

The Missing Link in Fighting Extreme Poverty?

by HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal

Once again, a G8 Summit has failed to address the structural causes of poverty. While the 2008 conference of the world's rich nations on Japan's Hokkaido Island made a modest pledge to increase aid and investment in agriculture, the bulk of their economic proposals were the familiar nostrums of free trade and open markets.

One would think that a successful strategy for ending global poverty would have been found long ago. After all, there has been a strong commitment since the era of decolonization (1940s-60s) that the best way to help poor nations participate on equal terms in the global marketplace is for their people to become self-reliant. Yet the means of accomplishing self-reliant development have never been entirely clear. During the past several decades, the international system has lurched from policies of nationalism and import substitution to strategies of privatization and export-led development. Nothing has really worked.

Even the green revolution of the 1960s -- which increased agricultural productivity and food supplies while lowering food prices in the newly developing nations -- ended up supporting the laissez-faire orthodoxy and systemic neglect of the poor, so clearly exemplified by successive G-8 Summits. Over the past four decades, agricultural investment has stagnated and agricultural productivity has gradually decreased in poor nations, while developed nations continue to sing cheery anthems of aid, trade and investment each summer.

The bare truth is that Western development policies have left many of the poor without property protection through legal titles and little opportunity to invest in land or to open a business. Neo-liberal policies have also led to the exploitation of local workers through the absence of employment benefits, shabby working conditions and insecure jobs. As the global population grows to 9 billion or more by 2050, agricultural production will need to increase by 50%. We won't get there safely from here without an entirely new strategy on global hunger and development.

A new UN panel has recently issued a report focusing on a much-neglected aspect in the fight against extreme poverty. The report of the Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor, *Making the Law Work for Everyone*, calls for the creation of a new legal identity for impoverished people. Co-chaired by Madeleine Albright and Hernando de Soto and comprised of analysts, jurists, and former government officials from across the world, the panel asserts that the poor must be guaranteed essential legal rights to realize their full potentials for development.

The commission, which undertook consultations in 22 countries, is calling for greater access to judicial systems, new worker protections, property ownership rights, business rights and the rule of law. It believes that particular emphasis must be given to the rights

of women, indigenous peoples and other vulnerable groups. The underlying philosophy is that, given the chance, poor people will work to get out of poverty. Legal empowerment can boost human potential, responsibility and opportunity, allowing people to get the most value for their work, leading to greater self-reliance, individual and social development, and new business initiatives.

850 million people are suffering now from extreme hunger. With ongoing climate change and higher food prices, the number could swell to more than 1 billion within a decade, resulting in social upheaval and civil strife in many areas. At the same time, legal empowerment of the poor could help bolster the world's commitments to the UN Millennium Development Goals -- the targets for international development which have been set for 2015. Many states have fallen far behind in the realization of these goals, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, and the 2008 G8 Summit in Japan offered few promises to further their 2005 commitments to double aid to Africa by 2010.

Yet for the 2 billion people who are earning less than \$2 a day, the attainment of legal rights may be the surest way of helping them realize their development targets. Title to land, land tenure and basic rights of ownership, along with microfinance, can enable small farmers to establish a plot, buy fertilizer, seeds, tools, and technology, and secure better access to water, roads, transportation and market information.

It is evident that the legal protection of the poor has never been given due attention, so this new emphasis is most welcome. For the world community to renew its focus on the supporting legal conditions of human and social development, everyone must get involved in this new mass initiative, including representatives from government, business, and civil society. The legal empowerment of the poor will only be possible through political commitment, firm leadership and concerted effort. At a time when virtually all nations are gripped by shrinking credit, balance of payments deficits, and soaring oil and food prices, it is especially important that rich nations show courage and leadership in providing a legal safety net for the impoverished. That would be an auspicious step forward.

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