

Preparatory Expert Group

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Contribution from Robert Walker¹

This note makes four related points in connection with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

1. Covid-19 has exposed weaknesses in global governance that must be rectified.
2. Ex-ante evaluation of all new policies and policy development needs to be assessed against all dimensions of poverty – even when measurement is unavoidably absent.
3. All climate change mitigation and adaptation policies should be similarly assessed for their likely impact on each dimension of poverty.
4. The UN protection offered through the *Guiding Principles on Human Rights and Extreme Poverty* should be extended to poverty in all its forms.

Eight specific policy recommendations are offered for consideration.

Covid-19, poverty, and global governance

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed gross inequalities and vulnerabilities among informal workers, urban migrants, service sector workers and ‘front-line’ personnel. Women and other marginalised groups have been especially negatively affected.

The pandemic has also revealed the structural incapacity of most liberal democracies to forgo the short-term needs and demands of national electorates for the benefit of vulnerable populations in other jurisdictions. This has proved to be so even when such actions bring greater long-term benefits to the whole of personkind, including the national populations required initially to forsake their short-term needs.

This strongly suggests that the existing world order is not fitted for the tasks at hand – including achieving the SDGs. The world order cannot continue to be structured according to the spoils of competition. Global poverty, climate change, decarbonisation etc. can be tackled, and transformative change achieved, only through purposive collaboration and partnership across existing ideological, economic, and regional divides.

Therefore:

1. There is a need dramatically to ***strengthen existing systems of global governance*** that can foster collaborative working towards a shared goal of the collective well-being of the global community. This requires reapportioning the concentration of powers within existing agencies to give greater voice to governments in the developing world.
2. There is need, too, to ***increase systems of democratic accountability at global level*** to balance those at national level, thereby ensuring that the interests of the global majority can be considered as well as those of the affluent and powerful minority.

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3. In addition, ***enhanced modes of participatory governance are required*** with special measures to ensure that the voices of those who are dispossessed and most vulnerable can be heard, listened to, and acted upon.

No-one should be left behind, either in the procedures of global governance or in its outcomes.

Poverty in all its forms and dimensions

Poverty is a process not a state. This is true for societies, governments, and individuals. Individuals, over the course of their lifetimes, may experience poverty of differing severity, and many people repeated move in and out of poverty. Societies get richer and suffer setbacks to which governments are obliged to respond.

The global goal should be one of continuous improvement with falling poverty rates BUT increasing poverty standards. In terms of income poverty, the World Bank recognises different poverty lines for low-, low-middle-, high-middle- and high-income counties.

Therefore:

4. Governments attaining the effective eradication of poverty at one level should then focus attention on alleviating and eradicating poverty at the next higher level as national prosperity improves.

Flexible and moving targets serve to emphasise that, unlike the Millennium Development Goals, the Sustainable Development Goals are intended to be equally applicable to all countries. They also discourage complacency.

However, as SDG 1.2 emphasises, poverty is not just a lack of income. Instead, poverty takes many forms with different dimensions. The UNDP's Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) is a great improvement over simple income measures and helps to focus attention on service provision. But, it is a measure driven by available data, and therefore omits dimensions that its original architects thought necessary to include.¹ Notably, it neglects relational dimensions and direct measures of the suffering that a lack of resources differentially engenders. A recent six-country study, embracing the global north and south, speaks to these omissions.² Persons with direct experience of poverty working together with poverty practitioners and academics, identified nine dimensions of poverty:

Privations

- i. Insufficient income
- ii. Lack of decent work
- iii. Material and social deprivation

Relational dynamics

- iv. Social maltreatment: negative and abusive language and behaviour unintentionally or unintentionally directed towards people living in poverty.
- v. Institutional maltreatment: the failure of institutions to respond respectfully and appropriately to people's needs and circumstances, thereby often resulting in humiliation and harm.
- vi. Unrecognised contribution: the failure to acknowledge the knowledge, skills and contribution of people living in poverty'

Core experience

- vii. Disempowerment: 'lack of control and dependency on others resulting from severely constrained choices'³.
- viii. Suffering in body, mind, and heart: the intense physical, mental and emotional anguish experienced by people in poverty.
- ix. Struggle and resistance: the necessary process survival which includes proactive strategies to counteract the negative consequences of the other dimensions of poverty.

