



Statement on Poverty by the Program on the Science and Ethics of Happiness



Extreme poverty in our world today reflects structures of sin, not the primary scarcity of goods. It is time to end extreme poverty and the great suffering it causes by reforming the economic, political and social institutions that foster greed, injustice, and indifference.

Pope Francis notes that “Today we see that the world has never been so rich, yet – despite such abundance – poverty and inequality persist and grow. In these times of opulence, when it should be possible to put an end to poverty, the powers of one-track thinking say nothing of the poor, the elderly, the migrants, the unborn, and the seriously ill. Mostly invisible, they are treated as disposable.” Pope Francis calls on us to “realize a global movement against indifference that creates or recreates social institutions inspired by the Beatitudes and impels us to seek the civilization of love.”

The end of poverty was first embraced as a global right seventy-three years ago, when the UN member states adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. This “moral charter” of the UN guarantees to each person on the planet:

the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

In our own time, these diverse economic rights are recognized in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, including social protection for all and the end of poverty (SDG 1); the end of hunger (SDG 2); the end of forced labor, slavery, child labor, and human trafficking (SDG 8); and universal access to healthcare (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), safe water and sanitation (SDG 6), modern energy services (SDG 7), decent work for all (SDG 8), digital connectivity (SDG 9), and environmental safety (SDGs 11-15). These goals should be accomplished with gender equality (SDG 5) and reduced inequality to overcome relative poverty (SDG 10). The Universal Declaration and the SDGs make clear that poverty is multi-dimensional, and should be understood, measured, and confronted in its economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

The fundamental moral truth is that the Earth and the global economy belong to all its inhabitants including future generations, not only to those today with great power and wealth. In the first beatitude, Jesus teaches, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Thomas Aquinas explained the meaning of being poor in spirit: “although some have riches, yet they do not have them in their heart; *if riches abound, set not your heart upon them* (Ps 62:11).” A society that is poor in spirit is a society of solidarity. Yet this is not our present reality.

With the world’s annual income and production of \$100 trillion, equal to \$12,500 for each person on the planet, and with around 3,000 billionaires holding some \$15 trillion in personal wealth, there is no primary scarcity that compels a world in which 1 billion people still destitute, hungry, and without access to healthcare and education. The US Treasury has recently reported that US tax evasion by America’s richest households alone amounts to hundreds of billions of dollars of lost revenues each year.

The anachronistic nature of extreme poverty in our world of plenty is easily seen. Consider the cost of providing social protection of \$1,000 per person per year for each of the 1 billion poorest people. The total cost would be \$1 trillion, a mere 1% of world income. The failure to provide such funding, whether in the form of cash transfers or public services such as healthcare and education, is a matter of the greed and indifference of the richest countries.

Shamefully, nearly three-quarters of a century since the universal economic rights were acknowledged by the UN member states in the UDHR, these basic economic rights have still not been realized. The world has become phenomenally rich since 1948, yet the deprivations of the poor have persisted, in no small part because of continued abuses by the rich and powerful:

- The ultra-rich hide their funds in trusts, secret accounts, and international tax havens, as revealed once again in the *Pandora Papers*;
- Many political leaders partake personally in these abuses, and many more support tax and regulatory policies that facilitate tax evasion and tax havens, depriving governments of the tax revenues they need to provide for the common good;
- Rich countries continue to emit greenhouse gases while failing to compensate the poor

countries for the growing losses and damages they are incurring;

- Rich countries continue to champion the interests of their multinational companies over the rights of the poor at home and abroad;
- Many multinational corporations continue to grab and despoil the lands and resources of indigenous and impoverished populations across the planet, or to participate in global supply chains in which vulnerable populations are abused and neglected.

These structures of sin sweep up much of humanity in their powerful vortex. Businessmen and women who would like to resist are often caught up in structures of corporate greed, and feel more trapped and manipulated than rewarded by them. Hence, we witness the increasing frequency of corporate whistleblowers and insider critics who are looking for new pathways.

We must no longer accept the false narratives that blame the poor for their fate. The rich criticize the poor for their shortcomings when in fact the poor are victims of plutocratic and racist systems, residential and job segregation, and exclusion from decent public services. The poor are increasingly the victims of environmental catastrophes resulting largely from the unsustainable consumption and production of the rich. The rich persist in their unsustainable practices while denying compensation to the poor for the damages incurred.

