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# DEMAND DIGNITY

HUMAN RIGHTS = LESS POVERTY

**AMNESTY**  
INTERNATIONAL





You don't need Amnesty International to give you figures on global poverty; you probably know many of them. You don't need Amnesty International to set out yet another plan to end poverty; there are many on the table, and much debate about which deserve support.

But if you want to change the fact that at least 963 million people go to bed hungry every night, that 1 billion people live in slums, that one woman dies every minute from pregnancy complications, that 1.3 billion people have no access to basic health care, that 2.5 billion people have no access to adequate sanitation services and 20,000 children a day die as a result, then you need to listen.

Whatever plan is pursued, whatever projects are prioritized, whatever aid package is agreed, no solution to poverty without human rights at its core will have any long-term impact. Protecting the rights of those living in poverty is not just an option – it is an essential piece of any solution.

People living in poverty don't just face deprivation, they are trapped – excluded, denied a say, and threatened with violence and insecurity. Rights are key to releasing that

trap. Respect for human rights demands inclusion, demands that people get a say, and demands that those in power ensure people can live free from fear and from want. Full respect for rights requires the recognition that everyone has the right to live in dignity, and the right to food, water, basic health care, education and shelter. These demands – codified in an impressive body of international law and universal standards – give those living in poverty a tool to change the balance of power that keeps them poor.

You may think you have heard this before – the need to put human rights at the core of development. But although many acknowledge the link, too few act as if rights mattered. For many governments and international actors, human rights are just two words – on paper. Projects justified in the name of development can, therefore, worsen the situation of the poor. Economic growth, while important, is pursued as if it alone can offer a solution – and deemed successful even when inequalities worsen and the lives of the most marginalized do not improve.

The Millennium Development Goals, (MDGs), the world plan against poverty,

address too few of the underlying abuses that drive people into poverty, and keep them there. They do not, for example, require governments to report on how poverty impacts different groups – even though ethnic and religious minorities, Indigenous people, and women and girls, make up disproportionate numbers of the

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## PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF THOSE LIVING IN POVERTY IS NOT JUST AN OPTION – IT IS AN ESSENTIAL PIECE OF ANY SOLUTION.

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world's poor. Neither do they require governments to end many human rights abuses that keep people poor and obstruct progress on MDG targets, nor is there a mechanism to hold governments to the pledges they have made.

Governments too often pick and choose the rights they will promote. Some demand

**Cover:** Residents of Bhopal celebrate the announcement that the Supreme Court had ordered remaining compensation money for victims of the 1984 gas disaster to be paid out, 19 July 2004, India.

**Left:** Padmabati Samal, a nurse midwife, checks the foetal heart beat of Sailabala Samal in Khankira village, Orissa, India. She has two years' training and provides antenatal and postnatal care for women but does not deliver babies. Many women in Orissa have no access to professional antenatal care.

democracy and property rights, insisting this will bring prosperity. Others want to suppress freedoms, arguing "stability" is essential to economic growth – crucial for investments in health and education.

Amnesty International has spent almost 50 years researching and campaigning on human rights. For most of that time it focused on civil and political rights – against repression, torture, and killings. More recently it has campaigned for the realization of all human rights. Our experience has taught us that rights really are indivisible. People living in fear and insecurity are more likely to experience want, but those in want are more likely to face other human rights abuses that engender fear and insecurity. We know that human rights abuses cause and perpetuate poverty. And that poverty leads straight back to such abuse.

That everyone is born free and equal in dignity and rights is the very ethos of the human rights infrastructure. And it is the only global infrastructure that assumes everyone is entitled to the same level of opportunity, to the same basic level of living, of security, of resource, of the absence of fear and the right to participate.

