

# POVERTY ALLEVIATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: BUDDHIST APPROACH\*

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## Abstract

Poverty alleviation focuses on the quality of life for those who are currently experiencing poverty. The United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development confesses that eliminating poverty in all its manifestations and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the massive global threat. The first Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 1) aims to "End poverty in all its forms everywhere". Buddhism has a transparent contribution to sustainable development and social welfare since the 6th century B.C. Some of the discourses recorded in the *Sutta Piṭaka* explain social degradation aggravated by poverty and its related issues. This paper presents the Buddha's teachings regarding the causes of poverty and its impact on sustainable development included in some parts of the *Pāli Tipiṭaka* such as *Cakkavatti Sutta*, *Kūṭadanta Sutta* of *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Cūḷakamma Vibhaṅga Sutta* of *Majjhima Nikāya* and *Maṅgala Sutta* of *Khuddaka Nikāya* etc., as canonical references and integrate with various research findings investigated by different research scholars.

## Aim and Objective

The aim of this paper is to examine the importance and efficacy of poverty alleviation and sustainable development from Buddhist perspectives. It is especially focused on applying Buddhist assumptions related to poverty alleviation that entails enhancing the living standards of people with references from the *Piṭaka* scriptures.

## Research Questions or Hypotheses

This paper questions to what extent theoretical tools expressed by Buddhism can contribute poverty reduction that occurs largely as a result of overall economic growth and examines how Buddhism can make solutions for eradicating poverty in all its forms that remains one of the greatest challenges facing humanity.

## Materials and Methods

The findings of the contents of this paper have been collected by indicating to the interpretation from the Buddhist sacred texts such as *Pāli*, *Aṭṭhakathā*, *Ṭīkā*. Additionally, other data was collected and analyzed from printed books, articles and blogs available online for academic experiments about the divergent schemes of poverty alleviation and its effects on sustainable development. The research methods used for this paper are descriptive, evaluative and comparative methods.

## Introduction

When people or communities are deprived of the means of subsistence, they are said to be in a state or situation known as poverty. Their fundamental human needs cannot be satisfied. Those

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\* Special Award (2023)

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who are poor may lack access to adequate housing, clean water, wholesome food, and medical care. Each country may have its own standards for establishing the poverty line and calculating the proportion of its population that lives in poverty. Most of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are consistent with reducing poverty, because they call for improved performance in areas that are crucial for underprivileged populations.

From a Buddhist point of view, poverty is a type of suffering that is related to the reaction of past *kamma* and the efforts of the present life. Buddhism accepts the idea of many rounds of lives in the cycle (*samsarā*), so a person is growing up and struggling in a nation with a high poverty index is often seen as the result of his or her past *kamma*. Therefore, in order to bring about a good life and a higher living condition, everyone is guided by Buddhism to always act and do good deeds which is referred to have moral ethics in the long run to achieve the good *kamma* that can be created. Moreover, Buddhist teachings urges everyone to cultivate moral ethics such as carrying out poverty alleviation, social welfare activities for the sustainable development of society, and to always avoid toxic actions that harm the well-being of the community.

## Findings

### How to Define Poverty?

The Encyclopedia Britannica defines the term poverty as the lack of a typical or socially acceptable level of wealth or material things is known as poverty. (Britannica, 2023) People are said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to meet their fundamental necessities. In this situation, figuring out what fundamental needs are first necessitates the identification of the impoverished. These can be categorized in two ways: either specifically as "those necessary for survival" or generically as "those reflecting the prevailing standard of living in the community." The first criterion would only apply to individuals who were on the verge of dying from famine or exposure; the second would cover those whose nourishment, housing, and clothes, while sufficient to maintain life, fall short of those of the general population.

The problem of definition is further compounded by the noneconomic connotations that the word poverty has acquired. (Britannica, 2023) For instance, poor health service, low levels of education, unemployment problem, high rates of disruptive or disorderly behavior, and improvidence have all been linked to poverty. Despite the fact that these characteristics have frequently been linked to poverty, including them in a definition of poverty would tend to conceal the connection between them and the inability to meet one's basic requirements. Regardless of the criteria, economic experts frequently believe that poverty has negative consequences on both individuals and society.

### Two Types of Poverty

Basically, there are two types of poverty; absolute poverty and relative poverty. The term absolute poverty refers to a predetermined norm that is constant over time and across nations. This standard criterion typically refers to a situation in which serious deprivation of essential human needs such as food, clean water to drink, sanitary facilities, health, shelter, education, and information occur. (Sachs, 2005). Especially it depends on both availability to services and income.

