

Good Governance and Extreme Poverty

INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENT ATD FOURTH WORLD

Governance in the context of extreme poverty

Effective governance, at whatever geographical or political level, cannot be brought about while extreme poverty exists. All thought and discussion on governance must begin by examining how to reintegrate all people, without exception, into the social dialogues which take place within communities, as well as both nationally and internationally.

Extreme poverty has been defined as the combination of income poverty, human development poverty and social exclusionⁱ, where a prolonged lack of basic security affects several aspects of people's lives simultaneously, severely compromising their chances of exercising or regaining their rights and of reassuming *their* responsibilities in the foreseeable future.ⁱⁱ By its very definition, extreme poverty is an obstacle to the active citizenship which effective governance requires. Among the consequences of extreme poverty is the associated isolation and exclusion, exacerbated by a sense of shame and stigma.ⁱⁱⁱ As a participant with experience of poverty in a peer-review project explained, "The challenge for me is the isolation, the loneliness, the painful awareness that we are not able to join in society or play any part in it."^{iv}

Extreme poverty, above and beyond social needs or deprivations, equates to the negation of all social existence due to the impossibility of full enjoyment of fundamental human rights – social, economic and cultural rights, as well as civil and political rights. Its endurance is testament that respect of human rights is an obligation that is not applied to all people, since some are seen as "hopeless cases". The fact that extreme poverty is first and foremost a human rights violation means that any attempt to build effective governance, based on respect for humans and the ethics of responsibility, must first seek its eradication.^v

The Millennium Declaration resolved to "To strive for the full protection and promotion in all our countries of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights for all" with the goal of "freeing the entire human race from want." Yet it is apparent that progress has been uneven in achieving the MDGs, both between and within countries, most notably for the very poorest and most marginalised people and populations.^{vi}

The consequences of non-effective governance in the context of extreme poverty—challenges for a post-MDG framework

Effective governance is difficult to attain when those most affected by extreme poverty have trouble getting their voices heard and their interests taken into account by service providers and decision makers. Globally, public expenditure on health, education and sanitation benefit the non-poor far more than the poor, who are powerless to change the situation.^{vii} This powerlessness, when compounded by shame, lack of self-confidence and the fear of meeting others stemming from being on the receiving end of contempt from an early age, exacerbates the exclusion experienced by people in extreme poverty. As one participant in a recent participatory research project explained: "Extreme poverty engenders a fear, a shame in people, doubts that

stop them from expressing themselves when they should.”^{viii} This renders effective, fully inclusive governance, highly problematic.

Participatory research carried out with people experiencing chronic poverty has suggested that encounters with public services were perceived to be associated with the risk of losing resources, being misunderstood, harshly judged or penalised. Research participants felt that the humiliation, lack of respect and contempt they faced could be seen as a form of violence, an attack on their identity as a member of society or of the community, and a denial of their individual humanity. The barriers this created made mutual recognition, understanding and communication impossible.^{ix} The idea that people living in poverty are unworthy of the rights, benefits and aid to which they are fully entitled has a corrosive effect on the quality and fairness of governance at a local and national level.

The promotion of effective governance is exacerbated by the difficulties of very marginalised populations to hold governments, as well as service providers from all sectors, to account. In the context of international development, this absence of accountability risks creating projects or programmes intended to achieve poverty eradication goals that are ill-adapted to the needs of those experiencing the most extreme poverty. This stems from a limited and incomplete understanding of the realities of people living in extreme poverty. Donors all too often demand quick fix solutions, whilst exhibiting a naive approach regarding the social impact of the projects they oversee, and a voluntary blindness about true levels of project accountability. Staff are reluctant or unable to invest the time necessary to seek out the voices of the most impoverished.^x This makes it increasingly difficult for projects and programmes to tackle extreme poverty. If only the most enterprising members of the community are reached, inequalities may in fact be entrenched, furthering the exclusion of the most vulnerable community members.^{xi}

Crucial to effective governance is ensuring the fundamental social bonds that link the individual to society. It is therefore vital to recognise and reinforce the social and family ties which the most marginalised people and families use to resist the shocks inherent with the experience of extreme poverty^{xii}. When humanitarian or development projects and services fail to recognise their importance, these ties are at risk of being undermined – even unintentionally – which can in turn lead to the rupture of this form of resistance and divide the poorest communities, leaving their inhabitants further susceptible to extreme poverty.^{xiii}

