Foreword

This volume brings together many of the leading thinkers and advocates who are exploring what international human rights law has to offer to efforts to eradicate extreme poverty and to ensure that the least well-off in society are not deprived of many of their human rights, solely or largely because they lack resources. Despite how insightful and encouraging these analyses are, the exceptionally uncertain times in which we live make it difficult to predict where the debate over poverty and human rights is really heading. There are strong reasons for pessimism. The COVID-19 pandemic has not just set back pre-existing efforts to tackle poverty but is likely to push hundreds of millions of additional people into poverty over the years ahead. Dramatic protests worldwide focused on police brutality have helped to demonstrate the depth of racial and ethnic inequality in many, if not most, societies, as well as expose the far higher rates of poverty among such groups. And the inexorable march of global warming threatens to be especially devastating for people living in poverty, thereby generating a ‘climate apartheid’ scenario in which the well-off will be shielded and the poor devastated.

But there are also grounds for optimism, including the fact that a time of crisis is also a time of opportunity. The dire threats posed by COVID-19, entrenched racism and global warming might all be seen to revolve in one way or another around the world’s continuing failure to adequately tackle poverty and rapidly growing inequality. That realization might in turn actually provoke the sort of reflection and action needed to bring about the adoption of truly transformative changes in economic and social policy. In a major study of historical efforts to tackle extreme inequality in centuries past, Walter Scheidel observed that concerted and effective efforts to do so have only ever occurred subsequent to one or other of four violent ruptures.1 The ‘Four Horsemen of Leveling’ that he identified are mass mobilization warfare, transformative revolution, state failure and lethal pandemics.2 The last of these – a lethal pandemic – is clearly upon us, and the penultimate horseman – state failure – will loom increasingly large as the existential threat represented by global warming becomes ever more unavoidable.

While there has been increasing recognition of the need for a dramatic response to these cumulative challenges within the United Nations context, the organization’s basic strategy is, in my view, flawed in some crucial respects. Before looking at those flaws, however, it is appropriate to note some of the principal recent policy statements. The Secretary-General, António Guterres, in delivering the Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture in July 2020, decried the terrible rise in inequality, the dramatic increase in poverty and the continuing challenges resulting from colonialism and patriarchy.3 He rolled out the rhetorical big guns by calling not just for a ‘New Social Contract’, as so many international organizations have done in recent

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2 ibid 6.
years, but also for a ‘New Global Deal’.\(^4\) For the time being at least, he does not seem to have formally endorsed the detailed program put forward by the UN Conference on Trade and Development for a ‘Global Green New Deal’.\(^5\)

UN Member States have collectively followed the Secretary-General’s lead in recognizing the scale of the current crisis. A prominent example is the Declaration on the Commemoration of the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the United Nations adopted by the Heads of State and Government in September 2020. Like most such statements, it was the product of lengthy negotiations designed to ensure that every symbolically important box was ticked, even if little was added in terms of meaningful commitments. It mentions the word ‘poverty’ three times, but on each occasion it does so as part of a laundry list of woes. Thus, for example, the governments proclaimed that ‘\[w\]e will address the root causes of inequalities, including violence, human rights abuses, corruption, marginalization, discrimination in all its forms, poverty and exclusion, as well as lack of education and employment. It is our responsibility’.\(^6\)

But when it comes to the means by which these goals will be achieved, the default setting returns to the solutions locked-in in 2015. In his Mandela Lecture, the Secretary-General declares that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (laying out the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)), the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on financing for development and the Paris Agreement on climate change together show the way forward. In his view, these policies ‘address precisely the failures that are being exposed and exploited by the pandemic’.\(^7\)

The Secretary-General consistently asserts that the Paris Agreement and the SDGs ‘provide the blueprint and the tools for a better recovery’.\(^8\)

In the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Declaration, governments also take refuge in the SDGs:

We will leave no one behind. … We are determined to implement the 2030 Agenda in full and on time. There is no alternative. The peoples have to be at the center of all our efforts. Particular attention must be given to people in vulnerable situations.\(^9\)

Yet the available evidence clearly indicates that the SDG targets will not be met in many key areas, including poverty elimination, the reduction of inequality, the meeting of climate change targets and the elimination of gender inequality.\(^10\) To take the latter by way of example, at pre-COVID-19 economic growth rates, closing the gender gap in economic opportunity was

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\(^7\) Mandela Lecture (n 3).


\(^9\) Declaration (n 6).

projected to take another 257 years. It is not clear why it should be assumed that the constant reaffirmation of a failing Agenda will miraculously turn existing trends around.

But the biggest flaw in UN anti-poverty efforts is the organization’s insistent reliance on the World Bank’s international poverty line as its basic benchmark. Utilizing this minimalist indicator enables the UN and others to put an unwarranted triumphalist spin on poverty eradication achievements in recent decades. Thus, in his Mandela Lecture, Guterres celebrated the fact that ‘[m]ore than a billion people have moved out of extreme poverty’ in recent years.

