



Eradicating
POVERTY:
MOVING FORWARD AS ONE

A Programme of the Science, Religion and Development Discourse Series

Organised by The Bahá'í Community of Malaysia
in conjunction with
The International Day for the Eradication of Poverty 2014

Saturday, 18 October 2014
4.00 pm - 6.00 pm
107, Jalan Ara, Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur

The crisis of global poverty has, at long last, been accorded a high priority on the international agenda. The mechanisms of poverty eradication have long been defined in primarily material terms. However, 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 — one 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. 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. 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.

THE SCIENCE, RELIGION AND DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE INITIATIVE – BACKGROUND

The Bahá'í Community of Malaysia is currently initiating a series of discourses on the theme of Science, Religion and Development (SRD) to promote greater understanding and collaboration on the complementary role between science and religion in social transformation.

The essence of the discourse is the recognition that the methodologies of science and the insights of religion can work together in a complementary and synergetic manner to provide the essential tools for building harmonious and equitable social systems.

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Objectives of the SRD Discourse

1. To create greater awareness on the need for an on-going discourse on science, religion and development.
2. To discuss ways and means of influencing thinking of decision makers in bringing about balanced development through the complementary inputs from science and religion, in the context of:
 - (a) Education;
 - (b) Business and Economic Activity;
 - (c) Technological Advancement; and
 - (d) Governance and Justice.
3. To strengthen the network among interested participants and partner organizations of the continuing discourse on SRD.

For further reading

- i. Eradicating Poverty: Moving Forward as One
<http://www.bic.org/statements/eradicating-poverty-moving-forward-one>
- ii. Human Rights and Extreme Poverty
<https://www.bic.org/statements/human-rights-and-extreme-poverty-0>
- iii. Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights
<https://www.bic.org/statements/guiding-principles-extreme-poverty-and-human-rights-0>
- iv. Initial considerations regarding the elimination of the extremes of poverty and wealth
<https://www.bic.org/statements/initial-considerations-regarding-elimination-extremes-poverty-and-wealth>

ERADICATING POVERTY – REPORT OF DISCOURSE

The theme of this discourse, “*Eradicating Poverty: Moving Forward as One*”, was chosen to coincide with the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, which is observed on 17th October annually.

The two-hour session, moderated by Ms. Yuet Mee Ho-Nambiar, comprised 30 participants from various backgrounds – economists, academicians, doctors, corporate figures, as well as students. The eradication of extreme poverty and hunger is Goal 1 of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)¹ (Nations, 2014), and therefore it is imperative to collectively find solutions to this global concern.

The discourse explored several questions regarding poverty, ranging from the definition itself to the initiatives currently undertaken to our perception of wealth. The following is a summary of the discussion that took place during the discourse.

Definition of Poverty

“Eradicating extreme poverty continues to be one of the main challenges of our time, and is a major concern of the international community. Ending this scourge will require the combined efforts of all, governments, civil society organizations and the private sector, in the context of a stronger and more effective global partnership for development.”

United Nations Secretary-General BAN Ki-moon (Nations, 2014)

The participants generally agreed that the extreme poverty line had to be viewed in perspective, for example, one stated that certain organizations viewed the middle income line between USD2 and USD10 therefore, anything more than USD10 a day would be considered ‘rich’. Malaysian for instance, has rural citizens surviving on RM150 or less and yet do not receive any financial aid but on the other hand, urban citizens classified as ‘poor’ were given aid by the government even though they could afford flat-screen televisions and laptops.

Hence, it is a global issue when it comes to defining poverty, because in the past the poor were the farmers and those living in the rural areas, but today they are educated city folk. Although the hard-core poor do exist, those who lie just above the poverty line and are not eligible for aid cannot cope with the rising cost of living in the city. It would be more practical to view poverty in terms of income and lifestyle choices, such as the cost of living in a given location.

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¹ Target 1.A: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1.25 a day

- ❖ The target of reducing extreme poverty rates by half was met five years ahead of the 2015 deadline.
- ❖ The global poverty rate at \$1.25 a day fell in 2010 to less than half the 1990 rate. 700 million fewer people lived in conditions of extreme poverty in 2010 than in 1990. However, at the global level 1.2 billion people are still living in extreme poverty.

“Poverty is a vicious cycle that needs to be broken” said a participant because it forces people to the extreme such as resorting to steal to make ends meet, or working in an illegal trade such as wildlife hunting and so on.

Despite being unable to fully define poverty, the participants agreed that this issue must to be tackled immediately as many of the world’s problems today were a result of extreme poverty. Someone suggested reducing the gap between the rich and poor through the redistribution of wealth; yet reports have shown that no system is flawless. As stated by the Bahá’i International Community - United Nations Office:

“Indeed, the central pillar of the international community’s poverty alleviation efforts has been the transfer of financial resources. Approximately \$2.3 trillion have been spent on foreign aid over the last five decades. Tragically, the aid, far from ushering in greater self-sufficiency, has often had a detrimental effect on recipient communities: increased dependency on foreign assistance, subservience to externally dictated priorities, misappropriation of funds and decreased pressure for governance reform.”

(Bahá’i International Community, 2008)

Individual Responsibility

The participants of the discourse also questioned the individual’s responsibility to alleviate themselves from poverty. Some said that poverty is seen as a choice, since a majority of the relatively poor choose to be poor, yet there are those who by their circumstances were unable to help themselves. For instance, children in extreme poverty must work to help their families. As shared by a participant; poverty can bring education which is an equally vital need, to a complete standstill when other needs have to be fulfilled. For example, in some third world countries, children would skip school to collect water from a river that is hours away² (Unicef, 2014).

