

**Mary Robinson**

Opening Remarks

**Launch of the Report *Child Poverty in the Developing World***

London School of Economics, London, October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2003

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to return to LSE to participate in the launch of *Child Poverty in the Developing World*, a new study commissioned by UNICEF, and co-authored by the Townsend Centre for International Poverty Research and the University of Bristol and the London School of Economics. Its findings are a stark wake-up call, bringing home to us how bleak the situation is for millions of children today. This is a moral challenge we cannot ignore.

As many of you are aware, LSE's work on poverty – on women and children's poverty in particular – goes back over a century, to the days of fabianism. Founders Sidney and Beatrice Webb were both deeply committed to "War Against Poverty" - the title of a 1912 pamphlet they co-wrote with Ramsay MacDonald and George Bernard Shaw. The very first public conference on family allowances was held at LSE in 1927. The Library here at LSE holds treasures of materials on the early thinking of politicians and reformers on poverty, and the origin of the welfare state.

As for my friend Peter Townsend, you all know his extraordinary commitment to action against world poverty, and that the Townsend Centre for International Poverty Research has authored powerful, courageous studies on the extent of world poverty and the need for new international strategies.

Globalization – the progressive integration of economies and societies – has, as we all know, greatly accelerated in the last decade. This process, it was hoped, would help lift millions out of poverty and raise living standards in the poorest corners of the world. Unfortunately, as we head towards the close of the first United Nations decade for the eradication of poverty (1997-2006), the reality is proving much more complicated. While China and India have indeed brought millions out of poverty, 54 countries have grown poorer in the last decade. Even in countries that have experienced economic growth,

the poor have not necessary been lifted out of poverty but, rather, have been left further behind.

Poverty is widely understood today as a deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health care, shelter, education and information. It is also characterized by unsafe environments and social discrimination and exclusion, by lack of participation in decision-making and in civil, social and cultural life.

When we think of child poverty, we think also about a denial of the future. Severe or extreme poverty can threaten children's very survival, or cause permanent damage – physical or mental or both. It can destroy opportunities of fulfilment forever, and feeds an unending cycle of poverty. This is why UNICEF insists that “poverty reduction begins with children”.

But what isn't considered so often is this perspective: poverty is a violation of internationally agreed human rights. How differently would we go about fighting child poverty in the world today, if we took seriously the commitments which practically every nation has made to their children by ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child?

By understanding, and insisting on implementation of these legal commitments, we open up new possibilities for participation in decision making and we set new tests of accountability for governments from both developed and developing countries alike. I am pleased that tomorrow, at a Conference here at LSE, the findings of this new study will be examined from the perspective of child rights. I encourage as many of you as possible to participate in these discussions.

The report's findings show just how far we are from ensuring the rights of children around the world. Over one billion children – more than half of all children in developing countries – suffer from severe deprivation of at least one basic human need such as food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities or health care. The report shows that over a third of children in developing countries suffer from absolute poverty, defined as two or more severe deprivations.

The study's findings are based on a sample of nearly 1.2 million children from 46 developing countries – the largest and most accurate sample of children ever assembled. The authors' aim was to measure the poverty of children themselves, rather than that of larger units such as families, communities or countries. Equally important, it is the first study to use a human rights definition of poverty, rather than the standard and arbitrary economic measurements of GDP per capita or income per capita.

Considerable differences between countries and regions were found, with children in rural areas most likely to be absolutely poor or severely deprived. Significant gender differences were also found with regard to education deprivation, showing the extent of discrimination against the girl child, especially in South Asia, North Africa and the Middle East.

Sub-Sahara Africa has the highest level of absolute poverty, with a staggering 65% of 207 million children living in absolute poverty. South Asia is not far behind, with 59% of 330 million children living in absolute poverty. These figures accuse us because we cannot plead ignorance.

Early in the last century Anna Akmatova wrote a bleak poem *"Why is this Age Worse..."*

*"Why is this age worse than earlier ages?  
In a stupor of grief and dread  
have we not fingered the foulest wounds  
and left them unhealed by our hands?"*

Might we not ask the same questions, knowing of the 'foulest wounds' of the suffering of millions of children in our resource rich world?

What must be done to change this situation? We began the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with an important signal of new commitment. In September 2000, the largest-ever gathering of heads of state adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration. Recognizing that they had "a collective responsibility to uphold the principle of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level", the leaders emphasized their "duty to all of the world's people,

especially the most vulnerable and, in particular, the children of the world, to whom the future belongs.”

Among other promises, leaders of all countries – rich and poor – committed themselves to a series of measurable targets known as the Millennium Development Goals. Poverty is at the core of the Millennium agenda, with countries pledging to reach benchmarks for eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, improving access to safe water, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases by 2015 which is now in twelve years time.

