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Response to Prof. Jeffrey Sachs: Walking with the Excluded - Call for a Multi-Dimensional Response

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I am grateful to Prof. Jeffrey Sachs for lucidly presenting his ideas on walking with the poor and the excluded, especially in the context of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals. I admire his passion and commitment to transform the lives of millions of poor in the world, especially those chained by the cycle of poverty and deprivation and living in the developing countries. I also agree with Sachs that the future of survival is a matter of choice, and a matter of ethics. A society that is not built on ethical principles will continue to perpetuate a broken humanity. How can we heal this broken world? While I find the response of Sachs interesting, I feel it is limited in scope and does not address the complexities.



The Rich Countries must help the Poor Countries

Sustainable goals call for universal action to build 'The Future that we want'. The fundamental questions are what we want to change and how do we make these changes happen. Sachs argues that to honour the pledge made by world leaders – Leave No One Behind¹ what we lack is practical wisdom. To abolish poverty, meet human needs, end the violence of social exclusion, ensure the global peace, and protect the planet, Sachs propagates 'aid economics'. He proposes that the global community, especially the rich countries must help the poor. He contends that unless these poor countries are helped to break the iron grip of poverty, development is not possible, and SDGs will remain as unfulfilled promises. He argues that

¹ <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html>

there are no magic bullets and what is required is a 'big push' through aid economics. Basing his arguments on the data provided by IMF, he calculates the financial gap as US \$ 350 billion per year and this could be generated through additional tax revenues @ 0.3 per cent of global GDP. For Sachs, this is possible, practical and ethical and for him, it is a matter of paying back to the poor what is theirs. This argument looks sensible and gives me a lot of hope. However, it raises some critical questions.

Is it all about Economics?

While I agree with the principles and ethics of aid economics, my reflections go beyond economic perspective. I find it extremely difficult to contain this discussion within economic parameters. Is walking with the poor and the excluded all about economics? In 1975, the Jesuits articulated the intrinsic relationship between faith and justice as inseparable dimensions. The promotion of justice was declared a central part of the Society's mission and a concrete response to an unjustly suffering humanity. The call was to rebuild the broken relationship with oneself, with the other, God and environment (GC 34). In 2016, Fr Arturo Sosa, the General of the Society of Jesus, in his letter on the Universal Apostolic Preferences² nuanced this understanding to present context and said, "We are called to walk with the poor, the outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice".

The idea of walking with the poor is a powerful image as it views the development of the poor in a multi-dimensional perspective than looking at it only from economic perspective and worse still from aid economics viewpoint. The ministry of reconciliation demands conversion, at the individual and collective level, that sees the world from the eyes of the excluded. It cannot be merely reduced to making an offer or financial support through taxes. No doubt, the poor need resources to address their basic needs. However, the poor cannot be reduced to economic measurements and terminologies. Walking with the poor cannot be just an economic agenda; it is political, socio-cultural and spiritual.

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Walking with the Poor is Political

The era of distinguishing and critiquing political parties based on their ideology is a bygone scenario. Ideological differences between right, centre and left are thin. All dominant political parties are fundamentally seen to be upholding anti-poor ideology and favouring neo-liberal agenda, though they might vary in degree on some specific agenda. In this muddled scenario, out of desperation, people mandate different political parties to govern a country on a round robin basis, every time with a sense of hope and soon to realise that things do not change.

² <https://jesuits.global/en/documents/send/8-uap-docs/63-universal-apostolic-preferences>

The poor are losing hope not just in political parties and governments but in governance. There is a virtual collapse of public institutions, service sectors, bureaucracy and judiciary. Human rights and civil society spaces are targeted, demonised and decimated. Space for freedom of expression is shrinking and voices against the ruling junta is scuttled and termed as anti-nationals. Majoritarian politics, which portrays the minority as the 'other' and enemy is thriving. The rulers consciously promote conflicts by dividing the citizens based on religion, caste, creed, language etc. There is a nexus between the governments and corporations in exploiting natural resources and depriving people of their sustenance and livelihood. If governments are condemned for corruption, most of the corporations are known for loot and there is an unholy alliance between the two. Looted money is thrown back to the poor as doles to garner votes during elections. There is a huge disconnect between GDP growth and development of the poor. Despite reduction in poverty, inequality is on the increase. In other words, accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few is fast growing. Every day new millionaires are popping up. To maintain the status quo and to scuttle the radical voices of the poor the Governments are investing in fudging data and engage in disseminating false propaganda. This is efficiently done by capturing media, especially social media. The oligarchies have found their strategy to continue to remain in power through control over media and technology.