**DEMAND THESE RIGHTS FOR ALL.  
DEMAND DIGNITY.**

## THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF THOSE IN POVERTY

When people in poverty talk of their experiences, they do not just talk of deprivation – although of course that is key. They don't characterize their lives by whether they have \$1 a day, or \$1.25. They talk of whether they can send their children to school, and whether that school, along with their home, will be bulldozed in the morning. They talk of living in fear of violence, of being treated like criminals, of being excluded not just from the perceived 'mainstream' society but also from decisions taken on their behalf, of never being listened to. They talk of arbitrary arrest, of losing their scant livelihoods on the whim of an international corporation's determination to extract resources from under their feet, of being marginalized, of having no access to justice.

Describing poverty in terms of income or expenditure levels assumes that simply raising those levels will 'solve' poverty. Yet those in poverty explain very clearly that daily life involves the interplay of four key elements: deprivation, insecurity, exclusion, and a sense of voicelessness – of being unable to get those in power to listen to them.

### INSECURITY

If you live in poverty, you face daily threats to your own personal safety and that of your family. Your home, possessions and livelihood are likely to be insecure and unprotected by law. Any social security that could promise you some minimal protections in the event of illness, crop failure, or joblessness, is likely to be impossible to access. Poor people rarely have secure and permanent employment, or any power within the employment relationship. They have no recourse when those who exercise power over them abuse it – tenants at the mercy of landlords, villagers evicted by developers, and women at risk in their communities and families.

People in poverty are also disproportionately affected by conflict; if they live through the fighting, their fragile existence is made all the more precarious as families lose crucial breadwinners and carers, or children are abducted into armed groups. The poor too are disproportionately exposed to criminal violence, and poor women to violence, denied the protection of the law and the police that is granted to the better off and those with influence. This violence presents real challenges to those seeking to improve their lot through work, education, and community organizing.

### EXCLUSION

Those living in poverty say they feel shut out by the very institutions set up to deliver the public services they so desperately need. Courts, the police, welfare bodies, municipal councils, utility services, boards of education – ostensibly meant to treat all citizens equally – too often treat poor people with contempt or indifference. And if you are a woman in poverty you suffer the double bind of both family and society excluding you from decision-making processes and power.

Exclusion – usually caused by discrimination, whether direct or indirect – is the lens through which poverty in richer countries also comes into sharp focus. Living standards for inner city African American communities in the USA, for example, or Roma communities across Europe, fall far below the majority population's. In some cases, public authorities knowingly implement policies to keep Roma children in inferior schools, or out of school altogether, in others they are indifferent to policies that allow unequal treatment by the police and courts. The different ratios for maternal mortality across rich and poor communities (see below) are one of the starkest illustrations of this discrimination and the connection with exclusion.

In late 2008, the outbreak of cholera that swept across Zimbabwe, caused by decrepit sanitation systems and the state's failure to provide an adequate supply of safe drinking water, threw the shambolic state of the country's health care into sharp relief.

By December the health system, already paralyzed by shortages, a dilapidated infrastructure, equipment failures and a brain drain, could not cope. The main referral hospitals in the country were barely functioning and some wards had already been closed. Many district hospitals and municipal clinics were either closed or operating at minimum capacity.

Around 3,000 women per month give birth in public hospitals in Harare, and up to 10 per cent require life-saving caesarean sections. Yet two government maternity hospitals in greater Harare were closed and maternity services at others had been withdrawn. Less wealthy women were denied emergency caesarean sections – those with money attended private hospitals and paid for the services in US dollars.

Heavily armed riot police are reported to have prevented a group of health workers from presenting a petition to the Minister of Health and Child Welfare. The health workers were calling for the government to take urgent action to restore accessible and affordable health care. Instead, they were forced to hold their protest within the grounds of Parirenyatwa Hospital. After four hours, police entered the hospital grounds and forcibly dispersed them, assaulting several health workers in the process.

Living in deprivation and insecurity, with no access to basic services, betrayed by your government, dying from treatable conditions, excluded from policy making, ignored – or worse, at risk of violence – when trying to raise your voice: this is poverty.