There is a need to develop the rural areas so that the poor living in the city can return to contribute to their own hometowns. These development conditions could even simply be in terms of mobility to enable students to have accessibility to schools. The infrastructure also needs to be improved and housing affordable for the people.

Also noted was that, 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 of education or of an 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

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² In several countries in the region (Lesotho, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, Kenya and Ethiopia) collecting water takes longer than 30 minutes for more than a quarter of the population. This considerably reduces the time women and girls have available for other activities such as childcare, income generation and school attendance.

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 necessary to inspire the accompanying changes in attitudes and behaviours (1).

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Religion and Knowledge

The individual's responsibility to eradicate poverty cannot truly be accomplished unless balance is achieved. The discourse explored the unifying power religion where a participant shared that immaterial of race and religion, the oneness of mankind and the nobility of man are two fundamentals that protect the understanding of human nature. It is crucial to change the younger generation's perception about wealth as not everything in the world is about academic success. They must be taught to lead the society as much as they learn to lead their own lives.

“Where a nation's wealth is concerned, the question becomes one of social value rather than gross dollar measures.”

Poverty alleviation efforts must be adequate to address both the poverty of means and the poverty of spirit. The material and technical dimensions alone will not compel the fundamental changes in human character and belief needed to overcome the destructive behaviours which have led to present day conditions. To encompass the spiritual dimension and its expression in the religions of the world is to build into poverty alleviation efforts, in an integrated manner, recognition of all the dimensions of human experience and an understanding of how poverty manifests in the material and spiritual dimensions of human life (2).

“Indeed the well-being of the entire family has been dramatically altered where economic and social circumstances and societal attitudes have been favourable to women's advancement.”

The participants pooled their thoughts on what are the possible means of addressing both the poverty of means and the poverty of spirit. Firstly, a life-span development framework, which involves the individual's development from child to adult to address poverty in a sustained manner. The second was a framework which involves the family, community, neighbourhood and businesses, as it takes a village to overcome poverty.

Underlying the meaningful participation in the advancement of society and the higher aims of civilization is the bulwark of education. It is necessary to create a society in which the production, diffusion and application of knowledge infuses all facets of human activity (3).

So instead of welfare programmes, it would be better to provide vocational training that teaches skills in order to empower the poor as monetary hand-outs are less effective. However, it is important for vocational training programmes to incorporate a form of accompaniment to help the poor to start up their own business.

Gender

The members of the discourse group agreed that women play a critical role of advancing the social and economic circumstances of families and societies. By creating enabling environments to contribute to the economy such as the Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia microcredit financing scheme, women were empowered to be

agents of change. Studies have shown that Ikhtiar loans have significantly contributed to an improvement in the income level of participants after the utilization of loans.³

Over the last two decades nations have repeatedly come together to acknowledge the critical role of women in advancing development imperatives. Female literacy, alone, has been shown to play a much more important role in promoting social well-being than other variables related to the general level of wealth in a society. Indeed the well-being of the entire family has been dramatically altered where economic and social circumstances and societal attitudes have been favourable to women's advancement (4).

Extremes of Wealth and Employment

While much of the focus of remedial efforts is directed towards the poorest, it is the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few that is in urgent need of attention. Indeed, the tremendous wealth generated by transnational corporations could be an integral part of the solution to tackle poverty, through strict regulation to ensure good global citizenship, adherence to human rights norms and the distribution of wealth for the benefit of the larger society. Where a nation's wealth is concerned, the question becomes one of social value rather than gross dollar measures (5).

It would be impossible to view poverty and economics in isolation. There is a need to look at our moral code instead of being profit-driven as morals come from spirituality and religion, hence there is a need to embed them into the economic system to solve the problem of poverty.

Concerning the minimum wage of RM800 a month, the participants in consensus called upon companies, business owners, and decision makers to strongly support the Minimum Wage Act in Malaysia (COUNCIL, 2012) to protect the welfare of the workers. Companies should not see the minimum wage as a burden.

Yet in business schools, students are taught that it is all about maximising profit, with no thought put into welfare. As a result of which, most corporations are reluctant to enforce the minimum wage policy. They comply with such policies simply because the law forces them to do so. An external force requiring various parties to make a change would not be as lasting as self-realisation of the fact and personal commitment to transformation.

The attitude of the employee towards work was also discussed. Participants collectively agreed that the attitude inculcated in the younger generation of today's society is one of apathy as they do not learn to grow or progress for themselves. Parents have become too obsessed with sheltering their children from a life of hardship.

The provision of meaningful work represents an essential component of poverty alleviation efforts. Lack of meaningful employment only feeds hopelessness and

“One's work is the means of developing one's craft, of refining one's character, and contributing to the welfare and progress of society.”

³ The main achievement of AIM has to be seen in the context of its main objective of increasing the income of its participants. This has been confirmed from several impact studies which were conducted between 1988 and 2000 on AIM's borrowers. (Omar , 2010)

frustration. Yet it is not only the quantity but also the quality and meaning of work that needs to be reconsidered. Whether tilling the soil or selling goods, one's work should not be reduced to a means for acquiring more goods or as an expendable cost of production. One's work is the means of developing one's craft, of refining one's character, and contributing to the welfare and progress of society (6).

Closing

The session ended with a recap of the points that were discussed. All of the participants were in agreement that current economic system is not promoting the eradication of poverty and that this will continue to be one of the main challenges of our time. It is a major concern of the international community, the government institutions, communities and the individuals. All must play a role in promoting justice and equity.

As a take-home message, the participants were urged to ponder on what they as individuals can do towards changing society. There is a need to bring like-minded individuals from various backgrounds and organisations to discuss, collaborate and channel concrete ideas and resolutions to the right podium to solve this issue.

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