

LIFT # 11 Wealth & Income Disparity and National Security

Too Poor for Peace

Edward Renner

For 5,000 years, humans lived in the past tense: "Yesterday was the same as tomorrow. " For the next 500 years people lived in the present tense: "Today can be whatever we want it to be." But now, for the next 50 years we must start living in the future tense: "Tomorrow's social, economic and political constraints must become today's reality."

"Vast numbers of people are perishing in civil wars and from other ravages associated with failed states and corrupt, incompetent, if not murderous political systems. Whether sparked by natural resource scarcities, inadequate employment opportunities for growing numbers of youths, or decrepit and corrupt institutions, intrastate conflict thrives in areas of poverty, leading to a vicious and deadly cycle between poverty and insecurity."

Strobe Talbott, President, Brookings Institute
Forward from *Too Poor for Peace*

The Bangladeshi economist, Muhammad Yunus in his speech accepting the Noble Peace Prize in 2006 noted that the millennium began with a great global dream. World leaders gathered at the United Nations in 2000 and adopted, among others, a historic goal to reduce poverty by half by 2015. Never in human history had such a bold goal been adopted by the entire world in one voice, one that specified time and size. But then came September 11 and the Iraq War, and suddenly the world became derailed from the pursuit of this dream, with the attention of the world leaders shifting from the war on poverty to the war on terrorism.

The cost of the Iraq War alone to the US has been estimated to be as much as \$3 trillion dollars. The total cost of the entire war on terror by all of the countries of the world, including the fight against ISIS, is some unknown number of times larger, and growing. This staggering amount of wasted wealth does not yet include, if ever, the reconstruction cost of undoing the physical damage done to the Middle East nor how to deal with the huge numbers of refugees and displaced persons that is now larger than at any time since the end of World War II.

Today, 62 people own as much wealth as half of the world's population. Oxfam has called for urgent action to tackle the inequality crisis and reverse the dramatic fall in wealth of the poorest half of the world. Nearly one-half of the world's population -- more than 3 billion people -- live on less than \$2.50 a day. More than 1.3 billion live in extreme poverty — less than \$1.25 a day. One billion children worldwide are living in poverty. According to UNICEF, 22,000 children die each day due to poverty.

Poor states fail to meet the basic needs of their citizens; that means providing food, water, health and education. Poor states cannot govern legitimately and effectively with the acceptance of their population nor foster and sustain equitable economic growth. The natural resources of weak states are often exploited by foreign interests that support and contribute to a corrupt government. Small per capita GDP is significantly related to the likelihood of internal conflict, civil war and falling into the status of a failed state. Terrorism

thrives in failed states that lose the ability to control their territory, such as Afghanistan and Somali. Islamic extremist have gained their place by defeating warlords and providing essential services to the people.

The belief that the first response to threats to our national security should be a military solution is one that actually increases poverty thereby deepening the very problem it was intended to solve. Imagine what the world might be like today if the wealth and lives spent on fighting the war on terror had been spent on reducing severe poverty and world-wide wealth and income inequality.

Yet, in the US, world poverty is largely invisible and is not considered either a humanitarian priority or an alternative to military strength. Unlike Canada and many other countries we do not welcome refugees, and in terms of humanitarian foreign aid we rank 20th out of the 28 nations who are members of the Development Assistance Committee in the percentage of GDP given to developing nations as foreign aid. The US gives far less than many poorer nations, such as Ireland.

In addition, domestic poverty in the US is also largely invisible and ignored until it boils over into disrupting domestic tranquility, as seen in Black Lives matter, Ferguson, the Flint water crisis and increasing the anger evidenced in the 2016 Presidential primaries. Poverty matters; it may be ignored only in peril.

Both globally and domestically, when wealth and income disparity become so large that there are a significant number of people who live in poverty there will be a breakdown of civil society and personal security for the rich as well as the poor. There will not be global or domestic security in the absence of economic, political and social justice.

“Peace should be understood in a human way, in a broad social, political and economic way. Peace is threatened by unjust economic, social and political order, absence of democracy, environmental degradation and absence of human rights...The frustrations, hostility and anger generated by abject poverty cannot sustain peace in any society. For building stable peace, we must find ways to provide opportunities for people to live decent lives.”

Muhammad Yunus



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