

UN Human Development Report pleads for reform as poverty and misery deepen

By Peter Daniels
16 September 2005

The latest Human Development Report issued by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) documents the growing inequality and absolute decline in living standards and social conditions in large areas of the world.

In the words of Kevin Watkins, head of the UNDP's Human Development Report Office, the latest survey of 177 countries (175 UN members, plus Hong Kong and occupied Palestine) "shows in clear, cold numbers that many countries are not only failing to progress, but are actually slipping backwards, and they will continue on that downhill path unless the international community steps in to help with more resources and new policies."

Eighteen countries, including 12 in sub-Saharan Africa, and 6 former constituent republics of the Soviet Union, have a "Human Development Index" (HDI) today that is lower than it was in 1990, when the Index, which combines data on life expectancy, educational attainment and real income to arrive at an overall measure of social well-being, was developed and published in the first of the Human Development Reports.

The devastation in sub-Saharan Africa is closely related to the unchecked and enormous HIV infection rates in much of the region. As the report points out, life expectancy in France fell by about 16 years as a result of the massive casualties of the First World War nine decades ago. By comparison, as a result of AIDS, the nation of Botswana is looking today at a fall in life expectancy of 31 years. Someone living in Zambia has less chance of attaining 30 years of age today than someone born in England in 1840. South Africa has fallen 35 places since 1990 in the ranking of countries based on their HDI. Even though life-saving therapy has existed for more than a decade and has saved the lives of many in the richer countries, only 4 percent of those suffering from HIV infection are receiving this therapy in the rest of the world.

Falling life expectancy is also contributing to the absolute decline in conditions in Russia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, where the collapse of the Soviet Union has produced an obscene gulf between rich and poor, along with the

elimination of much of the social safety net, including adequate health care, for the masses of working people.

The 18 countries that have fallen back in absolute terms are home to 460 million people. But they are only the sharpest expression of the social misery that is inseparably connected with the current stage of the capitalist globalization of production and the growing gulf it is creating between rich and poor countries as well as within national borders.

The report uses the example of last year's devastating tsunami that killed some 300,000 people to underscore the human cost of poverty. Every year, 10.7 million children die before their fifth birthday. "Every hour more than 1,200 children die away from the glare of media attention," the authors write. "This is equivalent to three tsunamis a month, every month, hitting the world's most vulnerable citizens—its children. The causes of death will vary, but the overwhelming majority can be traced to a single pathology: poverty."

The world's richest 500 individuals together have an income that is greater than the world's poorest 416 million. Using a slightly different measure, a few years ago it was reported that the world's 358 billionaires controlled assets (a wider measure of their power than income alone) greater than those of 2.3 billion people, 45 percent of the world's population. Either figure will do as a rough guide to the colossal and growing social inequality that characterizes world capitalism today.

While raising the alarm about poverty and child mortality, the authors of the report make the dubious claim that "overall global trends are positive." They point to China and India, in particular, where the harnessing of cheap labor has produced high economic growth rates, a rapid increase in wealth for the native capitalist class and some improvements for very small sections of the broader working population. Even here, however, they are forced to acknowledge that growing inequality means that economic growth masks growing misery for millions.

"Income inequality is increasing in countries that account

for more than 80 percent of the world's population," according to the report. The so-called "success stories" of globalization are characterized in most cases, in fact, by worsening conditions for a majority of the population, a state of affairs that finds only the most preliminary political expression in the growth of illegal protests in China, for instance, and last year's election that removed the BJP government in India.

Very much setting the pace for growing inequality is the United States. The report explains that "health outcomes in the United States, the world's richest country, reflect deep inequalities based on wealth and race." One of the advantages of the methodology used to compute the Human Development Index is that it goes deeper than the numbers of gross national product or gross national income alone, statistics that often do not reveal the extent of poverty and other social problems. The UN Development Program report includes what it calls a "human poverty index" for the 20 wealthiest countries, to "better reflect the extent of human deprivation that still exists" among the populations of these major economic powers.

Not surprisingly, by this measure, the US ranks next to last among the top 20, only ahead of Italy. On such indices as life expectancy, and especially infant mortality, the world's "sole superpower" lags significantly behind many other countries.

The meaning of the "poverty index" has, moreover, just been spelled out in New Orleans and the adjoining Gulf Coast of the US. The hurricane disaster that has killed thousands and uprooted as many as 1 million people shows what it means to be one of the tens of millions of poor in the world's richest country.

This year's Human Development Report is also noteworthy because it appeared only days before the opening of the UN summit, which this year was supposed to review progress or lack thereof on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to reduce poverty and inequality that were established by the Millennium Declaration signed by all UN members five years ago. The MDGs include specific targets, among them halving extreme poverty, providing an education for all the world's children, and slashing child mortality and infectious disease. The targets were to be met by 2015.

It is becoming harder and harder to pretend that the MDGs, modest to begin with, can be met by the target date. As the report indicates, "the overall report card on progress makes for depressing reading...the promise to the world's poor is being broken."

The Human Development Report authors address themselves to the leaders of world imperialism—Washington in particular—to argue that urgent measures are needed

against poverty and inequality, in their own self-interest. "Extending opportunities for people in poor countries to lead long and healthy lives, to get their children a decent education and to escape poverty will...help build shared prosperity and strengthen our collective security," they write. "In our interconnected world a future built on the foundations of mass poverty in the midst of plenty is economically inefficient, politically unsustainable and morally indefensible." The implication is fairly clear: revolutionary explosions can be expected if measures are not taken.

The report therefore calls for an increase in development aid, to 0.7 percent of gross national incomes, compared to a current percentage of 0.25 for the wealthy nations and 0.15 percent for the US. It also repeats the call for a lowering of barriers to exports from the poor countries.

The chance that even these modest proposals will be favorably acted on at the UN summit is nil. Washington has already taken measures to change the subject. The report just issued by former US Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker, harshly criticizing the administration of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in connection with the so-called oil-for-food scandal, serves the purpose of putting critics of the Bush Administration on the defensive. At the same time, newly appointed US Ambassador to the UN John Bolton has moved into action to water down the Millennium Goals even further, to the point of virtual irrelevance.

Notwithstanding the obviously limited nature of the UN report's prescriptions, its "clear, cold numbers" have the salutary effect of pointing to the reality of the global crisis. The cause of global poverty and growing inequality is the capitalist system itself. The only way to fight the misery outlined in the Human Development Report is through the building of an international movement that unites the masses of working people and oppressed masses all over the world in the struggle for socialism.

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