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PART III

Chapter 11

The United Nations High-Level Panel's vision for ending poverty

by

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In May 2013, a High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons delivered to the UN its vision of what a new development framework could look like once the Millennium Development Goals expire in 2015. This chapter summarises this vision, which retains poverty as the central focus. The approach it takes has four dimensions:

- 1. end poverty in all its forms (multidimensional poverty);*
- 2. end poverty not only where it is easiest to do so, but also where it is hardest to make progress (by having both a global goal and targets that are set nationally);*
- 3. address inequality of opportunities (by disaggregating indicators according to income, gender, location, age, disabilities and social group; and by agreeing that a target is only considered to be achieved if it is met for all relevant income and social groups);*
- 4. pay attention to vulnerabilities and resilience.*

In order to make reductions in poverty permanent, the authors stress the need to not only fight the symptoms, but also the causes of poverty. They highlight the need to move away from charity-based poverty programmes to providing a level playing field of equal opportunity that gives every person the tools necessary to build a prosperous life without depriving future generations of their opportunities to do the same.

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon recently appointed a High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons (HLP) to advise him on a bold yet practical development agenda beyond 2015, considering the challenges of countries in conflict and post-conflict situations. The panel report, delivered on 30 May 2013, proposed that a central element of the post-2015 agenda should be the eradication of extreme poverty from the face of the Earth by 2030. It recognised that this repeats a promise that world leaders have made time and again for decades, but concluded that there is a strong case for thinking that today such a historic challenge can actually be met.

The panel took an expansive approach to poverty reduction:

“Our vision and our responsibility is to end extreme poverty in all its forms in the context of sustainable development and to have in place the building blocks of sustained prosperity for all. We seek to make gains in poverty eradication irreversible. This is a global, people-centred and planet-sensitive agenda to address the universal challenges of the 21st century: Promoting sustainable development, supporting job-creating growth, protecting the environment and providing peace, security, justice, freedom and equity at all levels.” (HLP, 2013:5)

The approach, therefore, has several dimensions. *First*, it focuses on ending extreme poverty in all its forms, clearly highlighting the multidimensional nature of poverty (Chapter 3) as well as underscoring the links between the poverty agenda and sustainable development, including environmental issues. *Second*, by focusing on ending poverty it implicitly acknowledges that it is not enough to reduce poverty in countries that are committed to poverty reduction and where it is easiest to do so, but to tackle poverty wherever it exists. *Third*, the same focus on ending poverty suggests that inequality of opportunities within countries must be addressed head on. *Fourth*, the idea that poverty can be ended irreversibly suggests that attention must be paid to people’s resilience and vulnerabilities as well as to those above the poverty line who may nevertheless be at risk of falling back into poverty until they enter the middle class and can afford to protect their lifestyles themselves (Chapter 4).

End extreme poverty in all its forms

The panel report reflects the voices of more than 5 000 civil society organisations from 120 countries

That poverty is not only about income is already recognised in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The post-2015 report also embraces the multidimensional interpretation of poverty in stressing that the “many forms of poverty” need to be fought, including – but not limited to – income poverty. But which dimensions exactly should be included in a multidimensional poverty structure (Chapter 3)? There is much less consensus on this. The poverty dimensions of the MDGs were selected by an expert group comprising members from the OECD Development Assistance Committee, World Bank,

International Monetary Fund and the United Nations Development Programme (Manning, 2009; Hulme, 2009; 2010). The aspects of poverty that this group focused on were income, hunger and basic needs such as health and enrolment in primary education.

The High-Level Panel took a different approach and based its concept of poverty directly on the voices and concerns of those who are actually living in poverty but who are often unheard. The HLP members spoke with farmers, indigenous and local communities, workers in the informal sector, migrants, people with disabilities, small business owners, traders, young people and children, women's groups, and elderly people. Their discussions included the voices of more than 5 000 civil society organisations from 120 countries.

Based on these consultations, the panel included many less tangible expressions of poverty that were excluded from the MDGs, but that are tackled by public institutions with whom people living in poverty must deal on a regular basis. Examples of these "institutional" dimensions of poverty include protection from natural disasters, violence, the exploitation associated with child marriage and discrimination; the right to own and inherit property and run a business; access to infrastructure (including energy), jobs, legal identity, freedom of speech and association; participation in political processes and the right to information; access to justice; and freedom from abuse by security forces, police and the judiciary.

With so many aspects of poverty, the panel considered whether it would be appropriate to merge indicators within a multidimensional target, as suggested by several experts (Chapter 3). However, just like the MDGs, the panel decided to map the different dimensions of poverty using separate goals and targets. In this way, progress on targets cannot be traded off against each other – for example, some authoritarian governments have argued they lower poverty by providing more food to poor people (less hunger) even at the expense of less freedom. In some weighting systems (known as the authoritarian bargain), this could be said to reduce overall poverty, but in the panel's view hunger and freedom cannot be traded-off against each other. The assessment would be simply less poverty on the hunger dimension and more poverty on the institutional dimension. Judgements about the balance between the two are not required with separate goals and targets.

