



THE GLOBAL CRISIS OF VIOLENCE

COMMON PROBLEMS, UNIVERSAL CAUSES, SHARED SOLUTIONS

*Poverty:
Ensuring Enough for Everyone*



One in a series of six
briefing papers produced
by the Violence and
Development Project.

*The Violence and Development Project is a collaboration between
the National Association of Social Workers, the Council on Social Work Education,
the Benton Foundation and the U.S. Agency for International Development.*

OFFICE OF PEACE AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

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Poverty: Ensuring Enough for Everyone

Over the past 50 years, many gains have been made in raising the standard of living for people around the globe. Nevertheless, poverty remains ubiquitous:

- One-fifth of all human beings live in absolute poverty, without adequate food, clothing, and shelter.¹
- Fifteen percent of people in the U.S. — one of the most affluent countries in the world — live below the poverty line.²
- More than one-third of the people in the global South live below the poverty line. More than one billion survive on a daily income of less than \$1.³

Despite efforts to close the gap between rich and poor, inequities persist. Between 1960 and 1991, the share of world income for the richest 20 percent of the global population increased from 70 percent to 85 percent. During the same time period, the already meager share of world income for the poorest 20 percent of the global population declined from 2.3 percent to 1.4 percent.⁴ Discrepancies in wealth between the global North and the global South are equally striking. Wealthy nations in general have almost tripled their per capita income since 1950. In contrast, per capita income for the poorest countries — home to 77 percent of the global population — has stagnated.⁵

Poverty and inequity are passive forms of violence which impede human development.⁶ Gandhi characterized poverty as the worst form of violence.⁷ In

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care, and necessary social services.”

— Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25

the following pages, we will examine the conditions and consequences of poverty, both at home and abroad. We will look at the connections between poverty, violence, and development. And we will consider some initiatives designed to break the poverty trap.

Poverty Defined

“Absolute poverty” refers to the inability to obtain the goods and services needed to meet socially defined minimum needs. In the U.S., the official government measure of absolute poverty is based upon the minimum amount of money required annually to sustain a family (estimated to be roughly \$13,000 for a family of four).⁸

According to a “relative” definition of poverty, a person is poor when his or her income is significantly less than the average income of the general population. The relative definition focuses on inequality of incomes rather than absolute needs.⁹

What Causes Poverty?

Despite an historic tendency to blame poor people for their problems, the vast majority of people do not choose to be poor. Rather, poverty around the globe results from many factors, among them:

- Lack of access to economic “building blocks” such as land, seeds, water, tools, training, and education
- Unemployment or underemployment
- Inequitable distribution of global resources, including food
- Inadequate government support for needed social supports
- Discrimination against ethnic and racial minorities and women, who are disproportionately represented among the poor
- War and military spending, which drains limited resources that could be used for human development

There are considerable differences between the poverty conditions faced by people in the industrialized global North and the mass poverty experienced by people in the global South. But poor people worldwide have one thing in common: they are not receiving sufficient support. Most people have an inflated idea of how much help the U.S. government is giving the poor. This was reflected in a recent survey of 1,200 U.S. voters, in which 19 percent cited welfare as the biggest item in the federal budget, and 27 percent cited foreign aid. In reality, welfare was only one percent of the federal budget in 1992 and foreign aid was even less than that.¹⁰

The Violence and Development Project

The Violence and Development Project, a collaboration between the National Association of Social Workers, the Council on Social Work Education, and the Benton Foundation, aims to educate social work professionals about the parallel conditions of violence in the U.S. and less economically developed countries. To this end, the project, with the help of funding from the United States Agency for International Development has prepared a series of six papers focusing on violence as a global affliction and sustainable human development as a global antidote.

In this series, we will address the following questions:

- What is the interrelationship between violence and related problems in the U.S. and less developed nations?
- What do social workers know about these problems, and what is the role of social workers in solving the global problem of violence?
- What can we learn from past and current international development efforts of the U.S. government and non-governmental development agencies?

