

The business of poverty

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THE unveiling of the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report for 2003 has confirmed what many economists and development practitioners have known for some time: that real poverty has increased in more than 50 countries, that in 19 countries more than one person in four is going hungry, in 14 countries under-five mortality rates increased and in seven, almost one in four children will not reach his fifth birthday.

Further on, the report states that in nine countries more than one person in four do not have access to safe water, and in 15 countries more than one person in four do not have access to adequate sanitation and the situation is failing to improve or is getting worse. Perhaps the most significant achievement of the Human Development Report is its focus on issues of urgency for the world community. Extremely well-researched, this is a document which is essential reading for anyone who really wants to know where we are headed as a nation-state, ranked 134th within the comity of 174 nations which are compared with each other in terms of the human development Index, a summary measure of three dimensions of human development: living a long and healthy life, being educated and having a decent standard of living.

Even if one adopts the view of the cynic and dismisses the efforts of international and national agencies at focusing on the eradication of poverty as merely a "new flavour of the day" in the international agenda of pontification and pointless dis-

In Pakistan today, over one-third of the population lives below the poverty line, an assessment arrived at through the calculation of the value of the goods and services required to cover basic human needs. For most of the past fifty-five years, our planners have grappled with the problem of rising poverty and increasing disparities between the powerful and the poor, between men and women, between regions and between urban and rural populations.

Every five years we have the five-year plan, and every five years we find ourselves standing on the edge of the same precipice which threatens to swallow us if we trip over just a bit more than we already have. What is it that eludes the economists in the Planning Commission and in the ministry of finance? Why is that the most glaring, the most obvious reasons for the growing poverty and increasing despair have escaped the attention of our planners? Why are we faced today with some of the worst human devel-

on these sources?

More and more people are convinced that the planning and development strategies of our country do not come from within the minds of those who seek to address issues of inequality and distributive justice as core to the larger problem of poverty. As a colonized nation we not only unknowingly imitate the superficial behaviour patterns borrowed from our colonial masters (the felt hat and tweed hunting jacket), but we also have internalized attitudes which have perpetuated the institutions predicated on unequal relations of power. In colonial times, the popular explanations of the poverty of people were plainly apologetic, aimed at exonerating the colonial power of the moral and political responsibility for the poverty and development of these people.

It was taken to be an established fact that the people in "backward regions" were living the way they did by choice conditioned by tradition and would not even respond positively to opportunities for improving their incomes and standards of living. Their tendency towards idleness and inefficiency and their reluctance to seek wage employment were seen as expressions of their "want-lessness", indicating limited mental horizons.

Today, when Pakistan has held for the first time a participatory assessment of poverty in order to inform its planners and strategists of the perspectives of the poor on poverty, it is ironic to acknowledge the exercise as a continuation of policy diktats handed down by neo-colonial powers in the new millennium.

In recent years, specifically since September 2001, advanced societies have needed to see the writing on the wall so that they are now somewhat better aware of the problems of popular discontent, resentment, and

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tion and political discourse, it is imperative that we, as one of the 54 nations marked by increasing poverty and a worsening record of human rights, should be taking the data really seriously if we are to attempt to turn around this terrible trend towards abysmal impoverishment.

Attacking poverty directly, as a matter of human rights, to accelerate development and to reduce inequality within and among nations, has become an urgent global priority. The United Nations evolved the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to approach the issue of poverty holistically, making the connection between providing opportunities for a better life and changing attitudes and institutions which impede the progress of humankind within the paradigm of sustainability and growth.

The eight MDGs are: to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; to achieve universal primary education; to promote gender equality and to empower women; to reduce child mortality; to improve maternal health; to combat HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and other diseases; to ensure environmental sustainability; and to develop a global partnership for development, connect with each other like inseparable links in a chain, and need to be made integral parts of planning by the 189 nations which have expressed their commitment towards their implementation.

However, the world economic situation poses serious challenges for the achievement of the MDGs. Overall, in the 1990s gross domestic product (GDP) per capita grew by 1.6 per cent in the developing countries. But these slow gains were unevenly distributed, and the per capita GDP of the poorest countries in the 1990s was slower than in the 1980s. The new millennium started with even greater uncertainty. Recent global reductions in trade, spreading economic contraction and new banking and finance crises pose challenges to economic growth.

oment indicators, while at the same time with some of the greatest concentrations of wealth?

The answers are really right before us, in the basic premise of unequal power relations, in the dynamic of submission and dominance, in the structures of oppression supported by ideologies which have captivated our minds and characterized our attitudes and our institutions. Why have we as a nation not been able to come up with a set of values on which we could base the realization of goals which every political leader and head of state has vigorously announced in the years gone by? Too many years have been wasted, too many plans have gone to seed, too many lives have been lost in this wasteland of thought, imagination, and political will.

The Third Quarterly Progress Report released by the ministry of finance states that the government had made significant improvements in overall fiscal aggregates, but faced considerable challenges in achieving the desired momentum in anti-poverty expenditure. The fiscal interface between provinces and districts regarding releases, bookings, disbursements, and utilization needed to be smoothened to ensure that anti-poverty expenditures remain in line with the government's medium-term targets.

The question to be asked here is simply: will poverty be alleviated or even eradicated through "anti-poverty" expenditures alone? And what exactly are the government's "medium-term targets?" Are these available for scrutiny, are these formulated by our own economists, or are these handed down to us by international financing institutions like the IMF and World Bank which have required that Pakistan develop a Poverty Reduction Strategy in order to qualify for development assistance in the form of loans and perhaps some grants, furthering our reliance

lems of popular discontent, resentment and anger in poorer countries but not necessarily more helpfully disposed towards them. There has therefore been a redirection of research work in response to the emergence of political forces in recent years.

This shift represents a radical adjustment of research work to the needs felt by western societies. Making the connection initially between lower productivity and low human development indicators, and more recently seeing a linkages between deprivation and desperation, the western agenda in recent years has focused on poverty, initially on its eradication, and now, having looked at the horror of that reality, at its mere alleviation.

The fact is that more than three billion people around the world live on less than two dollars a day. The least developed countries will triple their populations by 2050, with Pakistan as the seventh most populous state today. The number of poor will grow, the resources used by the poor will be further depleted, the abuse of human rights will increase, and the chasm between the powerful and the powerless will become wider still. Despite the shift in research agendas, despite the supposed paradigm adjustments taking place in development practice, the fact remains that there are more people today than ever who are being crippled by unjust structures and the immoral attitude of subjugation.

Unless the framework of development and the war on poverty weave within its fabric the issue of equality and social justice, unless the shift is made from an almost total reliance on quantifiable data based only on empirical economic research to one that addresses issues of human dignity and human rights, we will be treating poverty merely as the business it has become, engendering contracts, providing opportunities for many of us to flourish even as we do our bit for the poor.