Relative poverty refers to situations in which certain people are unable to participate fully in society and profit from practices and occurrences that other people take for granted. (Adamson, 2012) These people lack of the resources necessary to maintain the typical level of living in the society in which they live. For instance, if practically everyone in a neighborhood lives in contemporary brick houses, a person who cannot afford better housing in that region can be said to be in relative poverty. Since they can fulfill their fundamental necessities, a person can be poor in the relative sense even if they are not poor in the absolute sense. Relative poverty is seen to be the most useful indicator of poverty levels in wealthy industrialized countries because they would have lower absolute poverty levels. (Raphael, 2009)

### **Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2023**

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) started to develop the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) in 2010 in order to quantify poverty in a much wider context. The MPI uses the dimensions of health, education, and standards of living to take into account various demographic deprivations and how they intersect. The worldwide MPI demonstrates how people experience poverty in all facets of their everyday life while also monitoring poverty reduction and informing policy. The MPI as a poverty index can be pictured as a stacked tower of the interlinked deprivations experienced by poor individuals, with the aim of eliminating these deprivations.

In 110 countries, 1.1 billion out of 6.1 billion people (or little over 18%) live in acute multidimensional poverty, according to the 2023 publication. (UNDP, 2023) Sub-Saharan Africa (534 million) and South Asia (389 million) are home to approximately five out of every six poor people. Since nearly two-thirds of the world's poor (730 million people) reside in middle-income nations. Although low-income countries constitute only 10% of the population included in the MPI, these are where 35% of all poor people reside. Children under 18 years old account for half of MPI-poor people (566 million). The poverty rate among children is 27.7%, while among adults it is 13.4%. (UNDP, 2023) Poverty primarily affects rural areas with 84% of all poor persons residing there. In every part of the world, it is found that rural areas are poorer than urban regions.

### **What is Poverty Alleviation?**

Poverty alleviation is the set of steps taken in an economic and humanitarian way for eradicating poverty from a country. The poverty line is the minimum level of income deemed adequate in a specific nation. (Ravallion, 1992) It is the minimum amount of money a person needs to fulfill the basic necessities of life, like shelter and food. The global poverty line must be frequently adjusted to account for changes in worldwide price levels. The World Bank updated the global poverty lines in September 2022. The new extreme poverty line of \$2.15 per person per day, which replaces the \$1.90 poverty line, is based on 2017 price levels. Therefore, it is considered to be extreme poverty for someone to earn less than \$2.15 each day. (World Bank, 2022) The goal of poverty alleviation programs is to lower the rate of poverty in the nation by providing proper access to food, financial help, and basic necessities to the households and families belonging to the below the poverty line.

## Sustainable Development Goals for Poverty Alleviation

The United Nations has set up a Millennium Declaration to tackle poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation, and discrimination against women by the target date of 2015, by 191 member nations at that time in September 2000. (WHO, 2018). The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were born out of this Declaration. The United Nations General Assembly formulated the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 as part of the Post-2015 Development Agenda, which aimed to construct a new global development framework to replace the MDGs, which were completed that year. (Biermann et al., 2017) The chief objective of SDGs was to formulate a set of universal goals that meet the urgent political, environmental and economic challenges facing our world. It is also known as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development because the deadline of the SDGs is set up to 2030.

## Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Poverty Alleviation

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes eradicating extreme poverty for all people worldwide by the year 2030 as one of its key objectives. The rate of poverty decreased from 11% in 2015 to 8.6% in 2018, marking a historical turn down for the period between 2015 and 2018. Nowcasts propose that the COVID-19 pandemic caused a sharp rise in the global poverty rate, from 8.3 percent in 2019 to 9.2 percent in 2020, (UNDP 2023) describing the earliest growth in extreme poverty since 1998 and the highest growth since 1990, and a three-year delay in the process of reducing poverty.