**A woman carrying a baby walks past a Brazilian police officer patrolling Rocinha, one of the largest favelas in Brazil, during a police operation, Rio de Janeiro, 31 October 2005.**

In June 2008, the Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor revealed that four billion people – the majority of the world's population – are excluded from the rule of law. Up to 71 per cent of children in the least-developed countries are not registered by their fifth birthday, leaving them with no documented proof they were ever born. This impedes their access to health care and education and prevents them from fully participating as political, economic and social actors in society.

#### VOICES IGNORED

Exclusion is closely related to another condition of poverty – that of being ignored by those with power. Those living in poverty feel that their views are not taken into account. Their efforts to organize are met with repression, information relevant to their communities is withheld, and processes for consultation are rigged or ineffective.

Whether through deliberate silencing or being rendered mute by indifference, the effect is the same – an overwhelming sense of voicelessness. It is no mere coincidence that the poorest countries are also among the world's most repressive. Yet even in countries formally committed to democratic principles those living in poverty consistently draw attention to the difficulties they face in getting their voices heard.

#### WHERE TO START

Over the next six years – at least – Amnesty International will initiate the biggest piece of research, campaigning and empowerment work in its history. Building on 50 years of rigorous and impartial investigation into human rights abuses and successful



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lobbying of governments and the UN to improve international and domestic laws and demand accountability when they are broken, it will work to shift the power balance towards the poor themselves and to provide the space for them to tell their own stories and engage in the processes that determine their own future. Our task is to show that poverty is the world's worst human rights crisis.

We will work initially on a few key areas and patterns of human rights abuse where Amnesty International has gained experience, where we think our efforts can help, and which show particularly sharply the interplay of deprivation, insecurity,



to delay or go without health care because of the cost.

Women have the right to life, but they die in large numbers because of poverty, injustice and powerlessness – in their intimate relationships, families and communities. They face institutional discrimination, which is then replicated on a domestic level. Women and girls may be forced by their families into early or forced marriages, once in these marriages they may be treated as indentured servants, denied adequate food, imprisoned in their homes and denied access to money. Women have the right to the highest attainable standard of health, but they face economic, cultural and social obstacles in access to health care. Women have the right to determine when they become pregnant, but they are often denied access to contraception or to information that would allow them to control their fertility. Furthermore, many women and girls are denied control of their own bodies.

When a woman dies her family is impoverished further – through loss of livelihood, unpaid work for the family, the care and education of children.

## SLUMS

More than 200,000 communities in the world can be defined as slums. Referred to by many names – bidonvilles, ghettos or the hood, bustees or chawls, favelas, barrios populares, informal settlements, or simply slums – they are home to more than 1 billion people across all continents. These neighbourhoods share common characteristics such as inadequate housing, sanitation and drainage; poor or non-existent water and electricity services; overcrowding; and high levels of violence. Many are classified as “illegal” or “unregularized”. In all of them, residents have very insecure rights of tenure, placing them at constant risk of forcible eviction, and with no power to fight for redress.

exclusion and voices ignored. Our overall goal is to end the human rights violations that keep people poor

## MATERNAL MORTALITY

Almost every one of the more than half a million women who die each year of pregnancy-related complications would have been saved by proper medical care at the right time. User fees for health services, including essential obstetric services and contraception, often keep women who are living in poverty from obtaining the care they need. For those in poverty or in remote areas it is hard to reach health facilities – transport costs may be prohibitive or routes may be impassable. Women and girls in

poverty may have no access to information about the risks of complications, particularly if they have had no schooling or are illiterate.

The vast majority – more than 95 per cent – of women and girls who die from pregnancy-related complications are poor and come from less-developed countries. But there are thousands of women who die in rich countries too. A disproportionate number of these come from marginalized or poor communities. In the USA, the maternal mortality rate among African American women is three times higher than that of white women. More than 46 million people in the USA have no health insurance, and it is common for people

The global slum population is growing at an alarming rate. Some projections suggest that by 2030, 2 billion people will be living in slums. Because of the absence of other affordable housing, people migrating to the cities from under-served rural areas are left with no alternative.

