

INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE ERADICATION OF POVERTY AND COVID-19: IS IT REALLY AN UNPRECEDENTED TIME?

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We are all tired of hearing the term “unprecedented times” after months of fighting this pandemic with all its “unprecedented” challenges. However, can all the challenges Covid-19 imposed on people worldwide really be fairly characterized as “unprecedented”?

October 17th marked the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, an international observance day¹ declared by the United Nations in its resolution 47/197² as an official day to raise awareness on poverty and call for stricter eradication measures from governments worldwide.

Although the declaration was made in 1993 to address the alarming rates³ of poverty worldwide when signatories of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights⁴ declared poverty as a human rights violation, we still observed its 27th anniversary⁵ while witnessing the same rates, if not higher.

People living in poverty not only suffer from economic hardships but are also stripped away from the right to live in dignity by lacking basic capabilities and essential resources. The implications of poverty reach different aspects⁶ of their lives, directly or indirectly, including unsafe housing, limited access to health care, lack of nutritional food, lack of sanitation, and more. Not to mention the effects high rates of poverty have on national and international levels such as dying economies, poor quality of education and quality of healthcare, and, ultimately, world hunger.

According to the United Nations,⁷ Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa have the highest number of people living under the poverty line,⁸ with “736 million people lived below the international poverty line [of \$1.90 a day in 2015].”⁹ This means that around 10% of the world’s population is fighting poverty daily.¹⁰ Unfortunately, children are not exempt from such alarming rates. In fact, according to UNICEF,¹¹ around 63 million children worldwide live in poverty, with around 385 million living in extreme poverty. Even in the wealthiest countries, “one in seven children still live in poverty.”¹²

These numbers reflect a longstanding disaster that countries, including developing nations, have been facing for centuries. There is no dispute that countries have come so far¹³ in recognizing that poverty is a worldwide concern that requires immediate actions. However, there is still so much to be done to fully eradicate the problem. While, as an international community, we are doing a lot, so rapidly, in terms of technological and economic developments, we are running short in eliminating the harsh reality for communities living in poverty who are watching such growth and wealth pass them by.

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¹ See generally *United Nations Observances*, U.N., <https://www.un.org/en/sections/observances/united-nations-observances/> (last visited Sept. 27, 2021).

² G.A. Res. 47/197 (Mar. 13, 1993).

³ Manish Bapna & Janet Ranganathan, *Rural Share of Poverty, 1993 and 2002*, WORLD RESOURCE INST. (July 24, 2008), <https://www.wri.org/data/rural-share-poverty-1993-and-2002>.

⁴ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, G.A. Res 217A (III), UNGAOR, 3rd Sess. Supp. No. 13, U.N. Doc. A/810 (1948).

⁵ *International Day for the Eradication of Poverty 17 October*, U.N., <https://www.un.org/en/observances/day-for-eradicating-poverty> (last visited Sept. 27, 2021).

⁶ *Effects of Poverty on Health, Children & Society*, HABITAT HUMAN., <https://www.habitatforhumanity.org.uk/what-we-do/building-and-renovating-homes/effects-of-poverty/> (last visited Sept. 27, 2021).

⁷ *International Day for the Eradication of Poverty 17 October*, *supra* note 5.

⁸ Francisco Ferreira et al., *The International Poverty Line Has Just Been Raised to \$1.90 a Day, But Global Poverty is Basically Unchanged. How is That Even Possible?*, WORLD BANK (Oct. 4, 2015), <https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/international-poverty-line-has-just-been-raised-190-day-global-poverty-basically-unchanged-how-even>.

⁹ *Ending Poverty*, U.N., <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/ending-poverty> (last visited Sept. 27, 2021).

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Child Poverty*, UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/social-policy/child-poverty> (last visited Sept. 27, 2021).

¹² *Id.*

¹³ David Rosnick, *A History of Poverty Worldwide*, CEPR (May 21, 2019), <https://cepr.shorthandstories.com/history-poverty/>.

