

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ERADICATION OF POVERTY

The Psychology Coalition at the United Nations, New York

Submitted on the occasion of the United Nations International Day for the Eradication of Poverty

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Co-sponsored by the American Psychological Association, Association for Trauma Outreach and Prevention, International Association of Applied Psychology, International Council of Psychologists, International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, International Union of Psychological Science, Society for Industrial/Organizational Psychology, Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, World Council for Psychotherapy, World Federation for Mental Health and other members of the Psychology Coalition at the United Nations

The United Nations International Day for the Eradication of Poverty is observed on 17 October each year to promote awareness of the need to eradicate poverty and destitution worldwide, especially in developing countries. This day was officially declared in December, 1992, according to the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 47/196. In December 1995, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the First United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997–2006), and in the year 2000, world leaders committed to the Millennium Development Goals which included reducing by half the number of people living in extreme poverty by the year 2015.

The United Nations Secretary-General's Report on Poverty Eradication (E/CN.5/2012/3) acknowledges that poverty is multidimensional. However, Governments, United Nations agencies, and the international community generally focus on economic policies and indicators in their programmatic efforts to eradicate poverty. While we do not deny the importance of economic policies and measures, the purpose of this statement is to advocate that governments, UN agencies, the private sector, civil society organizations and other stakeholders, address psychosocial factors as significant, complementary dimensions associated with poverty and its alleviation. We offer the following recommendations concerning the importance of psychosocial empowerment, mental health, and psychosocial well-being to the achievement of sustainable poverty reduction.

I. PSYCHOSOCIAL EMPOWERMENT

Provide Access to Productive Employment, Formal Education and Decent Work

Research in psychology indicates that being engaged in decent work in itself promotes psychosocial empowerment by developing a sense of ownership, optimism, and efficacy/confidence in one's ability to be effective in dealing with challenges. Empowering people to be productive and resourceful members of their families, communities and society reduces poverty and marginalization.

Therefore, we urge governments to create meaningful jobs and to increase and strengthen opportunities for training about entrepreneurship and income generating activities, life skills development, and access to primary, secondary and higher education as important pathways to decent work and the alleviation of poverty. Culturally relevant psychological assessments should be used to help find the most effective fit between individual strengths and available job, vocational, or career opportunities.

Promote Social Equality, Human Rights, and Social Justice for All

Poverty conditions, including structural inequality and social and economic disparities affecting individuals, groups and communities, are violations of their human rights to survival, protection, development, and social participation. Psychological and social science research demonstrates that social inequalities prevent people from developing their capacities and contributing as productive members of society. Apart from functioning as factors that stunt personal and group development, social inequalities, stereotypes, and discrimination are barriers to social cohesion within a society and are frequent sources of intergroup conflict and social instability, which in turn cause poverty to persist. Individuals living in poverty are more likely to be targets of imprisonment where they do not get the skill training they need to return to society and successfully meet their basic needs; thus continuing in poverty.

Therefore, we urge governments and all stakeholders to:

- * *Put human rights at the center of their framework for national development and to review and replace those laws, policies, programmes and practices at all levels that discriminate against individuals on the basis of their gender, age, race, ethnicity, color, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, disability, rural/urban/suburban residence and other categories of social identity.*
- * *Place emphasis on restorative justice (including education and mental health care) and less emphasis on justice by punishment or abuse in criminal justice systems.*
- * *Provide ongoing human rights learning for all members of society, especially individuals and groups living in poverty, to foster their vitality, resilience and activism to alleviate poverty conditions as social injustices and to advocate for positive social and economic changes in their own lives and the lives of others.*
- * *Provide education at all levels that is the key to eradication of poverty, as outlined by the UN Secretary-General's new global initiative "Education First."*
- * *Reduce the physical and mental burden of paid and unpaid work by rural women and girls by providing access to services and tools and technology (solar pumps, clean water, cells phone); and support the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 189 guidelines for the rights of domestic workers.*

Promote Engagement in Decision-Making and Capacity-Building Networks

Psychological research has demonstrated the value of engaging individuals and groups living in poverty as active partners in planning and operating programs at all decision-making levels. Having ownership and representation in social and economic planning, allows poor sectors of society to be responsive to proposed change initiatives instead of perceiving interventions as externally controlling and thereby rejecting them. Research has also shown that group cohesion can be developed by a diverse group coming together on an equal basis and a shared purpose, and working interdependently to achieve a larger, common goal.

Therefore, we urge governments and all stakeholders to encourage and provide opportunities for expanding and strengthening capacity-building community networks through which information about entrepreneurial and social opportunities can be shared.

