



Poverty

Poverty is persistent and widespread - there are 1.2 billion people living on less than one dollar a day, while about half of the world's population lives on less than two dollars a day. Hundreds of millions more live on the threshold of poverty. Poverty has various manifestations - poor people are prone to hunger, disease, illiteracy, joblessness, exclusion and social discrimination. They lack access to safe drinking water and food, sanitation and shelter, education, health care and modern energy services. Poverty alleviation is, at once, an essential goal and indispensable condition for sustainable development. Real and lasting reductions in poverty can only be achieved by enhancing environmental quality and protecting human health; improving natural resource management; securing people's access to resources; providing education for all and empowering the poor to develop their full potential to lead healthy, productive lives in accord with their needs and interests.

Persistent Challenges

Despite significant gains in welfare in recent decades, the world remains characterised by stark and growing disparities. Average income in the richest 20 countries is 37 times that of the poorest 20 - a ratio that has doubled in the past 40 years, mainly due to lack of growth in the poorest countries.¹ More than one billion people lack access to clean water, and more than twice that number do not have basic sanitation. One third of the total world population lack access to modern energy services. The core challenge for sustainable development is to ensure productive work and a better quality of life for these people, while sustaining ecosystem services and strengthening the social fabric that underpins development.

Poverty and Health

"The biggest enemy of health in the developing world is poverty." - UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, address to the 2001 World Health Assembly

There is a stark relationship between poverty and poor health. In developing countries, life expectancy is under 50 years, compared to 77 in richer countries. Lack of clean water, sanitation and hygienic living conditions cause about two million deaths every year - most of them among children. About 820 million people do not receive enough food to lead healthy and productive lives, while 160 million children are seriously underweight for their age.² In any country, poor women are far more likely than rich women to die in childbirth - women in developing countries face a risk of maternal death that is up to 600 times higher than that of women in developed countries.³ AIDS is a disease of poverty and produces poverty in turn. More than 95 percent of new HIV infections occur in developing countries while in industrialised countries most infections are among the poor. Once ill, the poor have less access to health services than the better-off and are less likely to seek care when they need it.

Poverty and Gender

In many parts of the world, unequal gender relations and unequal access to economic resources have made women more vulnerable to poverty than men. Women represent as much as 70 percent of the world's absolute poor - living on one dollar a day or less. Women's unpaid work limits the range of paid economic activities they can undertake. Women often work in the informal sector where there is greater insecurity and lower earning capacity and the return to their labour is less than that of their male counterparts. Gender inequalities in the distribution of income; access to productive inputs such as credit and land; and control over income also limit women's financial security. Meanwhile, gender discrimination in the household often results in girls receiving lower quality nutrition, less health care and poorer education than their brothers - perpetuating the inter-generational cycle of poverty.

Poverty and Environmental Stress

Poverty and environmental degradation are closely linked. Over half of the world's poor live in rural areas where they depend on natural resources such as land, water, wood, and vegetation to meet their vital needs.

¹ World Bank, World Development Report 2002 (*Washington, DC: World Bank, 2002*):3.

² World Bank, World Development Report 2002: 12.

³ UNFPA, State of the World Population 2002 (*New York, NY: UNFPA, 2002*):35.

Poor people often have no choice but to exploit resources available to them - resorting to low-input, low-productivity agricultural practices such as overgrazing, soil-mining and deforestation, with consequent land degradation. Degradation of the natural resource base further detracts poor people's livelihoods and security while undermining sustainable economic growth. This is true for both urban and rural areas - reinforcing the need for strategies that address poverty and environmental degradation in the context of location-specific environmental and social factors.

Poverty and Education for Sustainable Development

Although overall access to basic education has risen substantially over the last decade, the poor are still less likely to attend school and more likely to repeat grades and to have lower quality of education than those in higher income brackets. In 2000, around 325 million children were not attending school and more than 850 million adults were illiterate - almost two-thirds of them women⁴. Enrolment rates among the poor are low for several reasons including: long distances to schools; school costs (e.g., fees, books, transport); care-giving responsibilities including caring for family members with HIV/AIDS; and other opportunity costs (loss of labour in home production, farm work, household enterprise, etc.).

International Commitments

A number of major global conferences in recent decades have been convened to develop concrete strategies on key development issues, including sustainable development and the linkages between poverty, the environment and the use of natural resources. Recommendations from these conferences formed the basis of the 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These Goals, affirmed in the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) Plan of Implementation, set key targets on eradicating poverty including to:

- Halve, by the year 2015, the proportion of the world's people whose income is less than \$1 a day and the proportion of people suffering from hunger;
- Halve, by the year 2015, the proportion of people who are unable to reach or to afford safe drinking water and the proportion of people who do not have access to basic sanitation; and
- To achieve a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020.

To meet these targets, and all of the eight MDGs, the international community will need to adopt strategies related not only to economic measures, but also to health outcomes; access to quality education and housing; gender equality and environmental protection.

UNESCO's Role: Poverty and Education for Sustainable Development

"Education - in all its forms and at all levels - is not only an end in itself but is also one of the most powerful instruments we have for bringing about the changes required to achieve sustainable development." UNESCO Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura, 2002 WSSD

UNESCO has long recognised that freedom from poverty is a human right. As such, poverty cross-cuts all fields of UNESCO's mandate. UNESCO recently demonstrated its support for poverty alleviation through the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), a pledge by African leaders to eradicate poverty; promote sustainable growth and development; and participate actively in the world politic.

UNESCO also recognises the crucial role of education in breaking vicious cycles of poverty and social exclusion. Education for sustainable development (ESD) reorients education toward a process of mobilizing minds and communities in the struggle for sustainable development. This vision of education addresses the complexity and interconnectedness of problems such as poverty, environmental degradation, urban decay, gender equality, and health. It builds on basic education to develop curriculum around a balanced and holistic range of objectives to empower people of all ages to assume responsibility for creating a sustainable future.

UNESCO has a dual role in relation to ESD: first as a substantive implementer of ESD - accelerating education reforms and coordinating activities of multiple stakeholders to implement ESD at international, regional, and country levels. Second, UNESCO also acts as the lead agency in the promotion of the Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014). The Decade offers an opportunity for UNESCO and its partners to advance progress made in human resource development, education and training to achieve real and lasting reductions in poverty.

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⁴ UNDP, Human Development Report 2002 (New York: UNDP).
