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## **ERADICATION OF POVERTY: A KEY FACTOR IN ACHIEVING SOCIAL JUSTICE**

*'Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings.'*

-Nelson Mandela (2005)<sup>1</sup>

### **INTRODUCTION**

Social justice has remained a relevant topic of discourse on several fronts. Although, it is a matter of global concern, it appears to generate more interest in developing countries where justice is largely considered deficient due to inequality and poverty. Poverty has been identified as both a cause and a consequence of social injustice, as it deprives individuals of the necessities of a good life. Hence a need for its eradication, in order to liberate humanity and set the world on course to a better future.

Social justice, often referred to as synonymous with distributive justice (United Nations, 2006), has been defined as 'the idea that all people, everywhere in the world, have the right to a life of dignity... a life free from poverty,

violence, discrimination or human rights violations.’(CARE, 2013)

The concept of poverty is not straightforward in its definition due to the numerous components which comprise it. Therefore, from a more traditional and restricted perception of poverty as merely economic deprivation, a broader approach to the subject has emerged. In addition to economic poverty, there are now also concerns about social, cultural and political poverty (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, n.d.). These forms of poverty are all determinants of the accessibility of social justice; although, economic poverty, easily measured through income and purchasing power, is the best assessable form, and is also a good predictor of the presence or severity of the other forms. Despite the nature of the term, poverty is defined by one basic feature – lack – which manifests in several forms.

This work examines the existing attempts at fostering social justice through equity and equality. It also explores the reasons for social injustice, and then proceeds to examine the concept of poverty and its effect on the existence of social justice, especially in developing countries.

It also recommends measures to help eradicate poverty and promote social justice for a better life for all, highlighting the benefits that exist when poverty is eliminated and social justice upheld.

## **WHY SOCIAL INJUSTICE?**

Social justice breaks down due to the imbalanced distribution of resources, rights and privileges in a society at the detriment of the deprived members of the society. The motivations behind social injustice are fundamentally constructions which divide the people into groups along various lines, in order to offer an advantage to one over another. Generally, religious disposition, nationality, ethnicity, financial power (or lack thereof), sex, place of habitation and political affiliation are among factors which unfortunately form the basis for such injurious division and, hence, for unfairness.

Beyond obvious reasons for inequality such as given above, it is also known that corruption, nepotism and disrespect for the rule of law are forms of social injustice. The essence of equality is that it enhances the durability and depth of growth and poverty reduction as, unlike in unequal societies, growth is not quickly diluted. Therefore, with higher levels of development, equality should normally be given higher emphasis, in order to reduce poverty and aid wealth distribution.

Despite the prevailing level of injustice across the globe, there have been numerous efforts in history for a world with more equal opportunities. Some of these developments are presented below.

### **The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights embraced by the United Nations general assembly in 1948 was proclaimed to prevent the discriminations and maltreatment that threatened humanity, especially as experienced in the Second World War(United Nations, n.d.). The document carefully highlights many issues of concern to fairness. There are three scopes of priority with regard to equality and equity highlighted in the UDHR(United Nations, 2006). They include; Equality of rights, Equality of opportunities socially, economically, politically and culturally in order to give equal access to amenities such as health, education and housing, as well as Equity of living conditions for all individuals and households.

### **The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)**

At the turn of the millennium, a global commitment to promoting development through social justice was birthed. World leaders met at the UN Millennium Summit in New York in 2000 to endorse the MDGs(Obionu, 2016). These goals were aimed at reducing suffering through practical steps taken globally and individually by each participating country. The eight MDGs were targeted, directly or indirectly at improving the characteristics of human life.

### **Drawbacks of the MDGs**

The MDGs were founded on some essential ideals comprising freedom, equality, solidarity and tolerance. However, the implementation of the plan still bore some noticeable lapses which overall, unintentionally though, could not promote the actualization of social justice as required.

The methods of the MDGs largely verified progress at global, national, regional and state levels by emphasizing average and gross figures without necessarily observing for equity(Kabeer, 2010). With this approach, nations were judged to improve as whole entities, with less consideration of the interpretation of such growths into better living standards for citizens at individual levels. Irrespective of the advances in the levels of a country's gross domestic product, for instance, if resources are unevenly distributed internally, there is social injustice. Indeed, this presents the case of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. This uneven progress also resulted from the lack of uniform MDG coverage to all parts of a country or state.

Hence, despite the advances made in certain regards, the MDGs were unable to solve several of the problems that inspired their formation.