Separate goals and targets on health, education, gender, etc., are also easier to understand and to communicate to the public than a multidimensional composite index on its own. It is easy to envisage a global campaign to end preventable child deaths, but much harder to imagine that social activists could mobilise around reducing a multidimensional poverty index. Given that a major function of the post-2015 agenda is to motivate action globally, communication aspects are very important and should not be underestimated.

Most importantly, the panel report makes clear that poverty can no longer be tackled in isolation from other issues in sustainable development; and that sustainable development is a challenge that no country has as yet achieved. It calls for a single agenda that merges the various work streams of development, sustainable development and climate change. The connections are clear:

"Without ending poverty, we cannot build prosperity; too many people get left behind. Without building prosperity, we cannot tackle environmental challenges; we need to mobilize massive investments in new technologies to reduce the footprint of unsustainable production and consumption patterns. Without environmental sustainability, we cannot end poverty; the poor are too deeply affected by natural disasters and too dependent on deteriorating oceans, forests and soils." (HLP, 2013:5).

The recognition that many people slide back into poverty if resilient structures are not built at the household, national and global levels (Chapter 4) leads to the panel suggestion to add social protection, disaster relief, natural resource accounting and stability in international financial and commodity markets to its list of essential ingredients for addressing poverty in all its forms.

End poverty wherever it exists

The MDGs were meant to be global goals, yet they applied largely to low-income countries supported by developed countries that were expected to provide development assistance and debt relief. Most of the quantitative targets applied to low-income countries. This went against the spirit of existing global agreements that already recognised the universal nature of poverty, but was considered to be more pragmatic and focused. For instance, the World Summit for Social Development (1995) had declared that “profound social problems, especially poverty, unemployment and social exclusion [...] affect every country” (World Summit for Social Development, 1995), but the targets of the MDGs were set in an unbalanced way to require most action by low-income countries.

The HLP report is an expression of the belief that a global partnership needs to be based on an agenda that applies universally to all countries, but with responsibilities differentiated according to a country’s starting point, capabilities, and the resources and assistance it may expect to receive. Because countries differ dramatically in each of these dimensions, they cannot be expected to achieve similar outcomes. There must be a realistic differentiation, set through a process of national consultations.

In this, the post-2015 Panel report differs considerably from the MDGs: these sought to galvanise action at the global rather than the country level. In their original intent and formulation, the MDGs were designed to be global goals only; in other words, they were not to be applied at the national level. However, this exclusive concentration on the global level concealed the fact that successes in a few countries could dilute lack of progress in others. One example that highlights the difference between a global goal and national goals is the income poverty goal as measured by the USD 1.25 (PPP) per day international poverty line (Chapters 1 and 2). The MDGs called for halving the proportion of people living on less than USD 1.25 per day. This global target was met five years ahead of schedule: the proportion of people living in extreme poverty decreased from 43% in 1990 to 21% in 2010. But most of this overall reduction is due to progress in the People’s Republic of China. With China left aside, only 5% of people have passed this threshold in 20 years. The concentration on global goals, in this way, obscures the important differentiation across countries.

With China left aside, only 5% of people have ceased to live in extreme poverty in 20 years

To make matters worse, the global targets of the MDGs became transferred into national targets in the absence of alternative metrics and countries were ranked depending on their performance against the global aggregate. That gave rise to “findings” like “No low-income fragile or conflict-affected country has yet achieved a single MDG” (World Bank, 2011). Such findings, requiring the same progress from countries regardless of national circumstances and state capacities, are not fair to countries with bad starting conditions, like conflict-affected countries. Many such countries have made remarkable progress and should not be declared to be off-track when measured against an abstract global goal that was never

realistic given their starting point. For instance, in the case of MDG 4 (under-five mortality), Angola, Ethiopia, Guinea, Liberia, Malawi, Mozambique and Niger are clear over performers in the sense that they have been able to achieve progress that distinctly exceeds what could be expected from them, given their relatively weak state capacities (Klasen and Lange, 2012). Nevertheless, they are considered to be not meeting the MDG in global evaluations.

The post-2015 Panel Report emphasises country leadership and ownership in setting appropriate poverty reduction targets. In this, it goes back to older precedents like the *Action Plan of the World Summit for Children* (1990):

“These goals will first need to be adapted to the specific realities of each country in terms of phasing, priorities, standards and availability of resources. [...] Such adaptation of the goals is of crucial importance to ensure their technical validity, logistical feasibility, financial affordability and to secure political commitment and broad public support for their achievement.” (UNICEF, 1990)

Building on recommendations like this, the report suggests that targets be set nationally, although with global minimum standards in some cases to ensure that an appropriate level of ambition is achieved. For instance, referring to the illustrative goals suggested in the report, the first target is defined in two parts: one is global, to end extreme poverty at USD 1.25 per day, applying to all countries alike; the other is country-specific, to “reduce by X% the share of people living below their country’s 2015 national poverty line” (HLP, 2013). The choice of X% takes account of the differences in state capacities across countries, thereby allowing a fair and meaningful application of the goal at the national level, while preserving the global ambition and obligation to eradicate extreme poverty.