This paper provides an overview of the connections between violence and development. The remaining papers in this series will focus on violence in relationship to five sub-themes: substance abuse, women and children, ethnicity, poverty, and trauma.

Key Concepts

Sustainable Human Development

The term development may be defined as "meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to fulfill their aspirations for a better life." According to this broad definition, development focuses on fostering economic opportunity, equity, human rights, dignity, democracy, peace, and spiritual and emotional well-being.¹

Social workers will readily understand this concept, for it is what they strive to do everyday in their work with individuals, families, communities and organizations. In this series, however, we will be examining development from a national and international perspective.

Beginning in the late 1980s, a new consensus emerged within the international development community about how to best achieve long-lasting, positive change within poor countries. The agreed-upon strategy, known as sustainable human development, is based on these underlying principles:

- Meeting basic human needs for food, clean water, shelter, health care and education.
- Expanding economic opportunities for people, especially the poor, to increase their productivity and earning capacity in ways that are environmentally, economically and socially viable over the long-term.
- Protecting the environment by managing natural resources in ways that take into account the needs of current and future generations.
- Promoting democratic participation, especially by poor women and men, in economic and political decisions that affect their lives.
- Encouraging adherence to internationally recognized human rights standards.²

The International Development Community

The United States, through the federal office called the Agency for International Development, spent slightly less than one percent of the annual national budget, or \$14 billion, on foreign assistance in 1994. Of this money, 15 percent, or \$2.1 billion, went to fund projects to help people in poor countries better their lives. Other monies went toward military and security aid; food, exports, and other economic aid; and emergency humanitarian assistance.³

In addition to federal funds, there are several hundred U.S.-based charitable international development organizations, called private voluntary organizations (PVOs) or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These organizations receive an estimated \$4.5 billion a year from individuals and businesses that goes to support relief and development efforts in the poorest nations of the world. Some of the better known of these organizations are Save the Children, CARE, Oxfam and the American Red Cross.⁴

Global North/Global South

The term global North refers to the world's industrialized, wealthy countries, while the term global South refers to the world's poor nations. These terms are merely descriptive, as the split between rich and poor nations does not fall along strict geographic lines.

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According to per capita gross national product figures from the World Bank, there are 24 high-income countries, with 15% of the world's people, including the United States, Switzerland and Japan. Sixty-three countries, containing 29% of the population make up the middle-income category, which includes the Philippines, Romania, and Iran. The low-income sector, with a total of 45 countries and 56% of the world's population, includes Guatemala, Somalia, and Bangladesh.⁵

Violence

Violence may be broadly defined as an act or situation that harms the health and/or well being of oneself or others. Violence includes both direct attacks on a person's physical and psychological integrity, and destructive acts that do not involve a direct relationship between victims and the institution or person responsible for the harm.⁶

One of the goals of this project is to expand the common perception of violence to include such problems as racism, sexism, poverty, and hunger. These social ills grow out of institutions, governments, and economic structures that encourage the domination of certain groups of people over other groups, perpetuating unequal access to wealth and other resources. Inequities, which may be based on class, race, gender, or ethnicity, are often enforced through the use of violence by police forces, government troops or their proxies, foreign powers, and other forms of sanctioned militarism.

Threats to personal security and social stability come

from several sources. Among them: social and economic systems (deprivation, lack of access, oppression); the state (repression, torture, police brutality or inaction); other states (colonization, war); other groups of people (civil war, ethnic conflict, discrimination, hate crimes); and individuals or gangs (homicide, muggings). Violence may be directed against specific groups such as women (rape, domestic violence, lack of access to better education or jobs); children (child abuse, neglect); and ethnic populations (genocide, hate crimes, discrimination), or against the self (suicide, substance abuse).

Among the underlying principles of the Violence and Development Project is that long-term solutions to violence must include permanent changes in structural and institutional systems that give rise to deprivation and oppression and create a world of haves and have-nots.

NOTES (pp. 3-4)

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The following chart lays out three tiers of violence. These tiers form an intractable cycle, each feeding upon the other.

