

Interview to Maria Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona, UN Independent Expert on the question of human rights and extreme poverty,  
Aula Magna, Palazzo del Bo, University of Padua, 10 December 2010.

Transcription:

I think one of the points we should look at now, because it has a lot of political momentum, is the issue of the MDGs.

The MDGs were adopted in 2010, in order to eradicate extreme poverty and to improve the life of many people. Now there are only five years to go to the term in which MDG should be comply with and we have seen that actually governments have failed.

If we look at the aggregate numbers it is true that the number of people living in poverty has decreased, this is mainly due to the situation of China and India, so actually, if we take China, the progress made in China and India out, what we see is that the number of people living in poverty in the world has incremented and now, with the crisis, it is quite likely, after we had some measures, it is going to increment more.

The most progressive estimate consider now that after 2007 until now more then 116 million people have fallen into poverty, so this is a major global problem.

The MDGs are very limited, they don't take into account human rights, so in the five years to come there are two thinkgs to do, in my opinion:

I mean, the governments should increase their political will to comply with MDGs to decrease poverty in the world, and on the other hand it is important to incorporate a human right discourse in the MDGs.

The truth is that when the Millennium Declaration, that is the framework in which the Millennium Development Goals, was adopted, included human rights, but then we lost them in the specific MDGs, so we have to strenghten otherwise we're not going to have sustainable and equitable achievement and progress in the world.

I honestly think that we have to change our own consciousness about how we see and address poverty.

Those who are better off, we tend to have several prejudice against the poor and they are so entrenched in our mind, so often when we have programmes, for example, that give cash to those living in poverty the general reaction is that they don't deserve it, that they're going to drink their money, that they're lazy, so this type of programme does not receive a lot of support from the political elite, but actually

simultaneously we have seen in the recent decades is what we can call a "quiet revolution" in development, in which increasingly we have seen more what is called cash-transfer programmes, the direct transfer of cash to families living in poverty in order to allow them to satisfy their basic needs and at the same time be able to have human capacities for their children, so they can escape poverty.

There are extensive programmes like "Bolsa de familia" in Brasil that is considered like the flagship programme that has dimished poverty and inequality in the country, but we have seen those also in India, in Bangladesh, also now in several Subsaharian African countries and South-east Asian countries.

The interesting point with this programme is that when you give direct cash to families that are incapacitated to overcome poverty you lift them and you allow them to improve their situation.

Unfortunately because of all this prejudice against the poor sometimes these programmes do not receive the political support that is necessary to expand them and make a real change, and this is just one example.

We really need to work on changing our own mindsets about poverty. As I mentioned before, it's quite interesting that in European countries the perception of people about poverty is: first, they have bad luck, second, they're lazy or lack of political will, third, they do not deserve it.

Also we still have a group that consider poverty as inevitable and this is quite disconcerting in rich countries, in wealthy countries like European countries, because poverty is not a problem of progress, it is the consequence of political choices and policy measures, that may come from the past, but they're affecting a group of people and avoiding them to go out of poverty.

I'm a human rights lawyer, I'm a lawyer from Chile, I started working on issues of poverty since very early age at the community level then I linked this motivation toward people living in poverty, with academic studies, so I studied International law I did my Ph. D. in International Human rights law, as well, but always working with NGOs that promote economic, social and cultural rights and issues of overcoming poverty, fighting poverty.

In 2008, when the system for special procedures changed and it became an open system, a coalition of NGOs put forward my name and then I was appointed, so my name was put forward independently and it was the first time in 2008 when the election of the UN special procedures became a public process, in which all CVs and the candidates were made public and NGOs started putting a lot of pressure also to have certain candidates.

Well, I'm a lawyer but I think that, unfortunately, in the international human rights movement there are too many

lawyers and issues like poverty, but also issues of other rights (torture, disappearances, etc) must be addressed from a multidisciplinary perspective, in a way, I hope, where the human rights movement, if we can call it that way, will be more open to different disciplines in which lawyers will not dominate.

In particular issues of poverty, development or torture, disappearances, we need sociologists, we need anthropologists, we need people who have studied public policies, we need doctors to add their own knowledge, their own ambition to the movement.

To be honest, and quite frankly, I don't know the specific programmes of the University (of Padua) but what I do know and I think this is very good impact of the programme is that within the international organisations I quite often find Italians that have studied here and this is quite impressive.

To give an example: my assistant at the Office for the High Commission on human rights studied here, this programme it's of course one of the oldest human rights programme in Europe and it's very well known, and actually the alumni from this programme, you find them doing the real work, so I think that is a very good example of the quality of the programme.

Thank you