### **The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

In 2015, at the expiration of the time for the implementation of the MDGs, countries of the world, motivated by the successes and failures of the MDGs, launched another fifteen year project, the SDGs. This project, with its seventeen goals, was similarly aimed at improving the lives of every world citizen. The SDGs are just over two years into implementation and it is hoped that they deliver the promise they hold.

It is however unfortunate that despite these efforts (and many more) put into making living more enjoyable for humanity, inequality and social injustice are still rife in many parts of the world in varying degrees.

## **ERADICATION OF POVERTY A KEY FACTOR IN ACHIEVING SOCIAL JUSTICE**

Poverty and social injustice are inseparable. Where poverty thrives, many cannot enjoy the same services as others. For instance, they cannot afford the same level of education or of medical attention as those who have more resources. In 2007, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, in a bid to promote development and human dignity announced 20 February as World Day of Social Justice (United Nations, 2017), underscoring the importance of the concept of social justice and its significance in determining quality of life.

Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Kumar Sen once said that 'poverty is not just a lack of money – it is not having the capability to realise one's full potential as a human being.'<sup>2</sup> So beyond the inability to afford basic elements of a life of dignity and quality, poverty robs individuals of their capacities and their future. Therefore, Poverty is a manifestation, a consequence and a cause of social injustice, and both constitute a strong vicious cycle, with one perpetually leading to the other.

Poverty and social justice are global issues, however, in developing countries, social injustice is evident from the negative impact of poverty on human existence as explained below.

### **Education**

*'If all adults completed secondary education, 420 million could be lifted out of poverty, reducing the total number of*

*poor people by more than half globally and by almost two-thirds in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.'*

-United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization<sup>3</sup>

Poverty reduces the ability to afford quality education. Equivalently, illiteracy is one the major drivers of poor health, unproductivity and poverty. As reported above, the number of poor people globally could be halved if more adults were educated.

Education, to be effective, must be made available to all, irrespective of sex or socioeconomic status.

### **Health**

*'The poor are exposed to greater personal and environmental health risks, are less well nourished, have less information and are less able to access health care; they have a higher risk of illness and disability.'*

-World Health Organisation (2017)<sup>4</sup>

Poverty depletes the ability of individuals to afford medical care, purchase medications and access provisions such as immunization. A poor society is also very likely to be an uneducated one, in which poor sanitary conditions and unhealthy religious and cultural practices are rife. Poverty leads to a heightened risk of outbreaks of diseases due to poor living standards and poor immunity from malnutrition. The twin problems of malnutrition and disease lead to impairment of growth and development and general decline in overall long term productivity. Poverty will also result in

reduced subscription to helpful inventions such as health insurance. The incidence, prevalence and effects of chronic and debilitating diseases such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis are also high in developing countries due to unsafe living standards and paucity of capable health care facilities.

### **Child Health**

*'Especially in developing countries, maternal and child mortality is high. In 2013, maternal mortality in Nigeria was 500 to 625 per 100,000 live births and child mortality about 128 per 1000 live births.'*

-Obionu (2016)<sup>5</sup>

In 2016, Africa had the highest burden of death of children under five, with 76.5 deaths per 1000 live births (World Health Organization, n.d.). In 2016, it was reported that Nigeria's infant and under-five mortality rates stood at 74 and 117 deaths per 1,000 live births respectively, with one of every thirteen Nigerian children dying before attaining age one, and one in every eight before age five (United Nations Children's Fund). The chances of child survival are strongly linked to the educational level, general well-being and socioeconomic class of the family (Figure 1<sup>6</sup>). It is therefore expected that higher poverty levels lead to higher deaths, especially preventable ones.