Yet we know that three years into the agenda we are falling short of these commitments. According to the 2003 UN Human Development Report, in 21 countries today, more people are going hungry. Infant mortality has increased in 14 countries and life expectancy has fallen in 34 countries. At the current rate, Africa, in particular, would not meet some of these goals until 150 years from now.

As Shailen Nandy of the University of Bristol, one of the co-authors of the report we are launching today, has put it:

“At this rate the UN Millennium Development Goals are unlikely to be met, given declining international commitment to development aid. The results of cutting public spending on basic social services have been an increase in poverty and inequality, a fact which organisations like the World Bank need to acknowledge.”

This new report tells us that one-size-fit-all solutions and business-as-usual will not do. Anti-poverty strategies need to respond to local conditions. More emphasis needs to be placed on improving basic infrastructure and social services for families with children, with a particular focus on shelter and sanitation in rural areas. The report stresses that a lack of investment in good quality education, health and other public services in many parts of the world is as significant a cause of child poverty as low family incomes.

At the international level, the report proposes an international investment fund for payment towards national schemes of child benefit in cash or kind as a means to provide the impetus for rapid fulfilment of children’s fundamental right to a standard of living

adequate for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. Further, the report strongly recommends that UNICEF and other international agencies should campaign for a legal right to child benefit.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we all know that access to information is fundamental. The need for such access is emphasized in this report as one of the basic needs of children of today. The report singles out improvements to radio access as the most effective way to improve child access to information, and recommends that UN agencies raise the profile of the issue of information deprivation.

## **Conclusion**

In May 2002, in advance of the UN General Assembly's Special Session on Children, a meeting was held in New York of the representatives of independent children's rights commissioners or ombudsmen with legal authority to promote, protect and monitor children's rights from some thirty countries around the world. In assessing the progress that had been achieved in the twelve and a half years since the Assembly's adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the commissioners and ombudsmen proclaimed:

We cannot tolerate another decade of non-compliance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. ...After decades of international standard-setting activities and ratifying human rights treaties, States must focus on their full implementation. Having rights on paper means little or nothing when they are not known about or cannot be enforced. We can and must do better!<sup>1</sup>

What will it take to do better? My conviction is that we need a new strategy, which is exemplified by this report and the title of tomorrow's conference. Simply said, we need to explore the synergies between human rights and development. In this case, it means bringing child rights and development experts together to develop a truly child-right focused campaign against child poverty. A rights based approach allows civil society

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF Press Release, 8 May 2002, 'First Global Meeting Of Independent Human Rights Institutions For Children', [www.unicef.org/specialsession/activities/ihri-pr.htm](http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/activities/ihri-pr.htm)

groups to examine budgetary proposals and their impact on child rights. There is a rich experience of good practices in this area which should be shared during the Conference tomorrow.

As I see it, it is time to take human rights out of its box. Human rights work, - whether at the level of theory or in implementation of policies – has reached a stage of maturity where it can integrate the insights and tools from disciplines and professions other than the purely legal. In other words, human rights are no longer just a lawyer's preserve. There is space and need for much broader intellectual and scholarly attention to the subject, as well as for integrating human rights into the practical and policy programs that seek to advance human development and human security.

The new project I have been developing since leaving the UN – the Ethical Globalization Initiative – seeks to foster greater coherence in language and research agendas between development and human rights experts. Our aim is to focus on the role of human rights in relation to some of the major development challenges of the day, such as child poverty, and identify the synergies that can be derived from looking at these issues from the dual perspective of human rights and development policy. We believe that the tools of human rights can and should be used by economic and development policymakers. Conversely, it is my conviction that human rights work should be connected more effectively to the objectives of democracy and development.

EGL is glad to be invited to contribute to some strategic initiatives on children in the coming months. In early February a number of global women leaders will meet at Bellagio, Italy, on the initiative of Marian Wright Edelman, President of the Children's Defence Fund, to 'develop actions and strategies we can take individually and collectively within and among our key networks and nations to save child lives and lead towards broader changes in global priorities; identify one or two achievable goals we can pursue in the near future to make a measurable difference for the world's children; and agree on next steps.'

Later in 2004, we would hope to combine with the newly established African Child Policy Forum and African women leaders in a conference to focus in particular on support systems for Aids orphans in Africa. Currently it is estimated that about 13 million

children under 15 have lost one or both parents, because of AIDS, and most of them are in sub-Saharan Africa. This figure is predicated to rise to 25 million by 2010.

In order to get the priority attention that is needed to really tackle *'the foulest wounds'* of child poverty, I believe we need to make a stronger link between human rights, human development and human security. This link is made in the newly released report of the Commission on Human Security, 'Human Security Now'. There is a real opportunity to take up the Commission's broader approach to human security as an entry point to focus on economic, social and cultural rights in general, and on the economic, social and cultural rights of the child in particular. I would encourage you all to discuss this during tomorrow's conference, as you explore future directions for alleviating child poverty. Thank you.