Perspective: Eradicating Poverty: Moving Forward as One

The crisis of global poverty has, at long last, been accorded a high priority on the international agenda. Yet as renewed pledges for action pour in from governments, a feeling of rudderlessness looms.

The mechanisms of poverty eradication have long been defined in primarily material terms. Indeed, the central pillar of the international community's poverty alleviation efforts has been the transfer of financial resources. Approximately $2.3 trillion has been spent on foreign aid over the last 50 years. Tragically, far from ushering in greater self-sufficiency, such aid has often had a detrimental effect, leading to increased dependency on foreign assistance, subservience to externally dictated priorities, misappropriation of funds, and decreased pressure for reform.

It is now increasingly acknowledged that such conditions as the marginalization of girls and women, poor governance, ethnic and religious antipathy, environmental degradation, and unemployment constitute formidable obstacles to the progress and development of communities. These evidence a deeper crisis—rooted in the values and attitudes that shape relationships at all levels of society.

Viewed from this perspective, poverty can be described as the absence of those ethical, social and material resources needed to develop the moral, intellectual and social capacities of individuals, communities and institutions.

Much like the physical principles that govern the material world, the social world is governed by moral principles, which underlie the functioning of an ordered society. Principles such as gender equality, trustworthiness, access to education, human rights, and freedom of religion, for example, tend to correlate positively with measures of socioeconomic well-being and stability. The interrelatedness of challenges stemming from poverty calls for the articulation of principles capable of guiding analysis, decision-making and the development of indicators to measure progress. The essential merit of a principle-based process is that it guides individuals and institutions away from a focus on isolated, short-term concerns to consider problems from a systemic and long-term perspective.

Two principles stand out as guides for efforts towards poverty eradication: justice and unity. These principles underlie a vision of development in which material progress serves as a vehicle for the moral and cultural advancement of humanity. Justice provides the means capable of harnessing human potential to
eradicate poverty from our midst, through the implementation of laws, the adjustment of economic systems, the redistribution of wealth and opportunity, and unfailing adherence to the highest ethical standards in private and public life. Unity asserts that progress is systemic and relational, that a concern for the integrity of the family unit and the local, national, and global community must guide poverty alleviation efforts.

The question of poverty places particular responsibility on elected leaders. Central to the issue of governance is the question of character— the values that a leader brings to office largely define the direction and fruits of his or her work. Trustworthiness is foremost among these, as it fosters credibility, builds support for government initiatives and engenders stability and security.

Efforts to link poverty eradication efforts with international human rights norms are a positive step in aligning the work of governments with the principles of justice. Human rights norms in our common heritage— encompassing the rights of the individual and of the family; the freedom to know and to believe; the equality of men and women; racial equality; and the right to work and to education, among others— embody the most significant moral accomplishments of the human race. Human rights, as endorsed by most governments of the world, must now be systematically incorporated into domestic legislation.

A large share of the responsibility for poverty eradication rests with the individuals themselves. While poverty is the product of numerous factors— historic, economic, political and environmental— there is also a cultural dimension, which manifests itself in individual values and attitudes. Some of these— such as the subjugation of girls and women, the lack of value assigned to education or of individual’s right to progress— can exacerbate conditions of poverty.

The relevant human qualities such as honesty, willingness to work, and cooperation can be harnessed to accomplish enormously demanding goals when members of society trust that they are protected by standards of justice and assured of benefits that apply equally to all. The human rights approach, with its emphasis on the individual’s entitlement to a set of rights, however, may prove challenging to implement without an accompanying moral influence to inspire changes in attitudes and behaviors.

The issue of gender equality is one such example. Over the last two decades nations have come together to acknowledge the critical role of women in advancing development imperatives. The natural and social sciences have laid to rest any bases for discrimination; most countries have enacted laws to afford women the same opportunities as men; conventions have been signed and ratified; new measures and social indicators have been put in place. Yet women’s agency in the arenas of law, politics, science, commerce and religion, to name a few, is still grossly deficient.

In areas where women have gained access to education, employment, and ownership opportunities, there have been dramatic effects. These include more equitable division of food, resources, and health care among girls and boys; higher rates of literacy among children; lower rates of fertility leading to better economic conditions and maternal health. Yet, the transformation of attitudes has required much more than legal measures; it has required a fundamental change of belief about roles of men and women.

The economic theories of impersonal markets, promoting self-centered actions of individuals, have not helped humanity escape the extremes of poverty on the one hand and over-consumption on the other. New economic theories must be animated by a motive beyond just profit. They must be rooted in the very human and relational dimension of all economic activity, which binds us as families, as communities and as citizens of one world.

Economic considerations underlying poverty alleviation efforts have generally focused on the creation of wealth but have not yet fully considered the parallel problem of the over-concentration of wealth,
exemplified by a world where the wealth of some individuals exceeds the economic output of entire nations. This urgently needs attention.

A core element of sustainable development is the reform of agricultural policies and processes. Food production and agriculture is the world’s single largest source of employment; the livelihood of some 70 percent of the poor in developing countries is tied directly to the land. Although farming has been devalued by manufacturing and a rapidly expanding urban population, agriculture still represents the fundamental basis of economic and community life: malnourishment and food insecurity suffocate all attempts at development and progress. The farmer must be accorded his or her rightful place in the processes of development.

Education is also a bulwark of poverty eradication. While many programs have focused on increasing enrollment in primary and secondary education – which is the first step – the long-term goal must also be to create a society in which the production, diffusion and application of knowledge infuses all facets of human activity.

Poverty alleviation efforts must also address the poverty of spirit. Material resources are essential, yet they alone cannot generate a vision of the full measure of human prosperity; they cannot provide answers to the deepest questions about human nature or the purpose of our existence. Most important, the material and technical dimensions alone will not bring about the fundamental changes in human character and belief needed to overcome the destructive behaviors which have led to present-day conditions.

We are experiencing nothing less than the birth pangs of a global civilization: new modes of thought, new standards and new legal and institutional arrangements are struggling to take hold. As our understanding of the problems and their possible solutions expands, an unprecedented global consensus and accompanying capacity for international cooperation will undoubtedly pave the way for an outcome far greater than we have been able to achieve. To generate the knowledge and commitment needed to overcome poverty, the full spectrum of human spiritual and intellectual potential will need to be summoned for the task.

[Editor’s note: The following is adapted from a statement recently issued by the Bahá’í International Community. The full version can be read at: http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/bic-statements/08-0214.htm]