People living in slums face obvious deprivation of resources and assets. They also face high levels of insecurity due to the constant threat of violence from police and criminal gangs, and from being forcibly evicted with little or no warning. They are excluded from basic services such as safe water, sanitation, health and education. Access to justice is routinely denied because of discrimination and the criminalization of poverty. In the processes and decisions that impact on their lives, the voices of people living in slums are routinely ignored. They are not consulted or allowed to participate in decision-making process about upgrading their homes or alternative housing after forced evictions.

Far from being a problem exclusive to developing countries, there are similar issues of deprivation and exclusion of whole communities in and around European cities, poor neighbourhoods in the USA, or in areas reserved for Indigenous Peoples in Canada and Australia.

Women are particularly vulnerable in slums. In Brazil, women face difficulties when trying to report domestic or other forms of violence to the police. In areas where there is no sanitation, women have to walk to remote areas or wait until dark for privacy in order to go to the toilet, increasing their risk of sexual violence and harassment.

### CORPORATE ACCOUNTABILITY

Corporations and other businesses have an enormous impact on the rights of individuals and communities.

**Burning gas from oil exploration in the Niger Delta, Nigeria, February 2008. The oil industry in the Niger Delta has pushed many deeper into poverty.**

This impact can be positive, for example the creation of new jobs and an increase in state revenue that can be used to fund basic services and other initiatives. Yet all too often, human rights are violated as corporations exploit the corrupt, weak or non-existent systems of regulation in countries, and the people affected have no way to hold those corporations to account.

Particularly in the extractive industries, projects are often undertaken without adequate assessment of the potential impact on human rights, including environmental and social impacts. Communities are often forcibly relocated from their lands. But even if they are not, their traditional livelihoods – and lives – can be destroyed or threatened as their land is contaminated and their water supply polluted. Conflict and violence can escalate as companies seek to protect their assets. In the worst cases, corporations and governments collude to shut down peaceful expressions of concern and demands for justice – through violence, intimidation, or trying to impose gag orders reduce bad publicity.

This insecurity and deprivation are compounded when the affected communities are systematically denied access to information about the impact of company operations and consequently excluded from participating in decisions that affect their lives. This is compounded when they are denied access to justice, and governments either failed to include human rights protections in the initial agreements or refuse to hold companies to account for their actions despite comprehensive agreements.



People living in poverty in developing countries often bear the brunt of corporate bad practice and abuses; with these abuses and practices arguably enriching stockholders. Weak domestic regulation, ineffective enforcement, corporate double standards, and the lack of effective international or extraterritorial oversight and accountability mechanisms create a devastating combination in developing countries. Indigenous peoples, in particular, are among the most vulnerable to human rights violations, the least protected, and the least likely to have access to effective remedies.

Many of the world's most resource-rich countries are also the world's poorest, particularly those that rely on natural resources for the majority of their national income. Twelve of the world's 25 most



mineral-dependent states, and six of the world's most oil-dependent states, are classified by the World Bank as "highly indebted poor countries" with the world's worst human development statistics.

The combination of natural resource wealth and high levels of poverty seems paradoxical. It should be possible, as many companies in the extractive sector contend, for investment in natural resource extraction to make a significant contribution to sustainable development and poverty alleviation. It should also be possible for extractive activities to proceed in ways that respect human rights.

## HOW TO BREAK THE CYCLE

An approach to poverty eradication that focuses only on economic growth is fragile

In the first half of 2008, the major employer of the Gafsa region of south-eastern Tunisia – the Gafsa Phosphate Company – announced the results of a recruitment competition, kicking off a wave of popular protest. Some candidates who were unsuccessful complained the results were fraudulent, and others, including some members of the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), joined protests, which developed into an expression of dissatisfaction with high unemployment and rising living costs. As the protests, which started in Redeyef, spread to other nearby towns the authorities deployed large numbers of police and other security forces.