All nine dimensions were considered necessary adequately to describe the experience of poverty in each country. While the first three dimensions are familiar in the literature and frequently measured, the same is not true of the remaining six dimensions although preliminary work suggests that measurement is possible.⁴

Therefore:

- 5. Further work should be undertaken to develop appropriate indicators to be included as often as possible in social surveys and other research vehicles.

In the meantime, even in the absence of measurement, poverty in all its dimensions should be considered in the design of every policy – economic and social. This is to ensure that all policies are pro-poor with respect to all dimensions of poverty.

Therefore:

- 6. In ex-ante evaluations, all policy development should be assessed against a template of the nine dimensions of poverty to determine whether the policies are likely to ameliorate or exacerbate each of the dimensions.

Climate action, clean energy, and poverty in all its dimensions

The Sustainable Development Goals are forward looking in embracing the need for clean and affordable energy and to combat climate change (notably Goals 7 and 13). However, the urgency comprehensively to address these issues has increased under the 2015 Paris Agreement, as has the pressure to accelerate progress in the context of the forthcoming 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow during November 2021. While it is widely recognised that the changes required in livelihoods and lifestyles are very substantial, and that the transition to a greener economy must be just, attention has largely focussed on potential job losses, much less on inequality, social exclusion, and multidimensional poverty.

Therefore:

- 7. All climate change mitigation and adaptation policies should similarly be assessed against a template of the dimensions of poverty to consider whether they are likely to ameliorate or exacerbate each of the dimensions.

In general, cross-cutting issues are best resolved through paying attention to their combined impact not only on the level of poverty but on poverty in all its dimensions.

Human rights and poverty in poverty in all its dimensions

As the name indicates, the *Guiding Principles on Human Rights and Extreme Poverty*, adopted as a resolution by the UN General Assembly on 20th December 2012, do not apply to poverty in all its forms or dimensions, but only to people in extreme poverty. Paragraph 13 states that:

Persons living in poverty have diverse experiences and needs and encounter different levels of poverty, in terms of both intensity and duration. While all such persons should be the focus of policies based on human rights, the Guiding Principles are concerned mainly with those experiencing the most severe poverty in a given context.

The reasoning given is that:

Persons living in extreme poverty are of particular concern because their marginalization, exclusion and stigmatization often mean that they are not reached effectively by public policies and services. Obstacles, insecurity, and structural factors frequently render it impossible for them to claim their rights and to fulfil their potential independently; they need active support from the State and other relevant stakeholders.

The self-evident truth is that all people in poverty 'need active support from the State and other relevant stakeholders'. Likewise, the dimension of disempowerment often renders people experiencing any form of poverty unable to claim their rights. Moreover, they frequently experience poverty through the dimension of administrative maltreatment or abuse.

The *Guiding Principles* were conceived in the era of the Millennium Development Goals that focussed principally on the developing world. They need to be updated to remain relevant in the era of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Therefore:

8. The *Guiding Principles* should become the *Guiding Principles on Human Rights and Poverty* and, to the extent that it is necessary, they should be redrafted to accommodate this change.

Robert Walker

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¹ Alkire, S. (2007) The Missing Dimensions of Poverty Data: Introduction to the Special Issue. *Oxford Development Studies*, 35(4):347-359.

² Bray, R., de Laat, M., Godinot, X., Ugarte, A., Walker, R. (2019) *The Hidden Dimensions of Poverty*, Montreuil, Fourth World Publications, ISBN: 979-10-91178-76-1

Bray, R., de Laat, M., Godinot, X., Ugarte, A. & Walker, R. (2020). Realising poverty in all its dimensions: A six-country participatory study. *World Development*, 134. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105025>,

³ *The Hidden Dimensions of Poverty*, p.15.

⁴ Yang, L., Jiang, C., Ren, X., Walker, R., Xie, J. & Zhao, Y. (2021) Determining Dimensions of Poverty Applicable in China: A Qualitative Study in Guizhou, *Journal of Social Service Research*, 47(2): 181-198.