creed. The principle of global justice thus establishes the conditions for a fairer distribution of the planet's resources between its inhabitants in light of certain absolute rights. Let us remember that, morally speaking, the right to property is not absolute: it follows that territorial sovereignty, which entails ownership of natural resources, cannot qualify an absolute right, such as the right to life elsewhere.

What we must note is that nearly three billion people receive only about 1.2% of world income, while one billion people in the rich countries receive 80%. An annual income transfer of 1% from one group to the other would suffice to eliminate extreme poverty. In fact, the transfer continues to operate in the opposite direction, despite efforts towards debt reduction and development aid.

At the end of the day, there is a simple choice. Not between a “pragmatic” approach, based on aid granted by the rich to the poor, and the alternative sketched here. The real choice is between the abolition of poverty and the only other way for the poor to obtain rights, which is for them to take them by force. Needless to say, the latter solution usually causes misery for all: social strife, rampant crime. Mass uncontrolled migration, smuggling and trafficking are the only things to flourish. But what moral basis do we have to demand moral behaviour from people to whom we deny any opportunity to live a healthy life? What right have we to demand that they respect our rights? The sombre option will become increasingly likely if nothing is done – or too little, as tends to be the case with pragmatism, however deserving.

The options thus reduce to a single choice, which is the only one compatible with the categorical imperative to respect human rights: to abolish poverty in order to eradicate it, and to draw from this principle all the consequences that free acceptance of it implies.

No great programme will ensure the eradication of poverty. Its proclaimed abolition must, first, create rights and obligations, and thereby mobilise the true forces that can correct the state of a world plagued by poverty. By simply setting an effective and binding priority, abolition changes the ground rules and contributes to the creation of a new world. Such is the price to pay to give globalisation a human face; such is also the greatest opportunity for sustainable development that we can hope to grasp.

What are the implications for NGO activity? First, I would suggest that it is imperative to develop strategies that give tangible significance to the principles of indivisibility and interdependence of human rights. The unfortunate historical separation of human rights into civil and political rights on the one hand, and economic, social and cultural rights on the other, has tended to entrench the view that poverty was beyond the scope of human rights NGOs and to farm out poverty to market forces or development processes. Campaigns for ratification of international treaties must promote treaties on social, economic, and cultural rights, national legislations must be amended accordingly, and violations of such rights must be actionable. Furthermore, in the field, research techniques must be deployed to monitor the violations suffered by victims, fulfilment of their obligations by states and international actors, and reparations for injured parties.

Ultimately, the issue is to mobilise public opinion for a universal justice that is within our grasp. Its emergence has been lengthy – very lengthy. From the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the Rome Conference that established the International Criminal Court, the emergence of universal justice has been defiled by acts of barbarity that have grossly infringed human dignity. Now, however, the legal instruments are there, and step by step experiments and initiatives give hope. It remains to energise political will by unceasing mobilisation, true thinking, the contributions of experts and support for victims and their families.

What promises does such global justice bear? Let me quote Nobel Laureate Jose Saramago: “Were such justice to exist, there would no longer be a single human being dying of hunger or of diseases that are curable for some but not for others. Were such justice to exist, life would no longer be, for half of humanity, the dreadful

sentence it has hitherto been. And for such justice, we already have a practical code that has been laid down for fifty years in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a declaration that might profitably replace, as far as rightness of principles and clarity of objectives are concerned, the manifestos of all the political parties of the world.”.

As for UNESCO, its goal under the terms of its founding charter is to advance, “through the educational and scientific and cultural relations of the peoples of the world, the objectives of international peace and of the common welfare of mankind for which the United Nations Organisation was established and for which its Charter proclaims”. Unquestionably, the present state of the world grossly flouts this aspiration to common welfare; and does so, furthermore, in ways that are becoming the primary threat to the objective of peace.

It is therefore for UNESCO, by the terms of its mandate, to be the standard-bearer, at the heart of the international debate, of the key idea – a powerfully practical idea – that “poverty is a violation of human rights”. This is UNESCO’s contribution to the achievement of this crucial MDG, the one on which all others ultimately depend. In overcoming the threats that weigh so heavily on its future, the world has the lever that Archimedes demanded: it lacks only the fulcrum. To decide to abolish poverty, and thereby to ban all acts that create or maintain it, will provide precisely that fulcrum.



**Biographical note**

Pierre Sané has been UNESCO Assistant Director General for Social and Human Sciences since May 2001. He was Secretary General of Amnesty International from 1992 to 2001, prior to which he spent 15 years at the International Development Research Centre (Canada). His academic background includes doctoral studies in political science at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada; a Masters of Science degree in public administration and public policy from the London School of Economics; and diplomas from the École nouvelle d'organisation économique et sociale and the École supérieure de commerce et d'administration des entreprises in France. He has published extensively on issues of development and human rights.

E-mail : [p.sane@unesco.org](mailto:p.sane@unesco.org)