Global Poverty: A Threat to International Peace and Security

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Abstract
In recent years, the concept of security has become progressively stretched and expanded in its referent object, core values and types of threats (Hadinwinata, 2004). Conventionally, security as a concept in international relations is concerned with the nation state and inter-state relations. The emphasis has been on military threats and the need for strong counter measures; it has also been status quo-oriented and focused on states (Booth, 1991:318). Traditional realist scholars like Walt (1991:212), insist that security should be limited to deliberate threats, rivalries between states and narrowly studied as ‘the threat, use and control of military force’ given that many issues outside this scope do not pose a direct threat to the security of the state, much less the international system that gives the state its nature. However, many scholars agree that the pursuit of human security must have at its core the satisfaction of basic material needs of all humankind. At its most basic level, food, shelter, education and health care are essential for the survival of human beings; the absence of these essentials is what characterizes poverty (Thomas, 2001:162). Poverty is a highly contested concept and based on its multi-dimensional nature it is usually perceived using various criteria. This paper argues that, global poverty, when perceived from the nature of its impact, rather than its source, has significant implications for international peace and security in a world that is increasingly interconnected. It argues that global poverty has significant Environmental, Economic and Political implications for the stability of the international system.

Key Words: Global Poverty, Peace, Security, International System, Stability

Introduction
Many scholars argue today that trying to cope with contemporary problems using only traditional military means is not only inappropriate but dangerous and new measures are required to tackle the non-military threats as well. An important description of what constitutes a security threat, and one on which this paper is premised, is given by Ullman (1983). He argues rightly that a threat to security should be viewed as ‘any action or sequence of events that threatens drastically, and over a relatively brief span of time, to degrade the quality of life for the inhabitants of a state or threatens to narrow the range of policy choices available to a government of a state or to private, non-governmental entities (persons, groups, corporations) within the state’ (1983:133). While some scholars fear that such an expanded perception of security could end up widening and deepening the concept so much that it ends up meaning everything and preventing it for being useful analytically (Tarry, 1999:2), this definition is very relevant to contemporary challenges in a post-Cold War world where the security implications for states of pressures from human populations and resource depletion needs to be taken on board alongside military threats from other states seeing that people are being killed more, not by soldiers and weapons alone but by non-military threats as well (Hough, 2013). Consequently, the referent object of security should be people or human collectivities rather than the state (Buzan, 1991). This concept of human security accommodates the consideration of a wide range of threats to life, of which poverty is no doubt the most significant (Hough, 2013:92).

Understanding Global Poverty
Global poverty is highly contested and heavily politicized (St. Clair, 2006: 59). Applying the concept of poverty on a global level is very difficult considering that the concept itself is
highly contested (Sudhur et al, 2010). The World Bank has previously defined the International Poverty Line (IPL) as US $1 and $2 per day. Where the $1 per day is used for the least developed countries and $2 per day is used for middle income economies such as East Asia and Latin America. However a systematic estimate of global poverty by Chen and Ravallion (2008) updated those records to show that the IPL was now $1.25 per capita/day. The estimates of global poverty often used by the World Bank or other institutions have been criticised either for being underestimated (Reddy and Pogge, 2010) or overestimated (Martin, 2006). This difference in estimates is due in large part to the different methodologies adopted as well as differences in data sets ranging from poverty lines, within country distributions of income, purchasing power parity (PPP), to mean incomes within countries (Sudhur et al, 2010).

The literature shows that different conceptual choices underpin different notions of global poverty (Hulme, 2010). Lack of economic growth, contemporary capitalism, globalization and socio-economic inequality, lack of access to finance and technology in poor countries, state action and poor governance are some of the major causes of global poverty identified in the literature (Therrien, 1999). While causality is difficult to establish, it is important to state that the debates on causes of global poverty have contributed to how the concept is defined and the policy choices adopted by various institutions. Three major concepts, as Hulme (2010) correctly identifies, have shaped thinking about global poverty. These include, measuring income/consumption poverty (Townsend, 2006), developing multidimensional concepts and measures (Chambers, 2006), and adopting methods of participation for creating knowledge so poor people could define what poverty is to them (Hulme, 2010).