Structural	Institutional	Personal
Avoidable deprivations built into the structure of society based on norms and traditions that subjugate one group in favor of another (poverty, hunger)	Harmful acts by organizations and institutions (oppression, unequal treatment under the law, police brutality, torture)	Interpersonal acts of violence against persons or property (rape, murder, muggings)
	Official forms of violence (state repression, war and invasion)	Harmful acts against self (alcohol, drug abuse, suicide)
		Acts by organized groups or mobs (hate crimes, looting, rioting) ⁷

Poverty, Violence, and Development: Making Connections

“Poverty is violence—violence against people. Physical, mental, psychological, intellectual, emotional, social, legal, political, you-name-it violence. It is ugly and angry and everywhere.”¹¹ —N. Lourie

Poverty affects human health.

Worldwide, threats to health security are typically greater for the poorest people, particularly children in rural areas. In the global South, an estimated 17 million people die from infectious and parasitic diseases each year: most of these deaths are linked with poor nutrition and unsafe living conditions, including polluted water.¹²

Statistics on health care are also bleak. There is but one doctor for every 7,000 people in the global South — versus one doctor for every 400 people in the more prosperous global North. Yet, despite the fact that people in the global North are more likely to have access to health care than people elsewhere, 39 million low-income Americans still did not have health insurance in 1992—up from 35 million in 1989.¹³

Poverty impedes child development.

According to the United Nations, in the global South:

- Thirteen million children under five die each year from easily preventable diseases and malnutrition.
- An estimated 130 million children, almost two-thirds of them girls, lack access to primary education.
- An estimated 200 million youngsters are forced to work for their own or their families’ survival, often under dangerous and exploitative conditions.¹⁴

Poverty takes its toll on children in the U.S. as well:

“Across an astonishing range of outcomes—including premature death, stunted growth, physical impairment, injury, learning disability, low educational achievement, school failure, abuse and neglect,

extreme behavioral problems, and delinquency — poor children fare worse than children who grow up in families that are able to meet their basic needs.”¹⁵

—*The Children’s Defense Fund*

Poverty breeds shame, fear, and anger. Economic hardship contributes to parental stress and depression. “A Mother’s Testimony”, below, is one mother’s account of the horrible effects of poverty.

Poverty contributes to violence. Juvenile crime and violence are highly correlated with poverty and other factors related to underdevelopment including unemployment and inadequate education and social services.¹⁷ The same holds true for adult crime and violence. “Despite some findings to the contrary, a significant correlation has been shown to exist among societal inequality, discrimination, and homicide. Among all groups

in the U.S., regardless of race, homicide is found disproportionately among the lowest socioeconomic groups.”¹⁸ In Washington, D.C., for example, the poorest part of the city has a violent crime rate 13 times higher than the wealthiest part.¹⁹

Poverty and inequity set the stage for ethnic conflict as well. Contrary to widespread belief, violence does not spring naturally from ethnic differences:

“Modern states...create an economic barrier between mainstream populations—the rich and the educated—and ethnic populations—the poor and the marginalized. The ensuing power struggles generate the sorts of violent civil conflict that many observers attribute to some sort of natural hostility. But (different ethnic groups) are not predetermined enemies, and when these peoples have adequate space

A Mother’s Testimony

Susan was raised in poverty and I am still learning the many ways it hurt her. I am her mother. Susan was born two weeks after my eighteenth birthday and by the time she was 12 we had moved more than 30 times, always one step ahead of or behind the eviction notices, gas and light disconnect notices, and various other bills haunting our mailbox. We laughed a lot and tried to make it an adventure, like the time she was six and the two of us had to move our bed across town on a bus.

But then I would cry and cry and cry for days at a time. Being poor made me crazy, and Susan learned to be my support, caretaker, and defender before she could read.

A few times I tried to kill myself out of fear and shame at not being able to keep a roof over our heads, out of anger over not being able to keep a job and needing to return over and over again to welfare, out of despera-

tion whenever the welfare department would cut off my eligibility by mistake.