The COVID-19 pandemic's effects halted the steady decline in poverty over the previous twenty-five years. The effects of the crisis in Ukraine and soaring inflation are exacerbating this historic reversal even further. In comparison to pre-pandemic forecasts, it is predicted that the cumulative effects of these crises will result in an additional 75 million to 95 million people living in extreme poverty in 2022. (UNDP, 2023)

## Buddhist Approach to the Concept of Poverty

The Buddha preached the reason of being poverty in *Cūḷakamma Vibhaṅga Sutta* of *Majjhima Nikāya*. It is mentioned in this *Sutta* that someone who does not give food, drinks, clothes, vehicle, flower, lamp, etc., to anyone can be poor. (*Majjhima Nikāya* Vol. III, p.232) This means that the lack of giving called *Dāna* is the main cause of poverty. However, some argue that a poor person is incapable of giving to others because he rarely lacks his basic needs. What should be reconsidered is that if someone has a strong desire to give and donate, it should understand that no matter how small amount of the donation he or she performs, someone will enjoy the benefit of that donation because of his strong *Saddhā*.

## Kamma and Consequences of Poverty

The main highlight of this *Cūḷakamma Vibhaṅga Sutta* is that all living creatures are owners of their own actions, heirs of their own actions, they borne out of their own actions, are bound to their own actions, have their own actions as their own refuge. In *Pāli*, *kammassakā māṇava*, *sattā kamma dāyadā*, *kammayonī kammabandhu*. (*Majjhima Nikāya* Vol. III, p.244)

Here, action must be understood as *kamma*. A person does not have the right to choose which country to be born in when he is born. If given the choice, everyone would prefer to be born in wealthy, high-income countries. Therefore, if it is considered from a Buddhist perspective, every Theravādins fully accept the law of *kamma*. This idea is also related to a belief that every Buddhist is born alive in a cycle of existence called *Samsarā* that is always going around. Therefore, being born in a poorest country or a richest country in this present life is a sign of a person's own actions in his past life. It must be understood that it is totally based on everyone's actions (*kamma*) such as good or bad.

### Importance of Sīla in Poverty Alleviation

If it is analyzed why people are poor, it can understand that a simple and certain answer is due to the past *kamma*. However only past *kamma* is not referred to here. Buddhism describes both past and present actions. Therefore, by constantly cultivating good *kamma* in the present, a brighter future may be created. It can be said that it is directly related to the concept of morality or moral ethics which can be defined as avoiding bad actions and observing and practicing good actions. In *Pāli*, *idhekacco vivaṭṭaṃ patthento dānaṃ deti, sīlaṃ samādiyati*. (*Majjhima Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā* Vol.I, p.93)

Therefore, being poor or living in a poor country can be understood as being related to past karma, and in order to get out of poverty, it is very important to practice the morality of doing good actions and avoiding bad actions. Knowing how to work for the welfare, alleviation of poverty and sustainable development of the society with humanity is also doing a good deed, so it can be called morality (*Cāritta Sīla*) (*Vinaya Piṭaka* Vol.II, p.131). The Buddha taught that those without moral temperaments are truly indebted and poor. (*Aṅguttara Nikāya* Vol.I, p.36) On the other hand, refraining from doing things that are toxic and harmful to the human society as a whole or causing poverty is also a known as morality (*Vāritta Sīla*). (*Dīgha Nikāya* Vol. I, p.278)

### The role of Public Sector in Poverty Alleviation

The public sector means the aspects related to the public benefit policies for the welfare of the citizens in the society, such as food security, social and economic development; unemployment, public health, education quality, environmental protection and resource management etc., (Robert et al., 2009) From a Buddhist perspective, the regulatory framework of public administration can be found in *Cakkavatti Sutta*'s of *Dīgha Nikāya*. This sutta identifies the economic disparities that created a rich-poor division in the nation, which is crucial for public administration. The importance of ensuring the food security of a nation and providing job opportunities for the citizen is the long run prosperity of the country.

In this *Sutta*, the universal monarch ordered his son who will inherit the throne to assist the obstacles of the citizen and create job opportunities for them. (*Dīgha Nikāya* Vol.III, p.55) However his son was unable to do so, theft occurred in the country. The poor citizens could not bear the suffering of poverty because there was not enough food, so they began to steal property from the wealthy men. When the king asked the thief what he was stealing, the thief replied that it was poverty. Then the king gave the thief some food and clothes and released him from the palace. Then other poor people also started stealing, hoping that if the king knew about their theft, they would get their food. Thieves are rampant throughout the country in this way. Then, when the king

arrested and killed the thieves to keep the country peaceful, thieves also took up arms and started fighting back and killing them. Thus, there were riots in the country and many people were died.