The consensus definition by the World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen, 1995 is very comprehensive and highlights various helpful components of global poverty, relevant to this paper. These include severe deprivation of basic human needs, including safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information, limited or lack of access to education, increased morbidity and mortality from illness, homelessness and inadequate housing, unsafe environments, social discrimination and exclusion, a lack of participation in decision making and a lack of participation in civil, social and cultural life (World Health Organization, 1995).

Global poverty, therefore, has many dimensions ranging from material (food, clothing, standard of living and shelter) and psychological (trust, respect, fear, self-esteem), to political (power, representation, participation) and social (education, health, employment) dimensions (Spagnoli 2009). The degree of poverty felt in these dimensions is highly uneven, varies from country to country and is linked to inequality whether based on income or other social, political and economic factors which affect global relations in different but significant ways (Besley and Burgess, 2003).

Global Poverty, International Peace and Security: The Threats
In July 2000, the G8 issued a Global Poverty Report which noted that dealing with and eradicating poverty is significantly ‘a moral and necessary imperative for global stability’ (World Bank, 2000:1). Poverty is an old problem that rarely makes headlines except when there is acute crisis and hardship but its enduring nature makes it a very present and existing threat (Hulme, 2010). However, given that states are rarely altruistic in their motives and not driven much by moral concerns, questions have been asked as to how much the phenomenon could be a threat to stability of states let alone international stability since it does not fall within the spectrum of traditional definitions of national interests in terms of territorial integrity and political autonomy from foreign threats (Ferraro, 2003). In addition, establishing the link between global poverty and security at national and global levels has been a source of
thorny debates especially with regards to the precise causality and interconnections. The literature is densely contested. In recent years, though, a lot of research has shown that there is a nexus between poverty and insecurity, especially in the developing world, (UN High Level Panel, 2004) which has the potential to result in global instability. We can observe that this threat of global poverty to the stability of the international system is real and exists on three main levels, environmental, economic and political.

Environmental Implications

The links between poverty and the environment, although heavily contested, (see Reardon and Vosti, 1995) focus predominantly on the impact of degradation. Global deforestation continues even though over 800 million people live in forests and woodlands which are an important resource for their survival (Buys, 2007:xi). The causes of deforestation are linked, though not exclusively, to poverty as populations in tropical regions, without access to alternative sources of energy, need to cut down trees to cook, build houses and open up spaces for farming. For these populations it is about surviving in the present so the future of the environment is not considered worthy of preservation. About 20% of global carbon dioxide emissions come from tropical deforestation (Buys, 2007:xi). As these poor states become integrated globally the situation will only get worse and it does not matter how much efforts individual states put in to save the environment if majority of the other states lack the capacity and political will to do the same, the results will be insignificant (Ferraro, 2003).

Destruction of these forests lead to loss of irreplaceable global biodiversity and contribute to climate change which continues to worsen food and water shortages (Buys, 2007:xi). Poverty and equity issues, as Richards (2003:3) correctly indicates, are significantly linked in the analysis of climate change and the global governance response. The inability of poor countries to address environmental issues poses a threat to the quality of life in their countries and for richer countries as well. The failure to reduce greenhouse gas emissions which is considered to be responsible for global warming threatens unpredictable but certainly catastrophic consequences for most of the world’s population (Middleton and O’Keefe, 2003). The meaningful participation of developing countries to any effort in protecting or restoring the environment is crucial for sustainable results (Muller, 2002) and the tensions at the Copenhagen Summit, as a result of its failure in 2009 to deliver a global agreement on climate change, is evidence enough that the cooperation needed is still far off (Huettner, 2010).

Poor states need outside resources to survive as their population increases beyond their internal resources. Especially as they open up and adopt industrial policies and practices of the rich and developed states. As Ferraro (2003:15) succinctly observes, the impact of Chinese industrialization on the availability of petroleum is a case that points to the environmental impact of global poverty and in the near future the effects of increased petroleum consumption by the Chinese population alone will begin impact the environment negatively with global consequences.

