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## GLOBAL POVERTY AND THE POLITICS OF REDISTRIBUTION: AN INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH

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**ABSTRACT**

The politics and ethics of redistribution has been the primary issue of concern in the contemporary political theory, especially in the cosmopolitan traditions. Liberal cosmopolitans consider it one of the necessary measures/methods to bring in global equality and addressing some specific issue of global moral concerns like global poverty, climate change etc. But within cosmopolitan traditions there is no consensus about the framework of distribution or redistribution and another issue of debate is around the plausibility of the framework or model. The proposed paper is a humble attempt to explore the possibilities of an institutional design to alleviate global poverty through redistribution?

**Keywords:** *Global Poverty, Distributive justice, cosmopolitanism, institution*

In order to explore a feasible model of redistribution, the proposed paper maps out both nationalist and cosmopolitan debates surrounding global distributive justice and their comparative strengths. It also throws light on the existing performance of global institutions. It will derive some of the insights from comparative political theory/philosophy approach.

In this interdependent world, as far as global poverty is concerned, the issues of institutional design have been the central focus for both the policy makers and global justice theorists. The existing international institutions have significantly failed and the liberating claims of

globalization have been proved to be a mirage only in mitigating poverty in the Global South. We were led to believe in the last couple of decades that with increasing globalization the gap between the rich and the poor would be significantly reduced. But nothing of the sort has happened and on the contrary this gap, many analysts claim, has increased. Our moral concern regarding global poverty is compounded by yet another factor: powerful global actors and agencies have all but abdicated or significantly reduced the responsibility of alleviating the conditions of the global poor. In the meantime, however, studies in global justice across the humanities and social sciences have gained momentum. Much of

the philosophical literature on global justice that usually, though not exclusively, begin with the problem of global poverty stake out a wider domain of moral responsibility that is truly global in character. Any understanding of this moral responsibility, it is argued, is intimately linked with the ethics and politics of redistribution. And beyond this, scholars also debate—more in disagreement than in agreement—on how to work through the existing institutions in order to transform the moral responsibility to a set of feasible political goals.

A set of interrelated questions beg our attention: how do we explain what poverty is and what counts as minimal well-being? Are only states responsible for alleviating poverty through policies of domestic redistribution? Or, are states, in spite of their limited autonomy, also affected by forces not within their control? To what may we attribute the persistence of poverty in certain regions of the world, or in the global south?

A lot of scholarly literature already exists that seek to explain the above, but most have now come to converge on few significant issues, one of which seeks to highlight that the states alone, and by themselves, cannot address the incidence

of poverty and that what is required is an understanding of the structures of global *injustice*. In saying this one does not, of course, absolve a part of the responsibility that states owe to themselves. Some states do not carry out their redistributive tasks well, or may be incapable of doing so, and others may be corrupt. However, many people living in South Asia, Africa, or Latin America are not poor just because their domestic governments are corrupt and have failed to implement the poverty alleviation programmes and policies. Part of their poverty may be attributed to the unjust structures and institutions they are part of. They could be poor due to the combined effect of the unjust policies that various global or multilateral institutions such as the WTO, the World Bank, the IMF, etc. are pursuing.

Some global justice theorists fault the global institutions for violating the human rights of the global poor, usually ways in which they inflict harms upon them, both direct and indirect. On this view, poverty as a condition caused by a denial of rights, may also be seen as a state of powerlessness where the poor are unable to fulfil their basic needs necessary for leading decent lives, as well as a failure on the part of the transnational institutions

toward creating adequate opportunities that allow the global poor fair access to resources required for their basic needs and survival. The proposed research argues that any global commitment to the respect for human rights must have egalitarian implications for the global institutions which may, in turn, require appropriate redesign.

Following essentially a normative approach, some global justice theorists have defended and interpreted global poverty as violation of human rights in different ways but they converge on one point i.e., it needs to be addressed through global redistribution of benefits and resources. Amongst some of them the idea of 'duty of justice' is much debated as moral obligation but scholars disagree on the ways 'duty of justice' is being taken to protect the human rights of the global poor. And on those bases they can be classified into 'institutional' and 'interactional' categories of human rights. The duty of justice under institutional category is generally negative in nature and argues for compensatory obligation only. Theorists such as Thomas Pogge, Simon Caney, Pablo Gilabert differ on the scope, effectiveness, and nature of the duty of justice. Supporting an interactional

understanding of human rights Pablo and Caney criticize Pogge's (2005) negative duty of justice which is based on the harm principle and the necessity of institutional membership in order to help others living beyond the national borders. However, Pogge argues that negative duty of justice is wider in scope from the practical point of view but Gilabert (2005, 2012) and Caney (2004, 2005) argue that it limits the domain of the moral obligations toward the global poor. And thus both Pablo and Caney support the positive duty of justice which is interactional in nature and extends its scope beyond the national borders. Caney argues that addressing global poverty as a moral problem requires a 'mixed approach' that combines both the institutional and interactional understandings of human rights. He further argues that even if the well-off people of the developed nations claim that they do not interact with the worst-off on the everyday basis that causes harm but it does not limit their duty of justice to the national borders because in this interdependent world, the global poor are mediated and affected by the various policies of global institutions to which they are parties of.



