INTRODUCTION:
EDUCATION AND POVERTY REDUCTION

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Poverty and income

Brazil is known for its great soccer players, but has never had a single nominee for the Nobel Prize in literature. Brazilians encourage the creation of great soccer players: Every child has access to a ball from his earliest years on. However, only a minority has access to books, for very few have access to education. If the price of a soccer ball were the same as monthly school tuition, only 10% of children would play soccer; 90% would be excluded from the practice of the sport, which would dramatically reduce the number of great players.

Possible Nobelists in literature in Brazil and elsewhere have missed their opportunity to win the prize because they died illiterate. Had they learned to read while still children, they would have been better able to develop their potential. Possible Nobelists in the natural sciences have not developed around the world because children did not learn math or other disciplines essential for the development of their potential.

The popular provision of soccer balls and fields has allowed the universalization of the sport among Brazilian children, enabling Brazil to field soccer teams that are among the best in the world (something of which the country is very proud) and also helping thousands of children to develop their talents and wrest themselves from the stranglehold of poverty. Unfortunately, the same universalization has not occurred with respect to education, which has been the source of much shame instead of pride. Many Brazilians are ashamed of the country’s poor rate of basic education, ashamed that it ranks first in the world regarding inequality, ashamed that half of the population lives in poverty.

Such universalization enables soccer to function for talented players as a means of improving their social and economic status, regardless of their family income. In Brazil, most players come from poor communities. The explanation for this is simple: While rich children are able to spend their free time engaging in several activities, poor children, who possess only a ball, empty streets, and a great deal of free time, develop and sharpen their soccer skills and are in a better position to move up the social ladder.

Much the same would happen to poor children if they were given similar conditions for learning: access to books in addition to a soccer ball. However, this simple idea has not caught on, for the logic of social ascension is
too often held captive by the concept of income. From this perspective, it is economic investments that generate jobs, which in turn generate income, which leads to social advancement.

The horizontal poverty line

Understanding the concept of poverty as the opposite of wealth (large personal income and extensive assets) is a very recent phenomenon. In ancient times, the wealthy man was one who possessed knowledge; in medieval times, wealth was defined in terms of virtue; in the times of mercantilism, wealth became tied to the accumulation of gold. With the rise of capitalism, the concept of wealth was defined in terms of annual income and the accumulation of possessions. Therewith, poverty came to be defined as an insufficient periodic income, or salary, and a lack of possessions or assets.

In modernity, due to both the mercantilization of human relations and the flow of money within the capitalist system, it became clear that it was not enough to help only each poor person individually. It is technically possible and ethically necessary to fight poverty as such, to strike at its very roots. One means for doing so is said to be to harness the flow of social income so as to guarantee a minimum family income, which would enable families to purchase goods and services and thereby eliminate poverty. It is developmentalism that has initiated this promise and stirred this hope, universalizing them – as if poverty were a single concept and there were a single path out of it.

The World Bank has defined poverty as personal income lower than US-$2 a day. This definition has been accepted as a universal truth. The consequent strategy for fighting poverty has consisted in investing resources in productive activities, job creation, income generation, and increasing consumption levels of everyone, in every country. Taking its bearings on the richest populations, the chief premise informing this strategy is that economic development will benefit everyone by means of a ‘trickle-down’ process: What is given to the top will supposedly make its way down to the bottom, the poorest individuals.

This model has been taken as a universal truth, just like the World Bank’s definition of poverty. This model has proven insufficient to define and fight poverty. Neither is poverty alike everywhere, nor is income an adequate measure of scarcity: The baseline of US-$2 does not take account of differences among societies, economies, and exchange rates.

Fifty years of economic development based on high taxes and spread throughout the world have not resulted in significant poverty reduction; in fact, such development has increased differences and disparities.

The ‘trickle-down effect’ has not become a reality; indeed, development has concentrated rather than distributed income. In some poor countries, a wealthy class has even been created (with the help of income concentration) to