

# Poverty



“We must not hand down to future generations a selfish Europe which is blind and deaf to the needs of others.”

Vaclav Havel

Poverty is a worldwide problem and it is increasing. We tend to connect it with places like Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Latin America, but in Europe poverty affects millions of people, too. Of the European Union’s 400 million inhabitants, 60 million live below the poverty line (which is defined as 50% of a country’s average income), and 2.7 million are homeless. In Spain, 20% of the population live under this poverty line and 4.5 % live in extreme poverty. In the United Kingdom, one third of children grow up in poverty.

## Poverty in transition

“ (...) almost all the former socialist countries have experienced an important increase in poverty during the transition period. Nevertheless, poverty is not an absolutely new phenomenon and it is not due solely to the transition process; poverty existed before in the Soviet Union and the region, although for political and ideological reasons it was not recognised. One social group that was not previously affected by poverty is public sector workers, who have seen their salaries and living standards decrease dramatically. Unemployment is one of the main causes of poverty in the region.” *UNDP, 2001*

## Poverty in the world

“In rich countries, fewer than one child in one hundred fails to reach its fifth birthday, while in the poorest countries as many as a fifth of children do not. Also, while in rich countries fewer than 5% of all children under five are malnourished, in poor countries, as many as 50% are.” *The World Bank, 2000*

### Related activities

- Horoscope of poverty, page 145.
- Take a step forward, page 217.
- The scramble for wealth and power, page 231.
- Where do you stand?, page 254.

### Defining poverty

*Absolute poverty* is based on what is considered to be a minimum requirement for survival. By this definition, it is assumed that there are minimum standards below which people fall into the category of “poor”. One of the most frequently used measurements is level of income: where the income of a person or a family falls below a certain level, considered to

be the minimum required for a reasonable standard of living, then this person or family is considered poor.

In *relative poverty*, the status of a specific group is defined and measured in relation to others in the same environment, community or country. Consequently, someone who is considered poor in the developed world may actually have a higher income than someone in a less developed country who is considered well-off. The meaning of poverty depends on the customs, standards and values of each country and region of the world. In this way, there is also a cultural dimension in the perception of what constitutes poverty.

Nowadays, many people recognise that poverty is not necessarily reduced by a country's economic growth. In countries that have experienced economic growth, poverty has not disappeared. Poland, for example, has achieved significant success in the economic sphere, but poverty has still increased. It is widely accepted that "poverty is a multi-dimensional phenomenon consisting of mental, political, communal and other aspects", together with a material dimension (normally expressed in terms of monetary value). The factors underpinning it may be economic, social, political or environmental. Poverty has many faces: it can be rural or urban, a permanent or temporary state of affairs. Some people may be poor throughout their lifetime, while others may move in and out of poverty. It is not a static condition.

A further important dimension of poverty concerns what is often called the "feminisation of poverty". This means that there is a prevalence of women among the poor, which is linked, among other things, to gender-biased consequences of poverty.

## Poverty and human rights

The Vienna Declaration and the Programme of Action adopted during the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, Austria, (June 1993) states that "the existence of widespread extreme poverty inhibits the full and effective enjoyment of human rights...especially the economic, social and cultural rights." (Article 14).

It is important to realise that the denial of adequate health care, education, equality, shelter, etc., which are some of the consequences of poverty and social exclusion, impedes access to civil and political rights, which in turn prevents people from claiming their economic, social and cultural rights. This is a clear example of the indivisibility and interdependence of human rights.

### Amnesty International and economic, social and cultural rights

The International Council Meeting of Amnesty International which took place in August 2001 agreed to expand the organisation's mandate to enable it to work on a wide range of human rights. From now on, the organisation will work not only against torture or for prisoners of conscience, but also against all forms of discrimination, whether they affect political and civil rights or economic, social and cultural rights.

The Declaration on the Right to Development, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 4 December 1986, is the first international instrument that refers exclusively to the right to development. It is closely connected with the second generation of human rights, as described in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights. Development is defined in Article 1 as "A global economic, social, cultural and political process that tends to improve the well-being of all the people and all the individuals based on their free, active and significant

"Economic growth broadens the material base for satisfaction of human needs, but the degree to which they are satisfied depends on the distribution of resources among the people and the use and distribution of opportunities, particularly employment."

Moreira

### The Fourth World Youth Movement

is part of the Fourth World Movement, an organisation dedicated to the fight against poverty.  
[www.atd-fourthworld.org](http://www.atd-fourthworld.org)

**Key dates**

**17 October**  
International Day for the  
Eradication of Poverty.

**5 December**  
International Volunteer Day for  
Economic and Social  
Development.

participation in the development and the fair distribution that derives from it". Article 2 of the same declaration emphasises that "The human person is the main subject of development and should be an active participant and beneficiary of the right to development."



