13 Poverty Eradication and Human Development: Issues for the Twenty-First Century
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Our age is the first generation since the dawn of history in which mankind dared to believe it practical to make the benefits of civilization available to the whole human race.

Arnold Toynbee

VISION AND GOALS

When Toynbee wrote these lines in about 1947, the world was still a world of empires, wide gaps between developed and what were then called ‘under-developed countries’, school-enrolment ratios were mostly low, smallpox was endemic and infant mortality rates were three times present levels. Few developing countries had experienced sustained and rapid economic development, or the impressive advance in basic human indicators we have seen over the postwar decades.

Toynbee’s vision was all the more impressive given any lack of hard experience to rest it upon. It serves as a reminder of the vision of many of the post-Second World War thinkers – and of the need for vision today. If today, we are to look ahead with creativity to the challenges of the next century, we also will need to build beyond the solid base of past experience. We will need the intellectual courage shown by the drafters of the UN Charter and the founders of the Bretton Woods organisations, who rose above the painful events of the Second World War and of the prewar failures to look beyond to the world needing creation.

The architects of change were also bold at that time in considering international actions needed to achieve national economic and social objectives. One example was the 1949 UN report, National and International Measures towards Full Employment.
Today, we may look ahead boldly to the eradication of absolute poverty. We have a number of solid experiences to build upon, notably:

- the considerable progress made over the postwar decades, socially and economically, in both developed and developing countries;
- the new recognition that government has an important role to play, nationally and internationally, in place of the widespread scepticism about government in the 1980s;
- with the end of the cold war, the new opportunities and a growing willingness to use the UN and international agencies as a catalytic force for international action.

There are already, in the early 1990s, more specific openings available on which to build towards Toynbee's vision.

1. Goals have been defined and agreed. Among the most relevant are the goals of Agenda 21 for humanitarian and sustainable development agreed at the United Nations Conference for Environment and Development in Rio in June 1992. Agenda 21 looks to the progressive alleviation of the various aspects of absolute poverty, as a central element in sustainable development. The specific goals of Agenda 21 drew on goals and commitments from a variety of earlier conferences and meetings: the Amsterdam Declaration on Population and Development; the Jomtien Conference on Education for All by Year 2000; the World Health Assembly, which defined specific targets within the broader goal of HFA-2000, Health for All by the Year 2000; the World Summit for Children which brought these and other goals together in a political commitment for the 1990s.

Agreement on international goals is hardly new: the novel element in the cases of the two Summits is the commitment to prepare national plans of action, as a means of adopting and adapting the global goals to the specifics of individual countries. At the time of writing, over 90 countries have prepared national plans of action to implement goals for health, nutrition, water and sanitation, and education, usually including family planning and reduction of gender disparities; another 50 to 60 countries have such national plans of action in the process of preparation.

2. Proven strategies now exist. For all the difficulties of the 1980s, decisive progress towards poverty eradication and human development has been and is being achieved, in a growing and impressive number of countries throughout the world. Countries in South-East Asia first showed it was possible, desirable and cost-effective to combine rapid economic development with clear advances in human development, usually with investments in education leading to economic investment and rapid