### Under-five mortality rate by wealth index (DHS 2013)

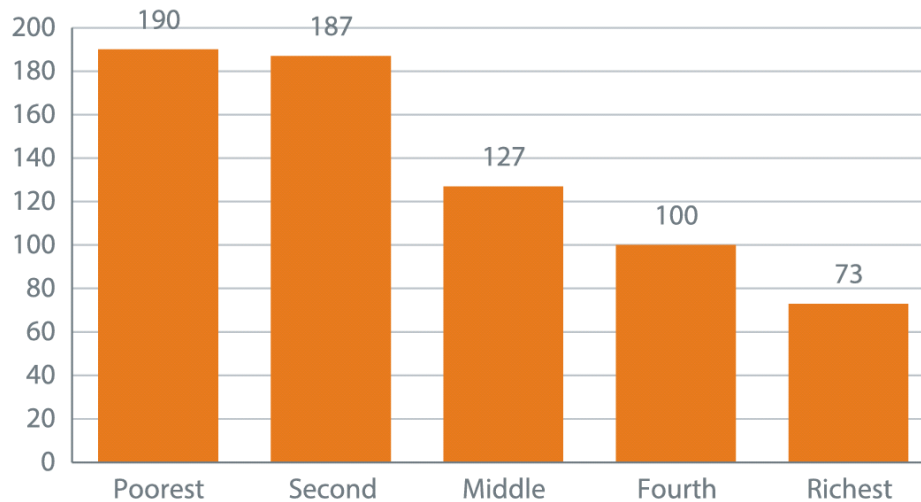


Figure 1. Source: UNICEF

### Maternal Health

*'99% of all maternal deaths occur in developing countries. Maternal mortality is higher in women who live in rural areas and among poorer communities.'*

-World Health Organization<sup>7</sup>

Maternal mortality goes in the same direction as poverty and illiteracy. According to Nigeria's Minister of Health, Professor Isaac Adewole, Nigeria's maternal mortality ratio is currently 576 deaths per 1000 live births. This figure establishes Nigeria as the country with the second highest occurrence of maternal mortality in Africa, and as contributor of 14% of global maternal mortality (This Day, 2017). The inability to afford good antenatal and general medical care, ignorance and illiteracy are among the major factors which promote this.

## **Cost of Illness**

This entails the economic effect of ill health on productivity and income generation. Like a vicious cycle, poverty and disease lead, one to another. When funds are channelled towards paying medical bills, individuals and families are left less economically stable. Also, ill health leads to loss of jobs, poor income generation and underemployment. Entrepreneurship is discouraged as capitals are scarce.

## **Employment and Decent Work Opportunities**

*'The alarming rise in youth employment and the equally disturbing high levels of young people who work but still live in poverty show how difficult it will be to reach the global goal to end poverty by 2030 unless we redouble our efforts to achieve sustainable economic growth and decent work.'*

-International Labour Organization (2016)<sup>8</sup>

Unemployment, underemployment and reduced productivity are hallmarks of social injustice and poverty. The existence of wealth and opportunities in the hands of a few individuals promotes inequality as seen in figure 2 (Beegle, Christiaensen, Dabalen, & Gaddis, 2016).

Even though poverty rates are generally reduced globally, the fact that half of the extreme poor worldwide live in Sub-Saharan Africa, with 389 million individuals living on under US\$1.90 a day highlights uneven progress (The World Bank Group, 2016).

