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Keeping the Promise Alive to End Poverty

(On the occasion of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty)

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A decade will be over soon since the MDGs were launched by the governments of the world and UN agencies in 2000. Poverty reduction is the first goal among eight others, and a commitment was made to reduce extreme poverty by half by 2015. This is a big statement and it is the responsibility of everyone both in developed and developing nations to keep the promise alive. However, MDGs have remained confined among the professionals, officials, government organizations, and agencies directly concerned with them. The vast majority of common people are still today completely unaware and uninformed about MDGs. So gradually noise is now being made in some quarters to create awareness for reducing poverty. The question arises when poverty can be reduced?

The number of poor people varies from country to country as does the intensity of poverty; this is true no matter what criteria may be used to measure it – income, nutrition, food security, assets, entitlements, etc. About half of the world, over 3 billion people, lived on less than \$2.50 a day in 2005. The proportion of extreme poor with one dollar income a day in 1981 was slightly above 20%, and this remained almost unchanged until 2005 when it was measured at \$1.25 a day.

Excluding poverty in China, the rate has fallen from 40 to 29 percent between 1981 and 2005. During the same period, the poverty rate fell from 60 to 40 percent in South Asia when measured at \$1.25 a day without much reduction in the total number of the poor. South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa still are two major poverty pockets in the world. In fact, the world's poorest 20% account for just 1.5% and the richest 20% account for 76.6% of total consumption. This explains the wide and unbridgeable gap between the richest and the poorest.

Seventy-five percent of people in rural areas are living on less than one dollar a day and a similar proportion of world population are suffering from malnutrition. The poor are living with inadequate access to clean water, without sanitation or adequate shelter, they suffer from infectious diseases, have non-immunized children who are not attending primary schools, or are

children orphaned due to HIV/AIDS; these are reflections of the reality today and some of the pressing issues for tomorrow.

Even though there are visible changes in the poverty reduction rate in percent terms, the changes in numbers are marginal as there is a continuous addition of poor people. With rising cost of living, due to price rises in food items and inflation, the current poverty line is no longer valid. Any shift in criteria between \$1 and \$2 will reverse the situation as assessed at the beginning of this century. This is alarming. With this scenario, cutting poverty in half by 2015 becomes nearly impossible.

As the climate change vulnerability is inevitable and its impacts are felt with increasing frequency of natural disasters over decades, a large number of people will be added year by year to the poverty list, making the poverty reduction task more challenging and frightening, too. Without collective support and efforts, it will be extremely hard to change the multi-faces of poverty.

Three country situations are highlighted below to gauge the problem and search for some solutions. The countries are India, Bangladesh and Thailand.

Despite high economic growth and progress in scientific areas, higher education and research over the years and despite its prominence of becoming a super power in recent times, India is still backward in reducing the poverty level both in its rural and urban areas. Efforts have been made continuously since the 1960s through various policies, programs and projects for poverty alleviation, but the result is not that impressive as about 30% of a billion plus population are still poor today. Unequal distribution of assets and income, high population growth, illiteracy, large family size, and the caste system are some of the factors perpetuating poverty in India and with further contributions from corrupt practices and poor governance in managing poverty related programs. Many other countries have also had similar experiences over last fifty years.

Bangladesh is a highly overpopulated country, prone to frequent natural disasters and struggling to overcome poverty since its birth in the 1970s despite the continuous efforts made by the GOs, NGOs, donor and multilateral agencies. At present, the country has about 40% of its poor population below the national poverty line. "Creating a world without poverty" is the dream of Prof. Yunus through Grameen Foundation combining the power of microfinance and technology, and promoting self-employment of low income people and social business. Is it adequate to address and alleviate poverty?

In contrast to India and Bangladesh, Thailand has set an example by reducing its poverty level to less than 10 percent at present. This country has either achieved fully or nearly most of the indicators under the MDGs. Thailand has a population growth of less than 1 percent. The literacy level (real) is close to 100% promoting free and compulsory secondary school level education. Thai people have adequate shelter and a high level with sanitation and access to a clean water supply system, adequate health facilities and services, etc. People have adequate opportunity for

earning livelihoods with supportive development policies, programs and projects. The extension of the decentralized governance system to the local level (Tambon) with introduction of microfinance (through Village Development Fund) and revitalizing rural industrialization through One-Tambon One-Product (OTOP) are a few among many other accomplishments in recent years which have significantly transformed the rural areas and contributed to poverty reduction in the country.

Many lessons can be learned from and disseminated to other neighboring and South Asian countries. Chinese experience and successful cases in reducing the poverty should be shared with large countries. Thailand should be used by others as a laboratory for understanding poverty reduction measures and outcomes.

If poverty is not addressed adequately and properly, the world as a whole will be impacted severely. Let's review some of the statements made by the great philosophers and scholars of the world. Aristotle had visualized once that "the mother of revolution and crime is poverty". In the same way Mahatma Gandhi had said that "poverty is the worst form of violence". These two statements from two time periods have great value today and will remain significant in the future unless poverty is completely removed from the globe. The points where conflicts occur on Earth today are mostly poverty prone despite perhaps being rich in natural and environmental resources; they are places of conflicts between the rich and the poor over development, grounds of distrust between the aborigines and the so called civilized population.

'Why Poor People Stay Poor' was answered to a great extent by Michael Lipton in the 1970s through his thesis of urban bias. This was a warning signal given to national governments to give almost equal priority to both rural and urban areas in terms investments and sharing the fruits of development. However, this thesis is very much true at present and not yet falsified by other scholars despite a number of counter arguments. Poverty will certainly grow unless the rural urban divide is bridged.

According to Prof. Amartya Sen, poverty is a complex, multifaceted world that requires a clear analysis in all its many dimensions. Similarly Mother Teresa had given a deeper perspective of poverty and had mentioned that "We think sometimes that poverty is only being hungry, naked and homeless. The poverty of being unwanted, unloved and uncared for is the greatest poverty. We must start in our own homes to remedy this kind of poverty."

With this backdrop, the issue is very much a mind puzzling one and no scholar of eminence can provide one point or definite solution to reduce poverty within a fixed time frame like 2015 or even in near future. It is a multi task that warrants collective thinking and action with passion and commitment from local to international level inclusive of all whether developing or developed nations. The national governments in the name of privatization and globalization have either toned down or completely withdrawn their responsibilities even for providing primary and secondary education, basic health services, and have failed to provide guarantees for social

security. Democratic process and values are missing even in democratic countries under corrupt practices and weak governance systems. Multi tasking through multi agencies such as the UN System and donor agencies have no doubt contributed to some extent in arresting the poverty growth, but this has not been done very completely due to overlapping responsibilities and competitiveness among them for the same cause and goal. The mushrooming of NGOs in many Asian countries has served more to them than serving the causes of poverty.

Poverty, gender development and mainstreaming, primary education and health, HIV/AIDS, environmental aspects, etc. should be addressed together on a common platform; otherwise, the struggle becomes fragmented and loses its manifestations and outcomes. This is as true for a country as for a local unit. Decentralized processes at the local level and trusting the wisdom and capacities of local people to decide on their matters, under good governance with minimal or no interventions, may yield better results in poverty reduction.

Let's get united wholeheartedly irrespective of diverse background of race, culture and religion, and get truly committed to keep the promise alive to end poverty, if not immediately, definitely one day in future. In the recent UN Summit held at New York, world leaders once again have reaffirmed their commitments to the MDGs and set out a concrete action agenda for achieving the goals by 2015 and have hoped that the goals which remain will be achievable.