Poverty was more than not having enough. It was about not having any control over the most intimate parts of our lives, and, for me, about feeling shame, fear, and anger all the time. After more than 20 low-wage jobs, I enrolled in college when Susan was eight. A few years later we received a rent subsidy which allowed us to stay in one place. Things got a bit better. For the first time in either of our lives, we had community, permanent friends, and a sense of belonging. Today, Susan and I are successful professionals, and best friends. It didn’t take much: a rent subsidy, a generous state university admissions policy, and access to mental health services. The rest we did on our own.

—“Anne,” an employment training program manager in Oregon¹⁶

and autonomy, their basic capacity for respect and problem-solving will flourish.”²⁰ — E. Boulding

Inadequate and ineffective development contributes to poverty. In the 1950s and 1960s, several nations in the global South implemented ambitious development programs using Western technology and aid. Due to poor planning, many of these programs only served to further marginalize struggling people. When mechanized farm technology, designed to increase crop yields, was introduced in Iran, for example, scores of laborers were no longer needed. They were forced to migrate to overcrowded cities in search of work, where they found little work or other services.²¹

Industry initiatives in poor countries that are motivated by profit alone, and that confer value on individuals only to the extent that they produce profit, merely exploit the very people who should benefit from them.²² Box 2 highlights the negative effects of unjust development on two families, one in the U.S., the other in the global South.

Summarizing the North/South Poverty Link. The global North and the global South are linked in several ways. For example:

1. Keeping wages suppressed in the

BOX 1 *The Green Belt Movement*

In 1977, Wangari Maathai went into her backyard in Kenya and planted seven small trees. “I realized that when you talk about the problems, you tend to make people feel that there is nothing they can do. To break that cycle, one has to start with a positive step. Planting a tree is very simple — something positive that anybody can do.”

As a member of the National Council of Women of Kenya, Maathai enlisted some women farmers to plant more trees. In the beginning, Mobil Oil provided funding for tree nurseries. Now the funding comes from non-profit organizations and in the form of small donations from women all over the world. The nurseries that supply the indigenous trees are located

in rural areas where they provide jobs for local people who then train other local people how to grow and plant them.

People not only get the benefit of the trees and earn a living, but they take responsibility for their environment and themselves. The Green Belt Movement has also grown to include training for women in nutrition and family planning, as well as expanding its agenda to challenge oppressive social institutions.

Maathai says, “The Green Belt Movement is a movement to empower people, to raise their consciousness, to give them hope. It shows them that the power to change their environment is within themselves, and within their own capacities.”²⁴

South causes companies to relocate jobs from high-wage countries like the U.S. to developing countries. The result: unemployment at home and exploitation of workers in the South.

2. Poverty in the global South forces people to migrate to prosperous countries in search of jobs and other op-

portunities. Immigrants often face racism and ethnic violence in their adopted countries, particularly when they settle in financially stretched communities. Many families are separated in the process of migrating, creating further isolation for newcomers.

3. Countries desperate to pay off their debts pillage their natural resources to gain new income, promoting global warming and water pollution.²⁵

BOX 2

Two Families Struggle with Poverty

Randy Conway is 44 years old and lives with his wife and three children in the small town of Mount Vernon, Missouri. Randy worked 20 years in a Zenith factory making televisions. Zenith had moved from the northern U.S. to Missouri in 1976, in search of workers willing to toil for lower wages and without the benefit of trade unions. By 1992, Randy was making \$11 per hour, but Zenith moved 20,000 of its U.S. jobs to Mexico, including most of its jobs in Missouri. Randy Conway

is now out of work. Zenith spokesman John Taylor admits that “the wage structure in Mexico is a primary reason for our relocation there.”

