
All Rights Must Be Guaranteed. All Actors Must Be Held Accountable

GRAHAME RUSSELL

It is morally and politically abhorrent that governments have not made the decisions necessary to end the historical and systemic violations of economic, cultural, civil, social, and political rights of huge sectors of humanity who struggle, survive, and die in varying conditions of impoverishment and repression. It is also in violation of international human rights law. Governments, however, are not the only ones to blame. Other powerful political and economic actors, including intergovernmental financial and commercial institutions such as the World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Trade Organization (WTO), and ‘private’ entities, such as multinational companies, banks, and financial investment institutions, are often just as guilty as states, if not more so in certain cases. Human rights activists should increasingly focus their attention on all rights and all actors, not just a limited few.

Impoverishment Is Not ‘God-given’ or Natural

Since World War II, systematic violations of overlapping human rights—in the form of malnutrition, hunger, and disease—have killed many more people than a combination of all the wars and repressive regimes that have violated political and civil rights. According to the 1997 Human Development Report, “17 million people in developing countries die each year from such curable infectious and parasitic diseases as diarrhea, measles, malaria, and tuberculosis.”¹ Many more people struggle and survive in subsistence conditions. Even by World Bank estimates, over 3 billion people ‘survive’ on a daily income of US \$2 or less.²

Yet death and suffering due to impoverishment have rarely been investigated, analyzed, or denounced as human rights violations that result from political, legal, and economic decisions made by a host of national and global actors. Acting with (sometimes complete) impunity, many governments and other powerful groups deny any responsibility for the impoverishment to which they contribute, directly or indirectly. Intergovernmental institutions such as the WB and IMF argue that their economic development policies and programs have nothing to do with politics, human rights, or the environment. This is false. Economics and development work have *everything* to do with human rights, political decision-making, and the environment.

All Rights

Grahame Russell is co-director of Rights Action, with offices in Guatemala City, Washington D.C., and Toronto (Canada). Rights Action raises funds for community development and human rights projects in Southern Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras, and educates and advocates about global development and human rights issues. They can be contacted at info@rightsaction.org. More information is available online at www.rightsaction.org.

Until recently, most human rights work has focused on a limited range of political and civil rights to the exclusion of other political and civil rights, and of virtually all economic, social, and cultural rights.³ This work has largely ignored the fact that international human rights law enshrines a broad range of rights without necessarily assigning greater value to some than others. Much human rights work has avoided analyzing and denouncing the vicious cycle that often exists between repression, or systematic violations of certain political and civil rights, and impoverishment, or overlapping violations of numerous rights. An all-too-common scenario is that impoverished people educate themselves about their rights. They then organize and work to end the systemic rights violations that characterize their lives. The state, often with the support of private sector interests and foreign governments, responds with repression in order to preserve the undemocratic, unjust status quo.

While human rights groups may investigate and denounce the use of repression, they have rarely investigated and denounced prior economic, social, and cultural rights violations or the wide range of actors who contribute to these violations. While governments and entities such as the WB and IMF lament social upheaval and repression, they have refused to accept any responsibility for the links between the economic development policies that perpetuate and worsen impoverishment, and the resultant repression.

All Actors

Most human rights work has been aimed at holding only states accountable for rights violations—political and civil, for the most part—that occur within their borders. Yet the actions of other states, as well as interstate and private actors, often contribute directly and indirectly to human and environmental rights violations, both in their home countries and abroad. States can and should be held responsible for repression in a second country when the first state is providing funds, weaponry, and/or training to repressive police, military, and paramilitary forces in nations where violations of political and civil rights occur. Agencies such as the IMF, WTO, and WB contribute to rights violations when they oblige governments of dependent, perhaps indebted nations, to impose political, legal, and economic programs in their countries that merely perpetuate or increase violations of the rights of their own citizens. Private actors such as multinational banks and companies also undermine respect for rights around the world, whether by providing support to repressive regimes or by violating labor and environmental rights in their operations.

Holding other political and economic actors accountable does not negate the responsibility of governments and other local actors, but rather focuses attention on and apportions responsibility to all actors who contribute directly and indirectly to violations. Moreover, while attention must be focused on the policies and programs of the WB, WTO, and IMF, the governments of the U.S., Japan, Britain, France, Germany, Canada, and Italy, among other nations, deserve similar scrutiny because they actually set the policies of the

intergovernmental institutions. There is clearly an ‘agency’ relationship between these institutions and the major power-holding, decision-making nations that determine their policies and actions.

A Rights Approach to Impoverishment and Repression: Entitlements and Accountability

All persons are entitled to full respect of all their rights: they have the right *not* to live, survive, and die in impoverishment, let alone under conditions of repression. The other side of this equation is that all governments and other powerful actors have obligations with respect to what they do: they must be held accountable for policies and actions that contribute to rights violations and environmental destruction.

A human rights approach to impoverishment and repression makes it clear that rights violations are neither inevitable nor natural, but arise from the deliberate policies and actions of a wide range of local, national, and international actors. In its demand for accountability, the human rights movement exposes the hidden priorities and power structures that underlie and lead to violations. Thus, addressing all rights in terms of their economic, political, and social contexts, and holding all actors accountable, constitute critical steps towards challenging the conditions that create and tolerate impoverishment and repression across the globe.⁴

Notes

¹ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 1997* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 28.

² *La Jornada*, 2 February 1998, 18.

³ In recent years, women and indigenous peoples have made significant advances in having systemic violations addressed (albeit not yet fully or properly) by a growing range of human rights institutions. Women's and indigenous organizations put forward important critiques of the narrow focus of traditional human rights work, pushing it to overcome biases and move towards addressing ‘all actors,’ and ‘all rights.’

⁴ This paragraph is adapted from “Unleashing Human Rights to Address Global Poverty,” by Chris Jochnick, legal director of Center for Economic and Social Rights (www.cesr.org).