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Leave No One Behind!
Mobilisation attempt for the taboo
subject of inequality

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Mobilisation attempt for the taboo subject of inequality

Bonn, 9 September 2013. 15 September 2013, the International Day of Democracy, marks the beginning of "Leave No One Behind!" mobilisation month. The international campaign was initiated by a large number of civil society organisations in order to call for greater commitment from the international community in combating social injustice and, in particular, inequality, which continues unabated. Primary goal is the General Assembly of the United Nations, which meets on 25 September 2013 in order to discuss a new development agenda after 2015. The biggest problem facing the campaign: as a topic, inequality is anything but popular.

The taboo topic of inequality

In a recent interview Branko Milanovic, chief economist at the World Bank, provided an insightful explanation as to just why inequality is a taboo theme. According to the economist, fighting poverty boosts the ego and earns ethical points. Inequality is different, however: any mention of it raises the question of whether one's own income is appropriate or legitimate. With the exception of the poorer levels of society, no one enjoys being faced with such a question. Mobilisation, then, is comparatively easy when good deeds are to be done. Things look very different when the issue is a question as fundamental as the global distribution of income. 1.75 % of the top earners worldwide have now assembled an income that exceeds the total income of the lower 77 %. In view of these figures, enquiring as to fairness appears to be more than justified. And in fact there is a well-known international treaty that opponents of inequality can refer to: the Millennium Declaration.

The Millennium Declaration

Passed on 8 September 2000, the Millennium Declaration identifies equality as one of six fundamental basic rights. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) derived from this – and valid

until 2015 – also include a target of combating inequality. It measures the share of national consumption that accrues to the bottom 20 % of the population. This objective is one of the least successful. It is not addressed, it is scarcely monitored and few people know that it even exists. In short, it is a target that has been literally hushed up. The reason for this may lie in the unpopularity of the subject, as described by Branko Milanovic. In view of the fact that the year 2015 is fast approaching, the question arises as to what a development agenda after 2015 could look like – and how the subject of inequality can be addressed effectively.

Development agenda post 2015

In July 2012 UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon appointed a 27-member international committee with the goal of drafting proposals for a future development agenda. This High Level Panel of Eminent Persons (HLP) received the express assignment of presenting a realistic and yet ambitious report for international development cooperation after 2015. This assignment resulted in significant international interest in the work of the group; including from those committed to the dismantling of international inequality. In March 2013 an open letter was sent to the committee by economists, academics and development experts. The demand of the ninety leading academics was that the subject of inequality should be moved to the centre of the future development agenda. When the committee presented its report on 30 May 2013 many critics were disappointed: it does not include a goal of combating global inequality. Voices were raised, accusing the committee of failing on this key point. But is this criticism justified?

The call for equal opportunities

The inequality target of the current Millennium Development Goals has remained largely ineffective. Doubts are therefore raised as to whether a similar goal in the new development agenda

would meet with greater success. What could the solution be? One extremely far-reaching proposal comes from the very expert report that has come in for criticism. Instead of trying to combat inequality through the formulation of an individual, stand-alone goal, the report suggests including inequality in each one of the future targets. Essentially, this means that targets will only be considered 'achieved' if they are met for all relevant income and social groups. If, for example, the vaccination rate amongst the population increased in the MDGs, this was deemed to be a success. This viewpoint failed to take into account worrying developments such as in Nigeria, where the vaccination rate for the highest income levels increased considerably, but where that of the lowest level halved. With the new proposal, in contrast, a target would only be achieved where it is attained by not only the richest, but also the poorest and so-

cially disadvantaged. In other words, no-one should be refused access or only receive limited access to key institutions such as education system, labour market or healthcare system on the basis of social origin, gender, race, religion or similar. This is a call for equal opportunities for all.

This call does not eliminate the problem of inequality, of course. But it is a first, significant step in the right direction. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon addressed this in his own report, published on 26 July 2013. This report will form the basis for discussion at the General Assembly of 25 September. The question is whether the international community will also address this theme. In any case, the "Leave No One Behind!" campaign will do all it can to support this objective.



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