Nevertheless, the responsibility to reach such a goal has increased even more for all countries today with this pandemic. Using the World Poverty Clock,¹⁴ experts estimated¹⁵ that 690 million people would likely be living under poverty lines this year, under poverty lines this year, which is a significant increase from their pre-Covid estimate of 640 million people. Additionally, rates of extreme poverty worldwide will rise to 50 million people in 2020, another significant increase compared to the forecast¹⁶ set in 2019 of 40 million people. Although the jump in rates is alarming, it is not surprising since Covid-19 hit even the richest and wealthiest economies in the world who had lower poverty rates. These rates and estimations reflect a disappointing setback in the world's efforts in eliminating poverty since now there are at least 60 countries who are off-track¹⁷ in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals,¹⁸ "the world's shared plan" to eradicate poverty.¹⁹

So, is it really an "unprecedented" challenge that this pandemic imposed on people worldwide? Yes and No. Communities living under the poverty line have already been battling this disaster on a daily basis and are only suffering more with the pandemic. However, it is indeed a new reality for wealthier communities that one can only with has opened the eyes of may to the struggles the poor face endlessly, and urged governing bodies to strengthen their measures on eradicating poverty as the United Nations outlined.²⁰ Covid-19 might have increased the global poverty to rates that have not been seen since 1998,²¹ but poverty was, and still is, a rapidly growing problem that requires continuous efforts.

Although the general purpose of this day is to "acknowledge the effort and struggle of people living in poverty, [and] a chance for them to make their concerns heard," the United Nations as well as various non-governmental organizations and community charities use this day to "actively call[] for country leaders and governments to make the fight against poverty a central part of their foreign policy."²² The United Nations specifically chooses one theme each year that highlights one area of global concern that has a significant effect of eradicating poverty. For instance, this year's theme²³ is centered around issues of social and environmental justice as dimensions of poverty. The United Nations emphasizes that addressing income poverty is not enough to eradicate the problem and that global measures should focus more on the impact of climate change, environmental challenges, and social injustice on poor people worldwide. The United Nations outlined²⁴ that its measures "to ensure Member States can achieve the SGDs²⁵ by 2030, including its proposed socio-economic responses to the global pandemic, must be robustly pro-poor and fully focused on establishing green pathways to recovery."²⁶

So, when reflecting on International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, let us all remember the words of one of the world's earliest leaders in ending poverty and the launcher of this day, Joseph Wresinski, when he said "Wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty, human rights are violated. To come together to ensure that these rights be respected is our solemn duty."²⁷ Countries around the world might now have a harder job

¹⁴ World Poverty Clock, World Data Lab (2021), <https://worldpoverty.io/headline>.

¹⁵ Homi Kharas & Kristofer Hamel, *Turning Back the Poverty Clock: How will COVID-19 Impact the World's Poorest People?*, BROOKINGS (May 6, 2020), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/05/06/turning-back-the-poverty-clock-how-will-covid-19-impact-the-worlds-poorest-people/>.

¹⁶ *PovcalNet (Data)*, WORLD BANK, <http://iresearch.worldbank.org/PovcalNet/data.aspx> (last visited Sept. 27, 2021).

¹⁷ Homi Kharas & Kristofer Hamel, *supra* note 15.

¹⁸ *Sustainable Development Goals*, U.N. FOUND. (2015), https://unfoundation.org/what-we-do/issues/sustainable-development-goals/?gclid=CjwKCAjww5r8BRB6EiwArcckC4NOBMfNMfD2VO2u7epnOpLTpH-oqBqEnrsg5pB-uzFWP0PN1ERjRoC8YIQAvD_BwE

¹⁹ *Id.*; see also *Projected Poverty Impacts of COVID-19 (coronavirus)*, WORLD BANK (June 8, 2020), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/brief/projected-poverty-impacts-of-COVID-19>.

²⁰ *International Day for the Eradication of Poverty 2020*, U.N., <https://www.un.org/development/desa/socialperspectiveondevelopment/international-day-for-the-eradication-of-poverty-homepage/2020-2.html> (last visited Sept. 27, 2021).

²¹ Daniel Gerszon Mahler et al., *The Impact of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) on Global Poverty: Why Sub-Saharan Africa Might be the Region Hardest Hit*, WORLD BANK (April 20, 2020), <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/impact-covid-19-coronavirus-global-poverty-why-sub-saharan-africa-might-be-region-hardest>.

²² *When is International Day for the Eradication of Poverty 2021?*, TIME & DATE, <https://www.timeanddate.com/holidays/un/international-day-for-poverty-eradication> (last visited Sept. 27, 2021).

²³ *International Day for the Eradication of Poverty 2020*, *supra* note 20.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Sustainable Development Goals*, *supra* note 18.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *International Day for the Eradication of Poverty 2017*, U.N., <https://www.un.org/development/desa/socialperspectiveondevelopment/international-day-for-the-eradication-of-poverty-homepage/idep2017.html#:~:text=%E2%80%9CWherever%20men%20and%20women%20are, respected%20is%20our%20solemn%20duty.%E2%80%9D&text=The%20active%20participation%20of%20those,of%20the%20Sustainable%20Development%20Goals.> (last visited Sept. 27, 2021).

adhering to their duty in eradicating poverty, but it is a critical job that must continue to be one of the world's highest priorities.