Furthermore, as Hauge and Ellingsen (1988) find, land degradation, fresh water scarcity, population density and deforestation have significant direct and positive effects on the incidence of conflict. Some have argued that these links are not so direct (Theisen, 2008) and conflicts are mainly inter-state and states rarely fight over scarcity of natural resources (Bernauer et al, 2012). However, it has been shown that problems relating to access to water and land contributed to civil conflicts in places like Darfur (Srinivasan, 2013). Continuous conflicts and instability in regions of the world like Africa and Asia do not contribute to international stability.
Political Implications

The human needs theory championed by Burton (1997) argues that there are conflicts and instability in developing countries because people are denied not only their biological needs, but also psychological needs that relate to growth and development. The overriding importance of this theory is not that it proves a direct correlation or causation relationship but that needs, particularly basic needs (such as food, water, shelter and health) unlike interests cannot be traded, suppressed, or bargained for and any attempt to do this, no matter how unintentional, potentially leads to conflict. In support of Aristotle, Okanya (1996:3) agrees that social strife and revolutions are not brought about by the 'conspiratorial or malignant nature of man', but are derived from poverty and injustice. Therefore, when the poor are in the majority and have no prospects of ameliorating their condition, they are bound to be restive and seek restitution through violence.

Poverty and insecurity are arguably two sides of the same coin. We find as Collier and Hoeffler (2004) argue that the world’s most conflict ridden countries, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Pakistan, Sudan, Yemen, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea and of course Nigeria, to mention a few, are also among the poorest. These poor countries, they further posit, account for a small and diminishing share of global income but are also responsible for a high share of the regional and global spillovers from civil war (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004). The unrest in these regions point to the linkages between poverty and security and are certainly an example of how poverty triggers instability which could potentially threaten global security.

Poverty bears indirectly on terrorism by sparking conflict and eroding state capacity both of which create conditions that can facilitate terrorist activities. There is a lot of debate about the causal effects of poverty as it relates to terrorism. Many scholars agree that poverty does not directly cause terrorism but we cannot ignore the reality that a lot of the grievances and dissatisfaction caused by structural inequality is one of the major factors that could aid radicalization (Lancaster, 2003). In the northern part of Nigeria, the growth of the terrorist group known as Boko Haram is attracting a lot of people not because they want to become terrorists but that they believe it is an umbrella under which they can have their basic needs met. Poverty alone may not be responsible, but with weak institutions and corruption, weak states could be vulnerable to terrorist networks and also drug cartels within their borders (National Security Strategy, 2002:4).

Poverty can exacerbate the threat of transnational terrorism not only at the individual level but at the state and regional level (Rice, 2006:78). Burgoon (2006) finds, through a cross sectional estimation research, that a country’s welfare efforts correlate with transnational or total terror incidents on its soil as well as transnational terrorism perpetrated by its citizens. He argues that ‘conflict zones’ can incubate almost every type of transnational security threat by creating anarchy and a conducive environment for external predators thereby providing training grounds for terrorists and criminals. For instance, Mali and Yemen are well known training camps for Al Qaeda as ineffective migration control eases travel and shipping of light weapons. The insecurity in Mali is said to have displaced as many as 350,000 people and increased regional food insecurity and poor humanitarian conditions (Arieff, 2013). This situation as Arieff (2013:2) rightly points out is an obstacle to the international community’s goal of promoting stability, democracy and effective counterterrorism measures to deal with the threats in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. As former US President Bush (2006:1) states, creating a world made up of democratic, well governed states that have the capacity to deliver welfare to their citizens and conduct themselves responsibly in the international system is a goal which will ensure global security and security for Americans in particular. It
is therefore a concern for the global community, especially rich states, if there is continued poverty-generated instability in poor countries.

Isaak (2004:1) rightly observes that the continuing and deepening divide between rich and poor states creates an “illusion of separate worlds” which makes genuine cooperation difficult and almost impossible. He rightly argues that this gap increased extremely in the 21st century and has made the liberal policies of the wealthy states look selfish in an obvious and transparent way such that the legitimacy of the post-war II rules of the global economy has been significantly undermined (Isaak, 2004:1). The richer states expressions of concern for political freedoms, growth and development within poor states ring hollow as long as desperate economic conditions fail to elicit concrete action (World Bank, 2001).