To explore more deeply the obligations of global justice, it will be necessary to comparatively analyse both the nationalists' and the cosmopolitans' arguments in terms of mapping out the scope of obligations. In relation to this, it will be significant to hold to closer scrutiny the views held by nationalists such as David Miller, John Rawls, Thomas Nagel etc. who are sceptical, both on principled and pragmatic grounds, to extend globally the domestic domain of the distribution of benefits and resources. The contrary view, held aloft by Charles Beitz (1983), Thomas Pogge (2011), and others argue that nationalists' claims regarding the scope and nature of redistribution do not undermine the universal moral claim of fair share and equal access to the natural resources by the global poor. Caney argues, for instance, that in spite of different areas of disagreements amongst global justice theorists, they all converge on one thing: an individual's right to have fair share to the global resources should not be limited by nationality which is a matter of luck. The possibility that this right may undermine any given state's sovereign ownership rights over the natural resources cannot be held against the exercise of such a right. And this debate in turn presumably attracts

scholarly attention on a different set of related questions: *why should nations give up their ownership rights over the natural resources that are within their own territory? And what moral obligations do states owe towards the resource deficient states in order to eradicate global poverty and fulfil the rights of the global poor?*

By extending the Rawlsian Original Position to the global level, Charles Beitz (1979, 2005) makes a case for the global distribution of natural resources. Though important as a first step, Beitz's argument does not answer why world leaders who are the party to the contract choose for distribution of natural resources only and not the benefits that accrue from unequal ownership. Martha Nussbaum (2004), by contrast however, rejects the social contractarian tradition of justice and tries to locate an alternative solution to global poverty in her 'capability approach.' She criticizes Beitz and Pogge—who extend the argument of the early Rawls—by stressing upon the structural flaws inherent in the contractarian conception of justice. She proposes instead a set of basic human entitlements which are similar to the human rights and protect a minimum decent life to all. And to realize these basic human entitlements she favours the idea of

‘human fellowship’ which is based on the philosophical tradition of natural law. Arguing beyond the social contractarian tradition, she proposes the idea of ‘human development approach’ as a suitable alternative to eradicate global poverty that, according to her, ensures certain human entitlements enhancing the capability of the global poor to lead decent lives.

Although Nussbaum conceives of thick cooperation networks at the global level that fulfils people’s entitlements to their well-being, Pogge, Caney, Brock, Steiner and Casal deserve our attention for suggesting institutional design proposals to solve the problem of the inequitable distribution of natural resources. Pogge’s suggestions range from mild to strong forms of institutional reform. At times he seems to suggest that instead of devising any ambitious institutional design we should work through the existing institutions to bring about reforms. On other occasions he is impatient with the architecture of the global norms that are captured by the rich and powerful and calls for a systemic radical redesign. One of his (2001, 2005, 2011) proposals for institutional design is the idea of the *Global Resources Dividend* (GRD). The GRD may be seen as a response to the

negative duties that arise from the exclusion of the worst-off from the common resource pool of the planet. According to the GRD, the well-off have to pay back the worst-off for massive consumption of the global resources from which they have been excluded. He argues that the GRD as a “modest proposal” has minimal impact on the well-off and it is wider in scope than any “robust institutional design or proposal.” But this proposal has various limitations. Firstly, the GRD proposal, of course, will benefit the worst-off but it does not interfere with the states’ sovereign ownership rights over the natural resources; secondly, it does not give right to the developing nations to participate and design how the rare natural resources of the planet should be used for the future; thirdly it is a compensatory model that does not promote the negative duties of justice as moral obligation rather argues for the compensation to rectify the historical injustice; fourthly, It does not explore how to ensure the fair and equal access to the global resources by the global poor. However, Pogge talks about the ‘non-participation tariffs’ to deal with the ‘non-complier nations’ but he is not sure what institutional structure- whether coercive, semi-coercive, decentralized, or shared is required to enforce the developed

nations in order to follow their moral obligation of helping the global poor through the common pooled fund. Considering GRD as vantage point, the proposed research makes an attempt to theorize upon egalitarian principle(s) of distribution and tries to visualize that what type of institutional structure is needed to actualize them in non-ideal circumstances.