Angelica Hernandez has worked in Zenith’s Reynosa, Mexico factory since 1988. She works in a noisy plant with hazardous chemicals all around and takes home \$35 for a 48-hour week. Angelica, her husband and their seven children live in a 12 by 18 foot, dirt-floor shack that has no electricity and no running water.²³

Alleviating Poverty through Sustainable Human Development

Three interrelated strategies—reducing poverty, creating employment, and increasing social integration—are at the core of sustainable human development. These strategies are consistent with principles embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The United Nations Development Program recommends that countries pursue the following measures to alleviate poverty:

- Provide poor people with access to basic services, such as health care, housing, and clean water
- Invest in education, training, and skill development, especially for women
- Ensure equal access to land, agricultural resources, credit, and information
- Involve the poor in the design of poverty reduction strategies
- Create a market environment that facilitates new employment opportunities
- Guarantee basic legal rights for all
- Implement anti-discrimination measures and apply stiff penalties for violations
- Support grassroots organizations that provide citizens with direct participation in decision making²⁶

Communities mobilize to tackle poverty. Change is happening in local communities around the world as women's groups, peasant groups, religious organizations, consumer advocates, and environmental protection societies work to break the poverty trap.²⁷

Box 1 describes how the actions of one individual can evolve into a community-wide development initiative that empowers people to reduce poverty.

The role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Thousands of NGOs around the world are playing an important role in addressing poverty and related problems through citizen empowerment and international advocacy for the rights of the marginalized. Vital lessons can be learned from NGO development approaches that encourage communities to take control of their futures.²⁸ In Tanzania, for example, the Community Development Trust Fund (CDTF) helped members of a poor village to establish their own health clinic, encouraging residents' participation in all phases of the project.²⁹

Grassroots economic alternatives. A new wave of grassroots organizations in the global South and in the U.S. are redefining economic development to in-

“Poverty anywhere is a threat to prosperity everywhere.”

— Human Development Report, 1993

corporate principles of equity, democratic participation, and environmental sustainability.³⁰

- **Co-ops.** In countries as diverse as Zimbabwe and Mexico, family farmers have formed cooperatives to produce and market their products. In the mountains of Mexico's Guerrero province, for example, campesinos have organized a regional alliance of co-ops to manage their coffee and honey exports.³¹
- **Revolving credit.** Most of the world's poor suffer from lack of access to credit. Many groups have been pooling and lending capital to the poor to enable them to start a small business or to improve farming practices.³²

Credit For All

Study after study on credit schemes for the poor confirm that the poor are creditworthy:

- The poor can save, even if only a little.
- The poor are very reliable borrowers. Repayment rates of 90% and more are not rare.
- The poor are able and willing to pay market interest rates, so that credit schemes for the poor stand a good chance of becoming viable, self-financing undertakings.
- The reason credit schemes for the poor work is that they significantly improve the incomes of the poor—typically by more than 20%, and at times by more than 100%³³

What You Can Do

- Focus on development needs identified by the communities in which you work. Take advantage of existing community structures and skills to combat poverty and exploitation.
- Learn about the outcome of the U.N. **World Summit for Social Development**, held in Copenhagen, Denmark on March 6–12, 1995. To receive information on the Declaration and the Program of Action, contact: The International Council on Social Welfare, ICSW Information, Lilian Chatterjee, Editor, 380 St. Antoine St., West, Suite 3200 Montreal, Quebec, Canada H2Z 3X7 tel: 1/514/287-3280, fax: 1/514/987-1567
- Learn about the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Adopted by the UN in 1948, the Declaration was the first statement on the fundamental rights of all human beings. Its provisions have been incorporated into the laws and constitutions of many countries.
- Organize a teach-in on the politics of welfare reform at your college or university. One such event took place at Fordham University Graduate School in June 1994. Its goals: to protest recent welfare reform proposals that blame social problems on poor families, to dispel myths about the current welfare reform debate, and to call for change.
- Learn about structural adjustment programs and their consequences. A good place to start is to read *50 Years is Enough: The Case Against the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund* (Kevin Danaher, ed., Boston, MA: South End Press, 1994).

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- InterAction, American Council for Voluntary International Action**, 1717 Massachusetts Ave. NW, 8th floor, Washington, DC 20036, 202/667-8227.
- An umbrella organization for several hundred international development agencies addressing the issue of poverty around the world.*

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