**Economic Implications**

Global poverty cripples global trade potentials and ultimately threatens global security (Sachs, 2003:28). Developing countries are major trading partners of developed countries including the US. It is therefore crucial for the rich states that developing countries are economically and politically stable. However, the reality is that, it is these states whose economies are stagnant and/or declining that are also ridden with conflicts. The economic and military burden of peacekeeping rests on the international community and particular developed countries such as the US (Sewell, 2003:36) who have in recent times shown that this largess will not continue for much longer. Illegal trade in natural resources like oil, diamonds, gold, including drugs like Opium in Afghanistan, has been on the increase especially in conflict areas in the developing countries (Sewell, 2006:36).

In a liberal international economic system, vulnerability to external economic events and dependence on foreign territories are a necessary consequence of involvement in global markets. The global financial crisis in 2008 is an example of how events in one part of the world escalated to the worst recession the world has known in about six decades (Verick and Islam, 2010:2). However this should not be viewed as a situation to be avoided (Cable, 1995:305) by cutting off ties but should be perceived as a problem that needs to be addressed speedily so that interconnectedness spreads development not crisis. The idea that global poverty is a problem of particular states, their political institutions and a lack of commitment to sound capitalist policies is problematic and does not enable the right policies (st. Clair, 2006). There is therefore a need to urgently develop an approach that places, as Wilkin (2002:634) argues, the general satisfaction of human needs before the pursuit of profit, the extension of democratic control of governing institutions before that of private power which is central to neo-liberal global governance. Existing global social relations need not just be reformed but transformed to provide sustainable solutions with a focus on human security (Wilkin, 2002:634).

Significant mass migration is another impact of global poverty (Stephenson et al, 2010). Migration is putting pressure on the finances of other states as populations seek greener pastures outside their borders. This is having significant implications for the economies of the states receiving the migrants. It also has implications for the state losing its population. For instance, the movement of people from Mexico to the USA is creating problems for the US as they have to commit finances to extra border patrols, curtailing drug gangs and networks trying to aid illegal migration. As Clark (1998:371) observes, changing economic conditions and large scale migrant flows is creating a situation where migrants are less welcome, substantially poorer and with low levels of skills and income there is a greater likelihood of being in more poverty. Low income states lack adequate control over their territories, resources, borders and institutions. This as Rice (2006) argues makes it easy for
transnational predators to move in bringing with them transnational crimes which can also cross into strong states.

With the ease of travel of goods and people it has become easy for disease to also spread swiftly. Over two (2) million people cross an international border each day (Rice, 2006:79). Poverty contributes to the outbreak of infectious diseases. Over 30 new infectious diseases came up globally in the last three decades; about 20 diseases re-emerged in new drug-resistant strains like the Avian flu, HIV/AIDS, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Hepatitis C and West Nile Virus, to mention a few (Sewell, 2003:36). Poverty means lack of adequate health care facilities and consequently death of large numbers, the wider spread of these diseases and also major economic losses.

Integration of poor countries into the world market by globalization continues to produce increase in global income inequality (Rice, 2006). It is a fact that the economic security of rich countries requires a degree of economic development within poor countries to ensure a sustained commitment to some level of debt repayment. If poor states are unable pay their debts, for instance, the rich countries will suffer major losses as well.

Conclusion
Global poverty has traditionally been considered a fact of low politics and not the high politics of state security (Sutcliffe, 2000) but the time to move it up on the agenda is now. Global Poverty is not only an internal problem of states as Ayoob (1987) posits but a global problem. A significant portion of humanity is trapped in a poverty-conflict cycle. No low-income, fragile or conflict affected country has achieved a single Millennium Development Goal (MDG’s) (Christi, 2013). To ignore global poverty is to ignore global environmental, political and economic security which is extremely vital to the stability of the international system. Even though the developing states are hardest hit by the scourge, the rich developed states are not totally immune to the impact. Powerful states have a vital interest in the stability of the international system and one cannot overestimate the significance of global order to a powerful state (Ferraro, 2003).

Globalization, as Isaak (2004), rightly argues, has made it inevitable that events in one part of the world can and do affect events in other parts. The prevailing and enduring nature of global poverty is a huge threat to international peace and stability and while global institutions are doing a lot, success is being recorded, albeit, at a slow and uneven pace. There is a need to review the practices of states and international institutions in their current fight against poverty. States, poor and rich alike, must rise up to the challenge and show the commitment and political will necessary to beat global poverty now before we are overtaken.

References


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