Poor countries are routinely called out for their alleged poor governance. Yet reform-minded governments in developing countries have repeatedly been overthrown by powerful countries to protect narrow financial prerogatives. Where would the world be today if Iran's Mohammad Mossadegh had not been overthrown in the interest of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (now BP); Guatemala's Jacobo Arbenz had not been toppled on behalf of United Fruit Company; and the Congo's Patrice Lumumba had not been overthrown to protect the profits of Union Minière? Where would we be today if powerful countries had not waged bloody and costly wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere?

Given these structures of sin, we need to end the rhetoric of "foreign assistance" or "foreign aid," which implies that the rich countries are doing a favor to the poor, and return to the more ancient and more appropriate language of justice. "Justice, justice, justice shall you pursue," we are told in the Scriptures. The duty of justice is recognized in Islam in the sacred obligation of Zakat, the payment of a portion of wealth for the sake of the poor.

Economic justice requires that the rich countries, and the richest individuals and families, respect their historical and current responsibilities, repair damages they have caused, and pay their fair share for ending poverty and deprivation. We need a global tax and financial system that serves all of humanity, not just a financial elite. Such a system will collect more tax revenues from the rich and the corporations, relieve unpayable debts of developing countries, and increase the flow of SDG finance at favorable terms through the multilateral development banks.

The end of poverty and full achievement of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the

Sustainable Development Goals are not idealistic fantasies. Rather, they are realistic goals, worthy of the same dedicated efforts that currently are misdirected towards corporate tax planning, tax havens, and new powerful weapons systems. Those structures of sin take considerable work to put in place. At a minimum, the same seriousness of effort should be directed to end poverty. Similarly, all of the arduous diplomatic efforts now underway to build new military alliances and cold wars should be redirected to the only just war in our age: the one in which all nations are aligned together against poverty, exclusion, and environmental destruction.

Moreover, we are keenly aware of the great power of civil society to create the future we want and need. Political and economic institutions do not exist in a vacuum, but are influenced by, and dependent upon, the public opinion of citizens and daily actions of consumers. We will help to encourage a global alliance of civil society -- enlightened entrepreneurs, not-for-profit organisations, responsible consumers and investors, and especially the young -- to work towards the elimination of poverty. We will help to develop the educational materials and metrics to help individuals, as citizens and as consumers, and businesses, to make responsible choices.

We raise our voices especially on behalf of the world's children and young people, who are inheriting a world of unprecedented inequalities and environmental threats, not least of which are newly emerging diseases such as Covid-19. Nothing can be more important in this world than that every child and young person enjoy their rights to decent nutrition, access to healthcare, and a quality education, so that they may fulfill their potential for a thriving life. And nothing could be more damaging to their lives, and the future of humanity, than the relentless suffering caused by poverty.

Therefore, we need to promote the well-being of young people, including their moral agency, voices, leadership, and visions for a future of sustainable development and the common good. We need to promote new educational approaches envisioned in SDG target 4.7, in which all learners "acquire the knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development," including a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and an appreciation of cultural diversity. By building compassion, this expanded education will enable young people to strengthen their sensitivity to the structures of sin and to appreciate the ability and means to end poverty.

In the name of justice, and in the spirit of the first beatitude, we call on the G20 leaders -- of rich and poor countries alike -- to set a clear financing plan and timeline for achieving the end of extreme poverty and the related sustainable development goals, when they meet in Rome at the end of October.

We call specifically for the following measures:

1. Most urgently, shipments of hundreds of millions of Covid-19 vaccine doses to developing countries each month to ensure that all countries, rich and poor, meet the World Health

Organization timeline of at least 40 percent vaccine coverage by end-2021, and 70 percent coverage by mid-2022;

2. A new international tax and financial regime that introduces worldwide taxes on mega-wealth and ultra-high-incomes, clamps down on tax havens and tax evasion, relieves the debts of the heavily indebted developing countries, and directs additional tax revenues and development financing towards achieving the SDGs
3. A global plan elaborated in the coming months, and engaging the UN system, the G20 countries, academia, the global youth, and civil society, to achieve the 17 SDGs and the Paris Climate Agreement.

Most importantly, we call on the G20 leaders to accept their sacred responsibility to fulfill the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and to acknowledge that 75 years is time enough to accomplish what the world pledged in the shadows of the Holocaust and World War II. Our most sacred task is to prevent another episode of self-destruction, whether by war or environmental devastation. For our survival and wellbeing, for the sake of our children and for generations to come, we must create a world of solidarity and justice, in which the dignity and rights of all are secure. These are indispensable conditions for realising the project of universal brotherhood and respect for the planet proposed by Pope Francis in *Laudato si'* and in *Fratelli tutti*.