Hundreds were arrested and prosecuted, including 38 who were accused of leading

unrest and charged with "forming a criminal group with the aim of destroying public and private property" and "armed rebellion and assault on officials during the exercise of their duties". Most were sentenced in December 2008 to prison terms, after an unfair trial. They appealed, but in February their convictions were upheld. Although most sentences were reduced on appeal, five people, who had initially been released after the decision of the first court, were convicted by the Appeal Court following an appeal by the prosecution.

Amnesty International considers those sentenced on account of peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly, to be prisoners of conscience.

and unsustainable. The current global economic crisis has demonstrated how fragile gains based solely on economic growth are. Economies worldwide are in or heading towards recession. Growth rates in China, India and Brazil are slowing. The most impoverished countries, especially throughout Africa, face the prospect of decreased investment, trade and aid with devastating affect on people living in these countries. Reduced demands for exports to developed countries and lower foreign investment will mean less growth for export-oriented economies. Countries that are heavily dependent on remittances from migrant workers are likely to be badly affected. At least an additional 100 million people were plunged into poverty due to the food, fuel and financial shocks of 2008.

It makes no sense to hold the lives of the poor hostage to the booms and busts of the world economy. Economic growth is an important component of a strategy to tackle poverty, but it cannot be the only piece. Governments must create the conditions that allow people living in

poverty to claim their human rights, to empower themselves, so that they can be masters, and not victims, of their destiny.

Amnesty International has always defended the space for individuals to act. When we campaign for prisoners of conscience to be released, our focus is on their right to express themselves freely. Now the world must acknowledge that this space to speak, to demand, to act is a prerequisite to ensure that people living in poverty can demand their rights.

If governments continue to lock up the poor – in their slums, their torture chambers, their death beds, their IDP camps, their poverty – we will not listen to them when they say the economy is growing.

Even when the economy is not growing it is possible – essential – to do things that help those living in poverty to escape the traps that keep them poor.

We know that human rights abuses cause and perpetuate poverty. And that poverty leads straight back to such abuse.

# DEMAND DIGNITY

## IMMEDIATE ACTION REQUIRED

To protect the rights of those who live in slums, to end the needless deaths of women from complications in pregnancy, to ensure corporate actors pay due attention to the rights of those in poverty, world leaders must move from acknowledgement to action. Different projects will focus on different targets and levers for change – all with the knowledge that people in poverty can indeed realize their rights, under the right conditions.

To do so, and to ensure long-term, systemic change, three underlying areas that have traditionally blocked progress, as well as good intentions, must be addressed. A future free of poverty is a future where:

### Accountability

- National and international actors – including multilateral institutions and corporations, as well as states and individuals – are held accountable for the human rights abuses they commit that drive and deepen poverty.
- No state may undermine the rights of people under its control through corruption, indifference or direct violations.
- Human rights obligations are respected and realized across national borders.
- Economic, social and cultural rights are legally enforceable at the national, regional and international level.

### Access to rights

- Discriminatory laws, policies and practices that hinder equal access to services and to redress are successfully challenged and changed.
- Concrete measures are implemented to overcome the key barriers people living in poverty face when attempting to access resources, services and justice.
- National and international poverty eradication and development processes – including the Millennium Development Goals – are based on a human rights analysis of the causes and solutions will be founded on the core of human rights.

### Active participation

- Internationally, key development and poverty eradication processes and actors implement consultation and participation systems that genuinely enable people living in poverty to take full part.
- Nationally, the space for human rights defenders and social activists is protected by the state, and people's rights to freedom of expression, of assembly of association and of protest are upheld.
- People in poverty are equipped with the tools that make their participation effective.

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**Amnesty International** is a global movement of 2.2 million people in more than 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion – funded mainly by our membership and public donations.

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