### Relationship between Poverty and Unemployment

The importance of ensuring the food security of a nation and providing job opportunities for the citizen is the long run prosperity of the country. According to above mentioned case of *Cakkavatti Sutta*, it also notes that the unemployment of a nation is the fundamental issue, and that if it is resolved first, all other issues would also be resolved. If the king would create a reliable employment opportunity for the first thief who can serve himself as a long-term career, instead of providing food and clothing that could run out in a very short time, other subsequent problems would be solved. The poverty of a country first arises from the failure to provide the basic needs of the citizens. When the poor people do not get their necessities they really need, thefts and robberies occur. Then they made and create weapons to defend themselves from the arresting. With the advent of weapons, killings each other have occurred, and human lifespans have decreased.

### How does Food Insecurity Affect Poverty

Poverty alleviation is a vital role in formulation and implementation of policy for food security because many poor people spend a large share of their income on food and have to endure high food prices. (Martin, 2010) The *Kūṭadanta Sutta* of *Dīgha Nikāya* highlights that the root cause of all problems related to poverty is the problem of food security and distribution. According to this sutta, the king used to collect a lot of taxes from his countrymen and make sacrifices to the nature gods for the peace and prosperity of the country. (*Dīgha Nikāya* Vol.I, p.150) However, it became difficult for the people to contribute a lot of money for the sacrifices. As a result, hunger and poverty crisis have started to occur all over the country. The king's wise minister suggests to him that making sacrifices is not a practical solution to solve the country's poverty issue. The minister also advises the king as follows.

- (1) *janapade ussahanti kasigo rakkhe tesam bhavam rājā bījabhattam anuppadetu*,  
“to develop and improve agricultural activities which is the basis of food security as a priority”;
- (2) *janapade ussahanti vāñijjāya tesam bhavam rājā pābhatam anuppadetu*,  
“to provide adequate capital and infrastructure to traders and merchants”; and
- (3) *janapade ussahanti rājaporise tesam bhavam rājā bhattavetanam pakappetu*,  
“to create decent salaries and basic necessities for government officials and civil servants”.

The king carried out the instructions directed by his minister and provided the basic necessities to the people in his country. As a result, everyone is satisfied, happy in heart and has a good quality of life.

## Does Inequality Cause Poverty?

When every individual is able to excel in their own businesses, the society a whole will be comprehensively prosperous. Buddhist teachings encourage the wealthy people to treat with respect those who have diligently provided for their businesses in some ways. Wealthy individual needs to realize and remember that the possessions have been supported in some way by others, and they need to award back generously to respective persons. They should realize that they would not get their current standard of property without the support of the staffs and followers. It means that they should not only express their gratitude towards the professional staffs and colleagues who help them achieve their great success, but also repay them with something special. They must be looked after and supported what they really need. It is mentioned in *Maṅgala Sutta* of *Khuddaka Nikāya* that *kataññutā etaṃ maṅgala muttamam*. (*Khuddaka Nikāya* Vol.I, p.4). It means that it is a great blessing to understand and remember the gratitude of another person who has done something for him.

From Buddhist perspective, a true caring and generous giving require a deep understanding of an interdependent relationship between donors and receivers. It must be understood that Buddhist assumptions lead to long-term goals of success by allowing all stakeholders in a community to share together the fruits of success. The Buddha preached in the *Maṅgala Sutta* that *ñātakānaṃca saṅgaho etaṃ maṅgala muttamam*. (*Khuddaka Nikāya* Vol.I, p.4). It means giving and supporting relatives and colleagues as much as possible is a great blessing. The wealth of one society comes from the poverty of the other." (Hanh, 2007). Therefore, if everyone in the world appreciates his or her social environment and helps the people in the community with humanity by means of philanthropic works, inequality can be eliminated; global poverty can be reduced; and sustainable development can be achieved.

## Buddhist Approach to Sustainable Development

Almost every country in the world is focused on the economy and trying to dominate the whole world. Most of the countries in the world are fiercely competing to be at the top of the world by using the limited natural resources in an unlimited competition. Unbalanced development is occurring in today's world because the focus is solely on increasing supply side. It may have seen instructive evidence of the tension between the world's major political and economic powers in the last two world wars. The economic concepts prescribed by Buddhism give special priority to the long-term sustainability of human society as a whole. In particular, it focuses on the sufficiency of the natural resources upon which all human beings depend for their needs, through the control of demand by limiting the inexhaustible human wants. Buddhist economics aims to change the modern concept of economic system which emphasizes on minimizing cost and maximizing profit to minimizing consumption and maximizing human welfare and prosperity. The wealth level of a nation should be emulated from Bhutan's method, which is not measured by Gross Domestic product (GDP), by converting it to Gross National Happiness (GNH).

