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The Real and Urgent Conversations We Need

By James E. Hug, S.J.

In “Ending Absolute Poverty” (*Conversations*, Fall 2013 (44), pp. 32-33), Stephen Rowntree, S.J., asks whether “Redistribution or Economic Growth” can do it. His position, in short, is that ending absolute poverty requires economic growth.

Rowntree’s presentation and assumptions overlook several critical realities that shape our lives today, making them both inadequate and dangerous. Here are four points to get our “conversation” to a more fruitful space for serious education and research, along with an invitation.

1. Globalization. Over the past several decades, national economies have become more and more intertwined, so that we now have one global economy. It is no longer possible for a poor country to address absolute poverty by simply launching a growth strategy to end that poverty. It must enter the globalized system and play by its rules. Social activists, including Nobel economics laureates, have long demonstrated that those rules are rigged in favor of wealthy nations and corporate powers.

This has two immediate implications. First, we need to consider economic strategies and plans within their global context. As economic actors, we are all global citizens. Second, we need to explore structural changes to the global economic system to make it more people-centered, common-good focused, and supportive of universal justice.

2. Power. The global economic system is not rigged in favor of the wealthy by accident. With wealth comes power –

political, social, cultural. The system works the way it works because the people and organizations with wealth have the power to make it work that way. Rowntree highlights the achievement of Western countries where a majority are well off and a minority poor as the model for the poorest countries to emulate, using fast growth to grow themselves out of mass poverty.

This model, however, is beginning to look like the dying phase of economic development as we know it. The gap between the wealthy and the poor is growing nearly everywhere. Upward mobility is disappearing in the U.S.: the economic gains of the last three decades have gone to the wealthiest one percent or so of the population while the middle class is shrinking and workers’ incomes are stagnating or eroding. Similar dynamics are emerging in China, India, Brazil, and South Africa. The Arab Spring began because masses of people lost hope that economic growth would be shared widely. Wealth brings social and political power that is used to consolidate wealth by those who have it. This situation is socially unsustainable.

3. Ecological Limits and Climate Change. The challenge of poverty today must always be addressed within the context of our awareness of planetary constraints. There are two dimensions we must be aware of.

First, the human community is already overusing the planet’s resources. In 2012, “Earth Overshoot Day” (the day we began to use more of the earth’s resources than it can renew in a year) fell on August 22. Each year that day comes earlier than the year

before. The pattern is clearly unsustainable. We must end poverty, but over the long term that can happen only through redistribution and a reduction of resource overuse globally.

Second, the type of economic growth that we currently produce – consumption driven, fossil-fuel based, globally competitive – is steadily warming the planet, contribution to climate change that further impoverishes the already poor and threatens to destroy life as we know it on earth over the next century. We must find creative new sustainable patterns of development.

4. Catholic Social Tradition. Jesuit higher education is part of a strong Catholic social tradition that for five decades has called humanity to deal with poverty as a global issue. In *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI described globalization as revealing God’s call to create one human family living sustainably in peace on our limited planet. We have a religious calling to address poverty and all the urgent social problems we face in global solidarity.

These four contextual realities frame the urgent conversation, education, and research needed to create a just and sustainable future. I am planning to set up working groups on the website of Academics at Jesuit Universities and Schools (www.ajus.org), a new initiative to facilitate global networking. Please check it out and consider joining our conversation. ■

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