As far as principles of global distribution and institutional structure are concerned, Global justice theorist Simon Caney (2001, 2005, 2008) has explored these questions and has theorized at length to address the problems of global poverty. He criticises nationalists such as Michael Blake (2002) and Thomas Nagel (2005) for emphasising too much on the normative significance of the state and for arguing that egalitarian principles of equality is applicable only at the domestic level because it has a system of political coercion. He says that they have failed to understand the direct and indirect coercion and its moral significance for global redistribution. Caney (2006) also criticizes Mathias Risse (2005) for not explaining why distributive justice should be a function of legal and political immediacy and what significance it carries at the global level. He admits that 'immediacy' is

necessary but it is vague to argue for political and legal immediacy as prerequisite of the distributive justice. He further argues that it will be too early to argue for what level of 'immediacy' is required to arrive upon demanding principle(s) of redistribution at the global level? Criticizing various nationalists Caney argues that there are possibilities for global principles of distribution and it requires global institutional design.

Caney (2006) probes into the existing approaches for global institutions design in a detailed manner. Distinguishing between the 'purely democratic approach,' on the one hand, and the 'purely instrumental approach,' on the other, for institutional design and rejecting both of them as equally implausible and he favours a 'mixed approach.' Following the 'mixed approach' he argues that a system of international institutions should possess some properties such as equalization of influence, facilitation of the participation of the vulnerable, ensuring of effective enforcement mechanisms that are equally available to all, transparency, public justifiability, and democratic accountability. For Caney what is crucially at stake is an impartial enforcement

mechanism to address the issues of global poverty.

Beyond Caney's proposal, however, there are certain interrelated questions that require our attention and need to be re-engaged with. They are:

- (a) *How to incorporate the voices from the powerless global south in the proposed structure?*
- (b) *What mechanisms of decentralization may be required to uphold states' autonomy and still enable and make them accountable to global duties of justice?*
- (c) *What kind of institutional design do we need to deal with issues of non-compliance?*

### **EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITY OF A DESIGN**

**Layer I**—it will be a body of the world leaders with special focus on the representation from the Global South. This body will have a duty to facilitate the favouring conditions to arrive upon a global consensus to formulate any global policy to deal with the issues of global poverty. Respecting the sovereignty of each and every state whether powerful and powerless, it will act as the highest body to formulate and enforce the global policy

to protect the human rights of the global poor and enhance their capabilities to lead a minimum decent life.

**Layer II**--Global Institutions---they will work as an egalitarian institutional arrangements under the highest commanding body and follow their duty of justice to mitigate global poverty.

**Layer III**--Business Corporations—fulfilling their Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR) wherever they are, they will help the local/state government in mobilizing the resources in the favour of the global poor helping them realize their basic moral rights.

**Layer IV**--Global Civil Society, Global NGOs & Global Social Movements—they will attract the attention of all the above three layers regarding their duty of justice to help the global poor in achieving a minimum decent life.

I believe that the allocation of duty of justice is an ethical task and it does not necessarily require coercion all the time. But to deal with morally urgent problem of global poverty, the top layer of the proposed design, I will not say, would be completely coercive in nature but certainly semi-coercive. And by the term 'semi-coercive', of course, I do not mean the use



of the direct 'threat forces' to restore peace and justice but I propose strong provisions for administrative, legal or financial punishments/sanctions in the cases such as corruption, not complying to the directed duty of justice, supporting those institutional practices that violate the human right of the global poor, massive consumption of the non-renewable and rare global resources, etc. And to fulfil these kinds of responsibilities, the top layer of the proposed design must be equipped with legal and political 'immediacy'<sup>1</sup> to deal with the non-complier actors & enforcing the duty of justice down the layers.

Regarding the 'legal immediacy', I favour either working through the existing International court system or designing of

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<sup>1</sup> I understand the term 'immediacy' as the ability of any juridical institution/body to intervene with the immediate effects to restore and promote justice. But my approach to immediacy differs from nationalists such as Michael Blake, Thomas Nagel etc. and criticizes the normative significance of the state and 'spatial' understanding of the term itself. It does not support the nationalists' idea that 'immediacy' is/should be limited by national borders considering state as the only juridical body to implement it rather it wish to explore some of the vantage points from within its own understanding to theorize what kind of immediacy we need for a strong redistributive institutional design at the global level.

any other legal framework dealing with the cases of non-compliance and violation of human rights at the global level. I do not support the nationalists' arguments of the 'political immediacy' which is limited by the narrow relationship of the fellow-being to the national borders only. I argue that in such an interdependent world, the realization of basic moral rights cannot be domestic phenomenon only. And thus to respond any global call to protect the basic human rights and facilitating a minimum decent environment to global poor to realize their certain human capabilities to mitigate global poverty, the proposed design must have political immediacy transcending the national borders. The logic for the legal and political immediacy derives its legitimacy from the fact that institutionalization of globally fair distribution of benefits and resources and inculcation of the duty of justice throughout the layers needs a strong legal and political institution with some sort of coercive authority. In the absence of any coercive institution at the top of the proposed design, what I see, it will work at the level of ideas only rather than in real world.

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