The precious lesson to be learned from the COVID-19 crisis is that human beings should continuously practice right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*) and strike a balance between humans and nature. In order to live in peace with all living beings on this planet, everyone should discover and practice the *Majjhima Paṭipadā*. (*Khuddaka Nikāya* Vol.I, p.42) Buddhism emphasizes the interdependence of all living beings in a human community. It is very important in today's world to find the most possible commonality among differences such as citizenship, race, skin color, culture religious beliefs. What they all have in common is that all humans live on this one planet.

For instance, global outbreak of COVID-19 has proven that the danger of a pandemic issue that is started in one region of the world is comprehensively applicable to all humanity living on this planet. Conversely, the success and happiness of one part of the world is also the inclusive advantage for all people in the world. Therefore, the suffering or happiness of this world does not only belong exclusively to an individual; or to a race; or to a nation, but also to the collective community on this world.

### **Discussion**

Poverty is a complex and multifaceted social and economic condition characterized by a lack of sufficient resources to meet the basic human needs and enjoy a decent standard of living. It often involves the absence or inadequacy of income, education, healthcare, housing, and access to essential services. Poverty can vary in severity and duration, and it often manifests in various forms and can be both absolute and relative. Poverty alleviation refers to the set of measures and strategies designed to reduce or eliminate poverty within a given society or community. It is a complex and multifaceted goal that involves improving the economic, social and overall well-being of individuals and families living in poverty. The specific approaches and policies for poverty alleviation can vary widely depending on the economic, social, and political context of a country or region.

A wide range welfare-based guidelines preached by the Buddha should be regarded as the underlying factors of modern social welfare services for a sustainable community. The concepts of Buddhism are rooted in a multi-faceted consideration of issues such as poverty, employment, investment, infrastructure, savings, income, expenditure and career development. It is also associated with various sector of today's economy such as material possession, consumption and production. This paper discusses some suttas recorded in the Pāli literature to improve the quality of everyone's socio-economic life.

Cakkavatti Sutta explains that poverty is the root cause of crime, social tensions, wars and conflicts. By poverty alleviation, society must be free of crime where friendship and peaceful coexistence of members can be associated and sustainable development can be achieved. The Kūṭadanta Sutta suggests to allocate resources to society in the form of material assistance, such as capital, infrastructure, and equipment to engage in economic activities that are beneficial to well-being. Buddhist teachings encourages wealthy individual to provide not only their attendants and employees who diligently assist for their business but also everyone living together in society to help each other with humanity and work for the common benefits.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that the achievement of individual and social prosperity depends on the poverty alleviation. Women, children and other vulnerable ethnic groups are disproportionately affected by poverty, and even if they wish to escape poverty, they face significant obstacles. Buddhist literature state that widespread poverty has a negative impact on communities and nations by promoting social unrest and violence. The United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development specifies a plan of action for countries to strive towards reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development. Therefore, poverty alleviation is essential for improving the quality of life of citizens and for achieving long-term global stability.

From Buddhist point of view, the suffering (*dukkha*) that occurs in all human beings arises from grasping impermanent nature and clinging to desire. From the Buddhist point of view, the two types of poverty: physical poverty and mental poverty, are the reality that will always exist among all living beings. It has been revealed that even some people who even accomplish material property are often far away from emotional wealth due to social barriers. Although material possessions usually serve to fulfill the needs of human life, it is true that maintaining these assets so that they do not disappear often leads to hardships and obstacles. Therefore, Buddhism instructs that everyone should only try to face any kinds of suffering. From Buddhist perspective, the suffering that occurs in all human beings arises from grasping impermanent nature and clinging to desire. At a time when everyone is enjoying the fruits of success, it is important to eradicate the selfishness that puts only one's own interests, and to focus and make efforts for the achievement of the common interests of all human beings who live together in the entire society.

### Acknowledgement

As a primary, I would like to express my extensive and genuine appreciation to Dr. Win Win Yi, Professor and Head, Department of Oriental Studies, University of Yangon, for granting me a chance to carry out this paper. I am extending my thanks to all the teaching officers, staffs and my colleagues from Department of Oriental Studies, University of Yangon, for their generous attitude and friendly behaviour.

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