Politics is participation. While we should hold the governments accountable to honour their commitment to SDGs, the real political question is how the poor could become participants of the SDG processes and outcomes. From being receivers of aid, the poor must become active players in the planning, implementation, evaluation and monitoring of SDG goals and indicators. Only then aid economics will be sustainable.

Walking with the Poor is Socio-Cultural

In 2015, Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze wrote in a book – *An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions* that India is stinking, comparing evidences among South Asian countries. Despite higher level of GDP growth in India the sanitation was a major concern. Poor sanitation facilities led many to open defecation. However, in Bangladesh despite poor GDP mark, the people had much better sanitation facilities compared to India.

United Nation, in collaboration with NITI Aayog, the Policy Commission of India, prepared baseline report in 2018 on SDG India Index. One of the claims made in this report is that the government has built millions of toilets, with financial assistance from World Bank, which have improved the sanitation of the poor and consequently health status (SDGs 6 and 3). Last November I had visited a few villages in Gorakhpur district, Uttar Pradesh, the biggest state in India with over 40 per cent of people living in poverty. I found a newly constructed small rooms adjacent to many houses. In the wall, it was written '*Ijjat Ghar*' which means dignity house. Those houses were uniformly numbered. I inquired with the villagers what those small rooms were. They told me that those were toilets and were built by the government under *Swachh* Bharat (Clean India) scheme. Out of curiosity I asked them, "Don't people use them?" The villagers said that they are used to store fodder for animals. They also told me, "How could we defecate close to our house?"

This is the cultural mindset of the people, which the Nobel Laureate Abhijit brings out with evidences in his book *The Poor Economics*. My point is that mere data on aid and constructions of toilets are good but not good enough, unless the logical end is realised. When caste, religious, ethnic, patriarchal prejudices etc are deep rooted in a society, aid economics alone will not lead the communities into sustainable development. There is a need for comprehensive approach.

Beyond structural perspectives, Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, the Noble Laurates argue why policies fail from another valid standpoint. In their book on *Poor Economics* they highlight “three Is” problem: ideology, ignorance, inertia. They argue that this problem plagues many efforts to supposedly help the poor and gives us an idea of why policies fail and why aid does not have the effect it should (Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo 2011).

Walking with the Poor is Spiritual

In October 2019, delivering a lecture titled ‘Between Encounters and Dreams’ at Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore (IIMB), Balkrishna Doshi³ said, “Today, we have become materialistic and technologically oriented. Technology has taken over our spiritual content – the intangible one – where there was reverence, inquiry and an attitude to do things. We think it is progress, but we are forgetting that progress is connected to something higher and not just restricted to material progress”. He decries, “One of the essentials we had was the gift of intuition, thinking about reverence, togetherness, humility and concern for others... I don’t think they are there anymore”.

Often, the poor are equated only as the needy and vulnerable. Yes, they are. But they also have something to contribute to the world. Love for the nature, concern for the needy, reverence to the divine, sense of detachment of materialistic world etc., are very much part of their being and living. Many of them believe in future sustenance, not because they have their barrels full, but believe that God, nature and neighbours will provide. They would go to the extent of feeding the hungry of today not knowing whether they would have their food for tomorrow. Despite being economically poor, their spiritual strength, resilience and ability to live with minimum are dimensions that need to be part of sustainable development discourse. The poor could very much tell us the ‘Future we want’. As much as the poor need resources of the rich, the rich and the wealthy nations have much to learn from the poor. From a merely materialistic outlook, sustainable goals must be driven by radical love for the poor and vulnerable and the spiritual quest of salvaging the entire humanity. The rich and wealthy are in need of change.

The Call today

The Jesuits and partners are called to understand the poor and walk with them in their ‘complexities, vulnerabilities and richness’. We need to be neither admirers of the poor nor have pity on them. The question is how we accompany the poor so that they could make

³ Balkrishna Doshi is the architect of IIMB and at the age of 92 works on affordable housing in India.

informed decisions, access new opportunities and technological benefits and hold the governments accountable and be the subjects of their destiny.

In building a sustainable and humane world, we need to recognise that global North as well as South have unique gifts to offer. It cannot be a one-way track of the rich 'giving' to the poor. There has to be a space for dialogue between the local and global. The global and local, states and citizens and rich and poor must listen to one another. To walk with the poor the sustainable development goals must be tweaked to embrace a multi-dimensional approach in planning, implementation, evaluation and monitoring where the poor are active participants of the processes. A bottom up approach is necessary for sustainable development.

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