**OHCHR’s workshop on promoting and protecting economic, social and cultural rights within the context of addressing inequalities in the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic**

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* **Q: You have been conducting participatory research on the multiple dimensions of poverty. What have you learned and what are the implications of your findings?**
* That poverty has nine intrinsic attributes – dimensions - wherever it occurs.
  + These group into three sets of three attributes:
    - Deprivation – lack of decent work; insufficient/insecure income; social material deprivation.
    - Relational attributes – institutional maltreatment; social maltreatment; unrecognised contribution – lack of recognition
      * Contribution of children is additionally unrecognised because of their status as children
    - Suffering –in body, mind and heart; disempowerment; – struggle and resistance.
      * Children are likely to suffer additionally because of their status as children
* These dimensions are the same irrespective of level of development, location and culture although their precise expression is influenced by these contextual elements.

**So, what are the implications of this?**

1. We learn most when we learn in partnership with people with direct experience of poverty – their disempowerment disempowers us all.
2. We have a cross-cultural understanding of poverty that points the misspecification of SDG1:
   * SDG Target 1.1 and SDG 1.2 (inappropriately) divide the world into two blocks:
     + Eradicate extreme poverty measured as less than $1.25/$2.15 a day.
       - Applies to LDCs and developing world.
       - Misses 8 dimensions
     + Reduce at least by half poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions:
       - Typically applied to the developed world.
       - But few countries have national definitions of multidimensional poverty, therefore developing countries tend to use the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI)
         * The MPI measures material deprivation, poor health and low education. However, while ill-health and limited education may be either the causes or consequences of poverty, they are not intrinsic to the experience of poverty
       - The MPI therefore also misses 8 dimensions of poverty.
3. Following OHCHR (2004, p. 7)[[1]](#footnote-1) , ‘Poverty can no longer be defined uni-dimensionally as lack of adequate income’; rather it is the ‘inadequate realization of certain basic freedoms’ contingent on an inadequate command over economic resources … in the causal chain leading to the non-fulfilment of human rights’.
4. Poverty is, therefore, a single multidimensional phenomenon, which can occur anywhere in the world and differs in degree but not in kind.

**Does this mean that we must measure all nine dimensions?**

* No. We could, should and hopefully will eventually measure all the dimensions, but we can make significant progress even without doing so
* The nine dimensions of poverty provide a policy tool, a template against which we can assess effective contribution of any policy, new or proposed, to alleviating poverty
* As a thought experiment, it is necessary only to ask of any policy intervention: is it likely to ameliorate or exaggerate the attributes of poverty
  + E.g.: Take a particular social assistance policy or proposed policy:
    - Insufficient/insecure income; Ask:
      * are benefit levels adequate for a dignified life?
    - Social and material deprivation; Ask:
      * do schemes facilitate access to resources and facilities necessary for users to fulfil their social responsibilities and to enjoy their social and cultural rights?
    - Lack of decent work; Ask:
      * do schemes enable/facilitate access to dignifying labour?
    - Administrative maltreatment; Ask:
      * do the administrative systems empower users, treat them with respect and minimise compliance costs?
    - Social maltreatment; Ask:
      * Are schemes promoted positively and are staff trained in customer service and anti-discrimination behaviour?
    - Unrecognised contribution; Ask:
      * Do schemes recognise and reflect users’ social responsibilities?
    - Disempowerment; Ask:
      * Do schemes empower users as applicants and recipients and enable them to fulfil their social responsibilities and duties?
    - Suffering; Ask:
      * Do schemes enhance the status and well-being of users, add to or lesson suffering ?
    - Struggle and resistance
      * Are schemes well designed, well promoted, accessible, transparent and well managed, providing accountability and systems for the redress of grievance?

**So, what does this mean in terms of policy?**

* ***National/micro level***
  + The nine dimensions should be applied as a template to assess ALL policies – poverty main-streaming.
  + It is imperative to confront the relational dimensions of poverty – non-recognition, social and administrative maltreatment – that legitimate blaming and shaming those in poverty while simultaneously justifying the status quo.
    - * Only by doing so, can we create sustainable support for the contention that *social protection should be available as of right and be progressively enhanced.*
* ***Global level***
  + Poverty is caused by the maldistribution of resources, not by an absence of resources. (Poverty in low-income countries could nominally be eradicated by diverting 0.1 percent of the GDP of high income countries.)[[2]](#footnote-2)
  + Therefore, poverty can only be addressed by a fairer distribution of resources, both intra- and inter-nationally.
  + But:
    - As UN Secretary General, António Guterres has noted ‘the global financial system is morally bankrupt. It favours the rich and punishes the poor’;[[3]](#footnote-3)
    - The lack of measurable targets under SDG17 is testament to the unwillingness of the developed world/global North to listen to, or to acknowledge the interests and needs of either the global South or the world’s people as a whole;[[4]](#footnote-4) and
    - Despite the best intentions of staff, the World Bank, IMF and WTO primarily serve the structural interests of the developed world.[[5]](#footnote-5)
  + Therefore, major reform of global governance is necessary to facilitate the fairer distribution of resources necessary to eradicate poverty. This will involve creating an inclusive multilateral system based on a strengthened United Nations, ultimately with an elected General Assembly with power to legislate in the interest of ‘we the people’ not ‘we the peoples’.[[6]](#footnote-6)
  + But not to despair (nor to forget the above), the instigation of a Global Social Protection Fund – to guarantee socially adequate resources for the populations of the poorest countries, such as that proposed by Professor Olivier De Schutter,[[7]](#footnote-7) is imperative - and a test of the willingness of ‘we the peoples’ to respond to the minimal needs of ‘we the people’.

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1. OHCHR 2004. *Human Rights and Poverty Reduction*. New York/Geneva United Nations: Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. R. Walker (2023) *Poverty and the World Order*. Newcastle: Agenda Publishing/Columbia University Press [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A Guterres (2022) Secretary-General's remarks to the General Assembly on his Priorities for 2022, 21st January. https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2022-01-21/remarks-general-assembly-his-priorities-for-2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Walker, op cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A. Lopez- Claros, A. Dahl & M. Groff (2020) *Global Governance and the Emergence of Global Institutions for the 21st Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. O. De Schutter (2021) *Global Fund for Social Protection*. New York: United Nations General Assembly, A/ HRC/ 47/ 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)