

UN world report documents widespread poverty, illiteracy and disease

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The United Nations recently released its *Human Development Report 2000*. Commenting in the introduction, “One of the 20th century's hallmark achievements was its progress in human rights,” the report proceeds on this contentious premise to make its assessment of major issues of global concern.

The report was established a decade ago to assess statistical profiles of national populations according to figures for areas such as average life expectancy and literacy, rather than simply by per capita income alone. Each year's report would concentrate on a new theme, providing statistical analysis and a poverty index, country by country. The sway of the capitalist market is never questioned. This year it considers human development in relation to human rights.

In September a special Millennium session of the UN will convene. The report suggests it could petition the world's top 500 companies to commit themselves to human rights and labour standards. The fact that these companies have to be petitioned in itself indicates that serious problems exist on this score. But even more, the report's automatic equation of free market policies with automatic human development and improved human rights is undermined from the start by its own statistics.

Over 30 countries with more than half a billion in population have recorded a per capita income lower than that of two decades ago. In Africa and Eastern Europe there have been massive reversals of human development in 22 countries since 1990—mostly due to HIV/AIDS, economic collapse and war.

Sub-Saharan Africa saw considerably improved life expectancy figures in the 1970s, but now these are falling dramatically. In many African countries life expectancy has fallen by more than 10 years in the past decade. By the end of 1999, nearly 34 million people were infected with HIV, 23 million of them in sub-

Saharan Africa. More than 12 million Africans have died of AIDS and by 2010 the continent will have 40 million orphans.

Worldwide, 11 more people are infected with HIV every minute. More than a million people were newly infected in South and South East Asia and the Pacific in 1999. On top of this, an estimated five million people died in military conflicts in the 1990s.

Statistics concerning child health and nutrition are particularly shocking. The sub-Saharan infant mortality rate is 106 per 1,000 live births. Of the 130 million children born each year, about 30 million are born with impaired growth. About a third of children under five in developing countries are stunted by malnutrition, with the highest rates in East Africa and South Asia.

These figures are matched by those concerning education. About 90 million children worldwide are denied any schooling at even primary level, and 232 million have no access to minimal secondary education. In Eastern Europe and the CIS (countries of the former Soviet Union) school enrolments are lower than they were in 1989, and the prospect of illiteracy is re-emerging.

In India, even though primary education is provided, a survey of primary schools across four northern states in 1996 found that 60 percent of the schools had a leaking roof, 89 percent of them did not have a functioning toilet, and 59 percent have no drinking water.

The report notes that while 52 percent of the Indian population over the age of seven was literate in 1991, in some states the literacy amongst rural women was only 16 percent, and in Rajasthan for this group it was only 4 percent. Worldwide there are one billion illiterate adults.

Alongside the lack of education and widespread

illiteracy, in developing countries there are 250 million child labourers—140 million boys and 110 million girls. There are 1.2 million women and girls under age 18 trafficked for prostitution each year.

The report admits in passing that public spending on health and welfare programs is ominously low. A recent UNICEF publication estimates a shortfall in public spending of up to \$80 billion a year (in 1995 figures) to achieve universal provision of basic services, with \$206-16 billion required and only \$136 billion spent. In Nigeria, per capita health spending is only \$5, 42 percent of the bare minimum, and in Ethiopia it is only \$3, 25 percent of what would be required to reach the minimum.

This is in a situation where research and development for a new drug is estimated to cost from \$150 million to \$200 million, and where no developing country has a pharmaceutical sales volume of even \$400 million.

In the poorest country in the world, Sierra Leone, 50 percent of the population are not expected to survive to age 40, 66 percent are without access to safe water, 64 percent have no access to health services, 89 percent are without access to sanitation, 68 percent live below the national poverty line and no figures are available on adult illiteracy.

Worldwide more than a billion people in developing countries lack access to safe water and more than 2.4 billion lack adequate sanitation. More than 790 million people are inadequately nourished and 1.2 billion people are counted as income poor.

The array of statistics and the detailed poverty index are horrifying in themselves. When they are viewed within the framework of the report, the overall effect is quite bizarre. The disjunction between the statistics and the ideological framework is sharpest in the report's historical timelines.

It provides a sanitised timeline of the struggles of the last few centuries, doing its best to avoid any mention of class conflict. According to this framework, the twentieth century has seen an ascending triumph of human rights and democratic forms of rule: “At the beginning of the 20th century, a scant 10 percent of the world's people lived in independent nations. By its end, the great majority lived in freedom, making their own choices.” The first great breakthrough was supposedly provided by the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights. The second was then unleashed by

globalisation—so that “a global movement has entrenched universal human rights in the norms of the world's diverse cultures.”

Report Coordinator Dr. Richard Jolly says that “for the first time in history, most of the world lives under democratic regimes. With the establishment of more than 100 multi-party democracies in the last 20 years in a global wave of freedom, bullying and bullets have been giving way to the ballot box.”

So for example, in the 1990s supposedly “democracy spread across Africa”. Somehow this doesn't square with the fact that the index of 24 poorest nations reads like an African roll call—Nigeria, Congo, Zambia, Cote d'Ivoire, Senegal, Tanzania, Benin, Uganda, Eritrea, Angola, Gambia, Guinea, Malawi, Rwanda, Mali, Central African Republic, Chad, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Burundi, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Niger and Sierra Leone.



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