**Do you think all the documents that have been agreed by governments can make a difference to the fight against poverty throughout the world?**

At the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, known as the Copenhagen Summit, 185 countries, through their representatives, committed themselves to eradicating absolute poverty and adopted concrete plans and proposals to that end. The heads of governments and states adopted a declaration and a plan of action, known as "Copenhagen + 6", but as of September 2001, none of the stated objectives has been achieved completely.

The existing international and regional instruments have had a limited impact on the fight against poverty. One reason is that many of these instruments do not include mechanisms to enforce these rights. Another is that, although progress has been made over the last 50 years to develop a human rights framework and the international community has accepted that sustainable human development is not possible without respect for human rights, there is still no express link being made between poverty and human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the two International Covenants on Human Rights do refer in their preambles to freedom from want, and the human rights treaties do provide for the right to an adequate standard of living, including sufficient food, clothing and housing.

**The European Social Charter**

With a view to ensuring the effective exercise of the right to protection against poverty and social exclusion, the Parties undertake:  
(a) to take measures within the framework of an overall and co-ordinated approach to promote the effective access of persons who live or risk living in a situation of social exclusion or poverty, as well as their families, to, in particular, employment, housing, training, education, culture and social and medical assistance;  
(b) to review these measures with a view to their adaptation if necessary.  
*The revised European Social Charter, Article 30*

**Final considerations**

One of the most common prejudices held about poor people is that they find themselves in this situation because they want to or because they do not work hard enough - implying that they are lazy and irresponsible. This is a way of making the poor bear sole responsibility for their situation; it suggests that society should not be responsible for them and can do nothing about them. This approach runs contrary to a culture of human rights, because it denies those people who find themselves excluded the opportunity to live with dignity and to be a subject of rights. In addition, it conflates the consequences of poverty (altered patterns of behaviour, drug abuse, refusal to work, use of alcohol, etc.) with complex root causes.

To eradicate poverty we should be addressing its roots, not just the immediate needs, and this will require a major political effort especially from states and international organisations: poverty thus has a strong political dimension.

"The fight against poverty is a deeply political issue. Poverty in most societies is about disparities in the distribution of power, wealth and opportunity." *UNDP, 2001.*



**Do you agree with this statement?**

In the Millennium Declaration (September 2000), the world community committed itself to eradicating poverty, with a target of halving those whose income was less than US \$1 a day by the year 2015.

### Examples of social indicators associated with poverty: unemployment and youth in eastern Europe

As in the West, young people suffer higher unemployment rates than other adults. In 1999, there were 65 million young people aged 15 to 24 in central and east European countries and the Commonwealth of Independent States (27 countries). Of the total youth population, 27% (18 million) were neither in education nor in employment. The average youth unemployment rate for 18 countries stood at 30%, double the overall unemployment rate. Youth unemployment is particularly high in south-eastern Europe (71% in “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, 61% in the former Yugoslavia, 35% in Bulgaria), in the Caucasus (46% in Azerbaijan, 27% in Georgia), and in Central Asia (37% in Kyrgyzstan, 33% in Tajikistan).<sup>43</sup>

### Example of a national plan to combat poverty

The plight of children in Moldova is disturbing. In many families, the main source of income is a modest child allowance. Recent years have seen a deterioration of nutritional standards among children from poor families, with adverse consequences for their health and cognitive development. Consequently, the government has decided to develop a special programme to combat child poverty as part of the country’s Short-Term Poverty Alleviation Programme. This initiative offers a wide range of measures aimed at instituting a social care system for orphaned and disabled children as well as for children from poor families.<sup>44</sup>

### References

- Bilan économique et social 2000, *le Monde, France, Édition 2001*.
- Choices for the poor, *United Nations Development Programme, New York, 2001*.
- Human Development Report 2001, *United Nations Development Programme, New York, 2001*.
- Moreira, C, Eradication of poverty in the world: an assessment on the threshold of the year 2000, *Social Watch, www.socwatch.org.uy/, Uruguay, 2000*.
- Pettiti, L, Meyer-Bisch, P., “Human rights and extreme poverty”, *Human Rights, New Dimensions and Challenges, Ed. J. Symonides, Unesco, Paris, 1998, pp. 157-176*.
- Report of the expert seminar on human rights and extreme poverty, 7-10 February 2001, *E/CN.4/2001/54/Add.1, United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Geneva, March 2001*.
- The dimensions of poverty, *Social Watch, www.socwatch.org.uy/, Uruguay, 1997*.
- “Young people in changing societies”, *Regional Monitoring Reports, No 7, Florence: Unicef Innocenti Research Center, 2000*.