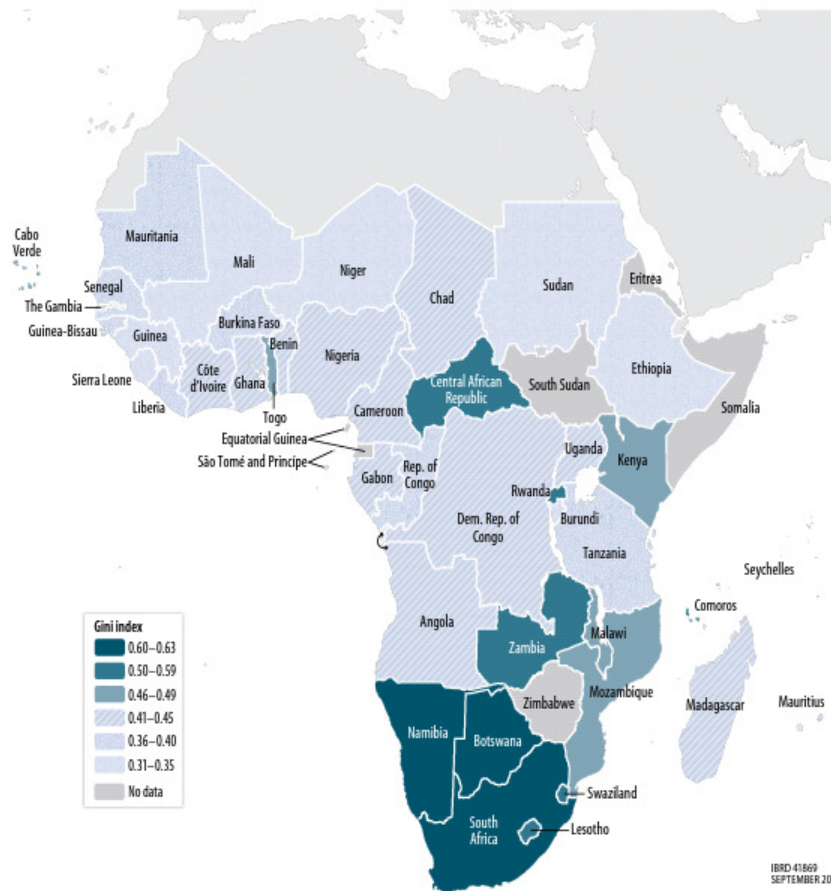


Figure 2. Source: World Bank Group

## Standards of Living

Nations with high prevalence of poverty have low human development indices. The unavailability of infrastructure such as power and clean water, and the high levels of vulnerability and uncertainty make life difficult. The living standards of the poor is unacceptably low even in countries which manage to have good gross domestic or national values – due to a wide divide between the rich and the poor.

## **Women's Rights:**

Women and children are more affected by poverty and other hostile environmental influences. In many areas, women are not allowed to attend school, make informed choices or own property. This is related to ignorance and poverty and will be reduced drastically when poverty is eradicated.

## **Crime and Violence**

*'...What reveals the unmistakable relationship between poverty and crime is that they're both geographically concentrated – in a strikingly consistent way. In other words, where you find poverty is also where you find crime.'*

-Poverties<sup>9</sup>

Like many other evils, poverty and crime are components of a vicious cycle of events. Idle hands are most readily available to wield guns and machetes; unemployment, which is very intimately related with poverty, is a major risk factor for various forms of crime. Even frustration at the injustice and inequality that characterise poverty has pushed many to revolt against the peace and order of their state. An apt example of this situation is the case of the oil-rich Niger Delta region in Nigeria. Due to the perceived injustice in the distribution and use of petrodollars derived from the oil from the region, numerous crimes and violent acts were perpetuated.

These crimes, such as armed robbery, burglary and kidnapping, which are unleashed on the innocent by the desperate and frustrated poor, in the sense of giving guiltless

citizens what they do not deserve, are forms of social injustice. Thus poverty in this case has resulted indirectly in social injustice.

### **A POVERTY-FREE WORLD**

For the world to make progress beyond the point where it is, there is a great need to make poverty and social injustice things of the past. This can be done deliberately and sincerely through the following:

1. Encouragement of necessities such as quality healthcare and education for all, irrespective of tribe, nationality or sex.
2. Provision of strong institutions to uphold and advance social justice.
3. Provision of suitable employment for all.
4. Respect for the rule of law always.
5. Undermining of tribalism and nepotism, and favouring meritocracy at all times.

A world free from poverty is a world with immense opportunities for growth and prosperity, irrespective of sex, religion, culture, political or ethnic peculiarities. When people have honourable lives, they have the ability to achieve so much to make the world a better place.

### **CONCLUSION**

Poverty is a scourge which offers no advantage. It encourages social injustice and deepens disparity and inequality and decreases human worth.

It therefore becomes necessary for poverty to be eliminated through various determined efforts to improve fairness, equality, equity and, ultimately, social justice. Quality education, enjoyable health, gender impartiality and good living standards are some of the benefits which come from having a society free from poverty and social injustice.

Social justice is about individuals getting what they deserve, and every human deserves a basic life of dignity.

Indeed, like Nelson Mandela rightly said, poverty eradication is possible.

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## END NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Upoma Mahbub, "Reaching our potential," *Dhaka Tribune*, October 17, 2017, <http://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/op-ed/2017/10/17/reaching-our-potential/>

<sup>3</sup> "World poverty could be cut in half if all adults completed secondary education," United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, accessed November 3, 2017, <http://en.unesco.org/news/world-poverty-could-be-cut-half-if-all-adults-completed-secondary-education>

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher N. Obionu, *Primary Health Care For Developing Countries*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Enugu: Ezu Books Limited, 2016), 270.

<sup>6</sup> "Infant, under-five and maternal mortality rates," *HEALTH*, United Nations Children's Fund, [http://www.unicef.org/nigeria/factsheets\\_HEALTH\\_low.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/nigeria/factsheets_HEALTH_low.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> "Maternal mortality," World Health Organization, accessed November 3, 2017, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs348/en/>,

<sup>8</sup> "Global youth unemployment is on the rise again," International Labour Organization, August 2016, [http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS\\_513728/lang--ja/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_513728/lang--ja/index.htm)

<sup>9</sup> "Poverty and Crime: Breaking the Vicious Cycle," *Poverties*, April 27, 2011, <http://www.poverties.org/blog/poverty-and-crime>