

Poverty Equals War

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Poverty is the parent of revolution and crime. – Aristotle

An imbalance between rich and poor is the oldest and most fatal ailment of all republics. – Plutarch

If the misery of the poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin. – Darwin

Once poverty is gone, we'll need to build museums to display its horrors to future generations. They'll wonder why poverty continued so long in human society—how a few people could live in luxury while billions dwelt in misery, deprivation and despair. – Muhammad Yunus

The arrangements of the circumstances of the people must be such that poverty shall disappear, that everyone, as far as possible, according to his rank and position, shall share in comfort and well-being. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, p. 152.

Poverty equals war.



That simple equation, proven true by centuries of experience, basically confirms what we all know: that conflict, violence, revolt and warfare results from an unequal and unjust distribution of the world's resources. Social unrest, terrorism and warfare all proceed from poverty. When oligarchs, dictators and multinational corporations own the predominant share of the planet's wealth; and when the great mass of the people of the world live with no power or resources, the resulting unfairness typically produces anger, rebellion and revolution. In today's world, that great disparity has become extremely pronounced. Just consider these few facts:

- The richest 20% of the world's population accounts for three-quarters (75%) of the world's total income. The other 80% of the world's people live on less than \$10 per day.
- The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the Earth's 41 poorest countries—mostly in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia—is less than the combined wealth of the world's seven richest people.
- The world's billionaires—just 497 people—are worth \$3.5 trillion, more than 7% of the world's GDP.

The Baha'i teachings say that eradicating this massive disparity of wealth and poverty creates one of the most important paths to peace:

The inordinate disparity between rich and poor, a source of acute suffering, keeps the world in a state of instability, virtually on the brink of war. Few societies have dealt effectively with this situation. The solution calls for the combined application of spiritual, moral and practical approaches. A fresh look at the problem is required, entailing consultation with experts from a wide spectrum of disciplines, devoid of economic and ideological polemics, and involving the people directly affected in the decisions that must urgently be made. It is an issue that is bound up not only with the necessity for eliminating extremes of wealth and poverty but also with those spiritual verities the understanding of which can produce a new universal attitude. Fostering such an attitude is itself a major part of the solution. – The Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace*, pp. 10-11.

The Baha'i teachings recommend several detailed solutions to this inequitable, peace-preventing mis-distribution of wealth:

Certainly, some being enormously rich and others lamentably poor, an organization is necessary to control and improve this state of affairs. It is important to limit riches, as it is also of importance to limit poverty. Either extreme is not good. To be seated in the mean is most desirable. If it be right for a capitalist to possess a large fortune, it is equally just that his workman should have a sufficient means of existence.

A financier with colossal wealth should not exist whilst near him is a poor man in dire necessity. When we see poverty allowed to reach a condition of starvation it is a sure sign that somewhere we shall find tyranny. Men must bestir themselves in this matter, and no longer delay in altering conditions which bring the misery of grinding poverty to a very large number of the people. The rich must give of their abundance, they must soften their hearts and cultivate a compassionate intelligence, taking thought for those sad ones who are suffering from lack of the very necessities of life.

There must be special laws made, dealing with these extremes of riches and of want. The members of the Government should consider the laws of God when they are framing plans for the ruling of the people. The general rights of mankind must be guarded and preserved. The government of the countries should conform to the Divine Law which gives equal justice to all. This is the only way in which the deplorable superfluity of great wealth and miserable, demoralizing, degrading poverty can be abolished. Not until this is done will the Law of God be obeyed. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, pp. 153-154.

Whether you're rich or poor or somewhere in between, you're probably curious about the organization and the special laws the Baha'i teachings recommend to do away with the extremes of wealth and poverty. In the next three essays in this series, we'll look at those very specific plans and programs, which the Baha'is believe will bring about an equitable distribution of the world's material resources.