But such a claim raises many questions, including where the figure comes from, what it tells us about real progress achieved and the conclusions that it suggests about the effectiveness of poverty eradication efforts to date. These questions are of vital importance for the analyses contained in this volume because the starting point for any endeavor to eradicate poverty must be a realistic assessment of how bad or how good the current situation is. There is no doubt that huge progress has been made in improving the quality of life for billions of people, especially over the past two centuries. Few would disagree with Angus Deaton that ‘[l]ife is better now than at almost any time in history. More people are richer and fewer people live in dire poverty’. But it is a large step from this well-grounded observation to the conclusion that ‘extreme poverty is being eradicated’. Yet all too often in recent years the balanced picture provided by Deaton and others has been translated into a deeply problematic triumphalism that plays down the significance of various factors including the miserable conditions in which billions of people continue to live, the extent to which governments at all levels have so consistently failed to take eminently feasible steps that could have led to vastly better outcomes, the growing global dominance of an ideology that justifies marginalizing concern for the plight of the poor and the calamitous looming impact on the poor of global warming.

Instead, world leaders including the Secretary-General, economists and pundits have enthusiastically proclaimed progress against poverty to be ‘one of the greatest human achievements of our time’, for which humankind should not be shy to take credit. The Chief Economics Commentator for The Financial Times echoed many in proclaiming that ‘the decline … to less than 10 per cent, is a huge achievement’. Others have paid tribute to the role of economic growth and capitalism in lifting a billion people ‘out of dire poverty into something approaching a decent standard of living’.

12 Mandela Lecture (n 3).
14 Steven Pinker, Enlightenment Now (Viking 2018) 116.
Almost all of these commentaries were based upon the data generated by the World Bank’s $1.90 a day international poverty line (IPL), which showed that poverty had fallen from 1.895 billion to 736 million between 1990 and 2015, and thus from about 36 to 10 percent of the world’s population. Whatever the merits of the IPL, the reality is that it reflects a standard of miserable subsistence rather than an even minimally adequate standard of living. This in turn facilitates greatly exaggerated claims about the impending eradication of extreme poverty and downplays the parlous state of impoverishment in which billions of people continue to subsist.

Using a more defensible line generates a radically different understanding of progress against poverty. Even under the Bank’s line, the figures are terrible: 700 million people living under $1.90 a day is abhorrent. Using more realistic measures, the extent of global poverty is vastly higher and the trends discouraging. Rather than one billion people lifted out of poverty and a global decline from 36 percent to 10 per cent, many lines show only a modest decline in rate and a nearly stagnant headcount. The number living under a $5.50 line held almost steady between 1990 and 2015, declining from 3.5 to 3.4 billion, while the rate dropped from 67 percent to 46 percent. Using Martin Ravallion’s weakly relative line, the number in poverty declined slightly from 2.55 billion to 2.3 billion between 1990 and 2013, falling from 48 to 32 percent. Under the Bank’s societal poverty line, the headcount declined from 2.35 billion to 2.1 billion between 1990 and 2015, and the rate declined from 44.5 percent to 28.5 percent. Today, the leading global non-monetary measure of deprivation, the Multidimensional Poverty Index, covering 101 developing countries, yields a poverty rate of 23 percent.

The stark reality is that the world is not even close to ending poverty. While SDG 1 calls for a rate of zero under the IPL by 2030, the World Bank does not foresee an end to poverty even under that line. Assuming that every country grows as it did between 2005 and 2015 (doubtful), the Bank projects a poverty rate of 6 percent in 2030. Under a $5.04 line, projections show 28 percent of the world, or 2.35 billion people, in poverty in 2030. These projections will deteriorate immensely as COVID-19 continues to ravage economies and public health and as global warming accelerates.

Several challenges emerge from this more sober and evidence-based assessment of the current state of world poverty. First, there is little cause to be in the least bit satisfied with the progress made over the past forty years or more, given the immense wealth that has been generated during that period. The fact that some two billion people still live in poverty, based on any reasonable conception of an adequate standard of living, means that the economic and social policies being promoted by mainstream neoliberal orthodoxy have failed vast numbers

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19 ibid 83.
23 Poverty and Shared Prosperity (n 18) 24.
of people, while creating immense wealth for a few and hugely exacerbating inequality. Second, redistribution needs to be at the top of the list of policy priorities and genuine steps need to be taken to reduce inequality and ensure social protection floors for all. Third, the Sustainable Development Goals, as currently formulated and pursued do not provide the sort of roadmap, blueprint, or whatever other evasive metaphor might be used, that will be needed to eradicate extreme poverty or significantly reduce inequality.

In the years ahead, the existential threat posed by climate change will further overshadow the prospect of achieving many of the goals reflected in the SDGs. The basic acknowledgement of global warming in Agenda 2030 is entirely inadequate and is not effectively integrated into the overall agenda. When we add in the radically changed economic situation that has emerged as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear that nothing short of truly transformative solutions will work to eliminate poverty in the decades ahead. The chapters in this volume should be assessed against that reality.

Philip Alston