II. MENTAL HEALTH CARE AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

The psychological and social science literature increasingly confirms that poor mental health is both a cause and a consequence of poverty, which often includes conditions of isolation, lack of education and economic opportunities and resources, inadequate access to health and mental health care and other social services, especially in rural areas. These multiple stressors interact to cause anxiety and depression which have negative impacts on the ability of individuals to cope, resulting in the persistence of poverty. Further, poverty may result from environmental migration due to climate change and natural disasters, which are associated with mental health issues for the affected

populations such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, child abuse and other forms of interpersonal violence. In addition, poverty has intergenerational effects within families and communities. The recent WHO QualityRights campaign, launched in July 2012, has elaborated on the desperate need for quality mental health care in all countries, especially in developing countries.

Therefore, we:

- * ***Urge governments and the international community to implement the Social Protection Floor Initiative, including access to mental health care within primary health care, to take care of basic human needs of all vulnerable groups.***
- * ***Recommend taking a lifespan, inclusive rights-based approach to implementing the Social Protection Floor for all age groups.***
- * ***Recommend the provision of accessible multidisciplinary service centers and mobile vans including access to mental health care, especially in rural areas, to provide one-stop services. In rural areas, literacy and continuing education and entrepreneurial training should be provided in these centers.***
- * ***Recommend the provision of trained psychologists, mental health counselors, and social workers well versed in culturally-specific methodology and techniques, to train and work with local community peer coaches, especially in rural areas, to recognize mental health problems and to provide services and referrals in an informed, nondiscriminatory manner.***
- * ***Urge that special care be taken to ensure that all services and interventions are implemented according to ethical principles and with respect for the human rights and dignity of all individuals.***
- * ***Support the WHO efforts for quality care as outlined in their QualityRights Toolkit Campaign.***
- * ***Support insurance plans and grants by governments and others to provide health and mental health services in all areas, especially rural areas, to those most in need.***

III. PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL-BEING

Well-being is mentioned three times in the Secretary-General's Report on Poverty Eradication, once specifically as "mental well-being." Measures of well-being were also included in the UN Human Development Report in the past. The WHO website as of October 2011 defines mental health as "a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community." The High-Level Meeting on Wellbeing and Happiness: Defining a New Economic Paradigm was held at UN headquarters on 2 April 2012, according to United Nations resolution 65/309, with many governments and other stakeholders upholding the importance of measuring well-being in national development. The importance of well-being was further supported by a panel sponsored by the UN Development Programme at the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development in June 2012 in Brazil.

The connection between wellbeing and employment status is supported by the World Happiness Report, edited by Helliwell, Leyard and Sachs. Much research in the field of psychological and related sciences, especially that of Positive Psychology, Clinical and Counseling Psychology, Social Psychology and Industrial/Organizational Psychology, has established the relationship between work and wellbeing. Many such studies are published in professional journals, including "Health and Wellbeing" and in the edited book, "Humanitarian Work Psychology" (Carr, MacLachlan & Furnham, 2012).

Therefore, we urge governments and stakeholders to include the term "psychosocial well-being" and/or "mental well-being", in all actions, policies and programmes initiated to eradicate poverty on this day and henceforward, including at the 2013 Commission for Social Development. We also recommend that governments support the efforts of the Bhutan Government and other governments,

agencies, and organizations, to implement measurement of wellbeing in their policies and programmes on development.

IV. NEEDS OF THE MOST VULNERABLE GROUPS

Research also shows that marginalized and disenfranchised groups, including women and girls, persons with disabilities, racial/ethnic and religious minorities, migrants and refugees, and rural populations are at the highest risk for poverty as well as for related psychosocial and mental health problems.

Therefore, we recommend that disenfranchised and marginalized groups be given special attention in efforts to eradicate poverty, and that programmes and policies are examined with regard to addressing gender and other disparities.

V. PROGRAM EVALUATION

Strategies and programmes that are implemented to eradicate poverty need to be evaluated to ensure their effectiveness and to determine the degree to which the policies they are intended to address have had the desired effects in eradicating poverty.

Therefore, we recommend that measurement and evaluation of poverty eradication initiatives and programs be undertaken, and that these measures should be developed and analyzed in consultation with, and with the assistance of, psychological, social science or other experts in program measurement and evaluation.

VI. CALL TO ACTION

On this 2012 International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, the Psychology Coalition at the United Nations calls for international, national and local community leaders to prioritize and plan sustainable efforts to eradicate poverty. We also call upon individuals and groups to take immediate, small actions to reduce poverty, including engaging in volunteering activities to help the less advantaged, creating petitions to address structural and social and economic disparities, organizing fundraising concerts and other community events to support existing and new poverty elimination programmes, and honoring individuals and groups that are making a poverty reduction difference that counts.

Reference

Carr, S. C., MacLachlan, M., & Furnham, A. (Eds.). (2012). *Humanitarian Work Psychology*. Houndmills, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

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