Fair and effective governance also relies on an active and informed citizen body. Active citizenship not only reinforces social bonds, but also encourages accountability and transparency and protects fundamental rights. However, in many countries people living in extreme poverty are unable to play their roles as active citizens. Barriers to citizenship include the cost of official documents, such as identity papers and birth certificates, high levels of illiteracy amongst the most marginalised communities and reluctance amongst local officials to acknowledge populations living in informal settlements. People living in extreme poverty also report that the lack of information about their rights as citizens also affects their ability to play an active role in civic society. Further problems are posed by the prejudicial views held by administrators and public officials about the intelligence, ability and motivation of impoverished individuals and communities.^{xiv}

Addressing the challenges of effective governance from a human rights perspective

Effective governance can only be achieved if all citizens are able to attain full and effective enjoyment of all fundamental rights. For this reason, it is essential that a post-2015 framework conforms to recognised human rights norms and standards and considers sustainable development within the context of meeting human rights obligations. The advantages of such an approach for effective governance are manifold. A human rights

approach is based on equity, non-discrimination and universalism. Priority is afforded to the members of society who encounter the most obstacles in achieving their rights. A human rights approach also stresses the principle of the participation of those affected to be actively involved as rights holders in addressing their situation. It encourages duty bearers to involve people in extreme poverty as citizens with knowledge to offer in finding solutions, which, as a result of their active participation, are more likely to be effective. Of course, the necessary conditions must be met for such participation to be meaningful and genuinely serve poverty eradication efforts.

The recently adopted UN Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights provide a practical tool for policy makers in designing their public policies, particularly their poverty eradication efforts. Based on international human rights norms and values, the Principles provide guidance on the application of States' human rights obligations in the fight against extreme poverty. They highlight the specific rights whose enjoyment by persons living in poverty are particularly limited and obstructed, and in relation to which State policies are often inadequate or counterproductive.^{xv} The Guiding Principles also clearly outline the barriers that people living in extreme poverty face in claiming their rights, and give detailed steps of ways by which state - as well as non-state actors – can counteract them. Given that they are based on agreed human rights norms and standards, they provide a common basis for dialogue between rights holders and duty bearers. By also providing specific implementation requirements, they provide a clear framework for stakeholders seeking to promote effective governance through the implementation of Human Rights.

Promoting participatory good governance in the post-2015 development framework

Families and individuals living in extreme poverty aspire to play an active role in creating effective and fair forms of governance. Ensuring their ability to genuinely participate all forms of governance, from international institutions to groups responsible for overseeing local development projects, is extremely important. Their participation not only counteracts the stigmatisation faced by impoverished communities, but also improves the impact and sustainability of the policies and programmes designed to address their needs and encourage development.

The following recommendations, created in partnership with people living in extreme poverty,^{xvi} aim to counteract the challenges that extreme poverty poses to the maintenance of fair and effective forms of government:

- ✧ **Ensure transparency at all levels of governance whilst creating accountability mechanisms at national and international levels.** The reason decisions are taken and the effects of participation must be clear for all to see. Independent ombudsmen, judicial processes and peer-review systems between countries can all help ensure that participatory governance is not just tokenistic.
- ✧ **Develop participatory mechanisms at all levels of governance,** in line with the provisions set out in the Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights: *"States must ensure the active, free, informed and meaningful participation of persons living in poverty at all stages of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of decisions and policies affecting them ...Particular care should be taken to fully include the poorest and most socially excluded persons."*
- ✧ **Ensure that local, national and international structures encourage participatory governance.** The incentives for staff in local, national and international institutions and administrations should be modified to make their governance processes more conducive to implementing participatory approaches.

- ✧ **Enable impoverished communities to participate meaningfully in governance.** Participation cannot be imposed, and time must be taken to listen to entire communities, not just community 'leaders'. Building the capacity of communities to self-organise and build links with wider society should be a priority. The role of CSOs that provide space for people living in poverty to speak with their own voices and take part in decision-making processes should be recognised.

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