

Poverty and Us

Poverty is and ought to be a central issue at a UWC. There are two sides to it: First comes the understanding of poverty. Then comes the doing something about it. Without awareness, action is of not much use and may go in the wrong direction. Here are a few points to consider.

* In 1998, at a time of far advanced global wealth, a staggering 2.8 billion people¹, close to half the world's population, lived on less than 2 USD a day. 1.2 billion people lived on less than 1 USD a day². By far the biggest part of those – 522 million – lived in South Asia, 40.0% of total population there. While the absolute number of poor (290.9 million) was lower for Sub-Saharan Africa, their share in the population was even higher at 46.3%.

* Somewhat linking up with this week's Global Affairs session on Women in India: "Perhaps the most valid generalizations about the poor are that they are disproportionately located in rural areas, that they are primarily engaged in agricultural and associated activities, that they are more likely to be women and children than adult males, and that they are often concentrated among minority ethnic groups and indigenous peoples."³

* Poverty is an integral part of the system – you thus cannot understand poverty without understanding the system. Poverty has a lot to do with the institution of private property that is so fundamental to every modern market economy. Private property first and foremost implies the right to exclude all non-owners from that property, if necessary by force. The excluded are a lot likelier to be poor than the excluders. There is a local side to poverty (e.g. the agricultural labourer having to borrow at exploitative interest rates from the money lender to be able to afford the dowry for the daughter's wedding) and there is a global side to this (e.g. cloths sold in New York, Rome and Berlin would not be so cheap if wages weren't so low in South and South East Asia)

* To only blame the government is a common way of 'solving' problems, but it is not as easy as that. Governments most certainly do have a role to play. West Bengal was able to reduce its poverty rates considerably from the late 70s to the mid 90s and so was Kerala⁴, partly because of a policy orientation that can be called social democratic most fittingly. Other Indian states performed a lot worse in terms of poverty alleviation. Overall, governments are themselves more symptoms than causes: The power and influence of vested interests have had governments (in India since independence as elsewhere) keep power and wealth and status to a large extent for the castes and classes that have always had them.

* That the poor are happier than the rich is a myth that comes in very handy for the rich who do not want to share their riches or who want to calm their conscience about all the misery around them. I am by no means saying that material wealth makes you happy⁵. But those who are poor by their own free choice are a tiny minority. To be poor is bad, very bad. To deny that is thoughtless or even cynical and callous.

* First and foremost poverty is about not having enough materially – that means not having enough money in today's monetised world. Malnutrition, low life expectancy, illiteracy and/or bad education, no access to safe drinking water and sanitation all come with poverty. That our Global Affairs discussion revolved so much around education may have been because we live in an educational institution. Awareness (see above) is a necessary precondition for changing anything. But you won't solve poverty by only investing heavily in education.

Poverty needs to be attacked on many fronts. Simultaneously. Empowerment of the poor is likely to be one of the cornerstones of that multi-pronged attack. Welfare activities will do some good, will provide short-term relief, but are by far not enough. And teaching somebody to fish may be useless if they do not have the right to access the water to fish in. In that case even giving fish will be better than teaching to fish. Access to resources is the heart of the problem. The poor are usually extremely resourceful in using resources. Only the resources they have access to are far too few.

Grass-root activities will be necessary. Have you seen the video 'Slowly but surely' on Tuesday on the Adivasi Vikas Manch's tendu leaf struggle in Udaipur district? There was an initial external impetus from Astha NGO, but the strike and the struggle and the setting up of the cooperative and of the savings group and of the school were largely the women of Kotra's own initiative and success.

Local action will need to be supplemented by initiatives with a regional, a national, and more and more also with a global reach. The internet is to be put to creative use for such local-cum-global action, *MUWCI_talk@egroups.com* can play a role – the field for meaningful contributions is wide and open.

At UWCs our mission is to 'make a difference'. We are forming a future elite that is to be equipped with the necessary knowledge and personal qualities to be able to make a difference. A lot of money is going into UWCs. Would this money be better invested if it went directly into poverty alleviation?

To change something about poverty you need to change the system.

To change the system you need to be strong. If you are a member of the elite you are likelier to have a bit more access to the required kind of strength and power and influence. However 'strong' you are, as an individual on your own you will not be able to achieve much. You will need to cooperate. It is essential to know what side you are on, what to work for, and who to cooperate with.

The UWCs' job is to prepare teenagers who were selected for their outstanding potential for their future role as members of the elite. They will then – is to be hoped – not merely go after their personal gain but try to 'change the world' – to the small extent that is possible according to each individual's position, capabilities, taste ... What to do with our privileges? What use to put our membership in the global elite to? The UWCs' job is to make people aware. Aware of what is going on in the world. Aware of the need for solidarity. Aware of the urgency of the need for change.

As a UWC teacher I would consider myself defeated not if students of mine failed their economics IB but if I did not contribute to such awareness. The average income of the richest 20 countries in the world⁶ is 37 times the average income of the poorest 20 countries. This gap has doubled over the last 40 years¹. Go forth from here and live with that, and, if in your might, contribute something towards changing it!

Günther Lanier

1) Figures from World Bank, World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty, Washington (Oxford University Press) 2000

2) to be exact: the poverty line was drawn at 1.08 1993 PPP USD

3) Michael P. Todaro, Economic Development, Harlow (Addison-Wesley) ⁶1997, p.155

4) West Bengal: the poverty ratio decreased from 51.8% in 1978 to 26.0% in 1994; Kerala: the poverty ratio decreased from 53.2% in 1978 to 29.2% in 1994; figures of World Bank, India: Policies to Reduce Poverty, Washington 2000, as quoted in S.S.A.Aiyar, Jyoti Basu, champion reducer of poverty, Times of India, 5th of November, 2000.

5) I tend to believe in philosophical materialism. But I deeply despise down-to-earth materialism. I have given up a well-paid job as SVP of a western investment bank. The job was very interesting. But I felt that helping a bank make profits is not a very meaningful way of spending a life.

6) Note that this is an inter-country comparison and refers to the average income for each country. If we took the intra-country discrepancies into account, the differences would be really huge.