Leave no-one behind

A target is only considered to be achieved if it is met for all relevant income and social groups

The panel report recommends that the post-2015 agenda ensure that every person achieves a basic minimum standard of well-being by 2030¹ with no excuses or exceptions, a recommendation for which all countries must accept their proper share of responsibility. This is a powerful commitment that recognises that while development targets should be set in a fair and meaningful way at the national level, the result may not meet the ambition of the global community without adequate external support. For example, state capacities are lowest in the poorest countries that face the highest rates of extreme poverty. These countries cannot be left to their own devices, otherwise it would take too long to eradicate poverty from the face of the Earth.

In other words, the responsibility to eradicate extreme poverty in all its forms is both a national and a global responsibility at the same time. The global community takes responsibility for setting a minimum standard that is feasible and appropriate from a moral and economic point of view. National governments take responsibility for using global assistance to the best possible effect (Chapter 14) and for systematically elevating national standards to raise the bar in their own country. Over time, as national poverty lines rise, the globally acceptable norm is also expected to rise, in the same way that it has been raised from USD 1 per day to USD 1.25 per day from 1990 to today (Chapter 2).² The panel report uses this combination of global minimum standards and national standards for several targets, and encourages the setting of ambitious, yet practical, global standards.

Another aspect of the commitment to leave no-one behind is the strong statement that a target is only considered to be achieved if it is met for all relevant income and social groups. This prevents distortions that can arise when looking just at national averages. Take the case of Nigeria as one example of such distortions. Between 1990 and 2008, the country faced a slight decline in the percentage of children who received the measles vaccination, from 47% to 44%, suggesting that progress on this indicator had slowed down only slightly. However, the immunisation rate of the bottom quintile actually fell by one-half, and the immunisation rate in the fourth quintile fell by about 25%. This troubling sign of worsening health conditions for poor people was obscured by the increases in the vaccination rates of the first three quintiles that together led to an only minor decrease in the national average vaccination rate (Vandemoortele, 2011).

In order to prevent the poorest populations from being left behind, and in an effort to create equal opportunities for all, the report requests that all relevant indicators be broken down into income categories (especially the bottom 20%), gender, location (rural/urban as well as region), age, people with disabilities, and social groups. Such disaggregated data will permit policy makers to identify whether specific groups are being left behind and to take remedial action if they are (Chapter 16, Global approach 1).

End poverty once and for all

People living in poverty get half their income from natural resources; they must be able to rely on these to sustain their livelihoods

In order to make reductions in poverty permanent, it is not enough to fight the symptoms of poverty; the causes of poverty have to be addressed as well (Chapter 9). The panel report moves away from poverty programmes that are based on charity (“lifting people out of poverty”) to a focus on providing a level playing field of equal opportunity that gives every person the tools necessary to build prosperous lives for themselves and for their families – without depriving future generations of their opportunities to do the same. The report identifies five transformative shifts that need to happen in order to realise this overall objective.

1. **Leave no-one behind:** No person should be denied universal human rights and basic economic opportunities, no matter where a person lives or to which social group he or she belongs. This requires strengthened property rights for people and businesses, social protection of the poor and vulnerable, and resilience to natural disasters.
2. **Put sustainable development at the core:** If poverty is to be eradicated irreversibly, every country is challenged to embark on a course of structural transformation that integrates the three dimensions of sustainability, social, economic and environmental. As people living in poverty get half their income from natural resources, they must be able to rely on these to sustain their livelihoods. Rich countries need to adopt sustainable consumption and production patterns to avoid carbon emissions that threaten to undermine progress on reducing poverty.
3. **Transform economies for jobs and inclusive growth:** Diversification of economies that provide more opportunities for jobs and livelihoods as well as a radical shift towards sustainable production and consumption patterns is a precondition if we are to create good job opportunities for everyone without threatening the world’s limited natural resources.

4. **Build peace and effective, open and accountable institutions for all:** Peace and good governance are core elements of well-being, not optional extras. Every country is challenged to ensure that governments are accountable and responsive to people's needs and that every person is provided the fundamental human right of freedom from fear, conflict and violence (Chapter 10).
5. **Forge a new global partnership:** In order to be able to live up to the fundamental challenges the world faces today, a new global partnership has to be formed that is based on principles of common humanity and mutual respect and includes local and national governments, business, civil society, scientists and academics.

Conclusions

The eradication of poverty will only be irreversible if the building blocks for sustained prosperity are put in place for all countries. Only then will poverty in all its forms be eliminated once and for all.

Notes

1. Defined by international agreement among UN member states.
2. Global extreme poverty lines have been defined as the average of the lowest national poverty lines in use; see Chapter 2 for more detail.

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