

Canada's Role in the Protection of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

Development Assistance

Gauri Sreenivasan

Policy Co-ordinator, Canadian Council for International Cooperation

(Text)

"A Mean Season for Human Rights"

At a recent Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC) conference Clarenz Diaz, President of the Centre for International Law in Development in New York, said that this is a mean season for human rights, by which he meant that the current global context is predominantly one of human rights deprivation.

Even as we doubt the outcomes of the wave of democratization in Latin America, Eastern Europe and elsewhere, in terms of the depth of protection it affords for civil and political rights, we are certain about the worsening global context for economic, cultural and social rights.

Global poverty has its familiar statistics: 1.3 billion living on less than \$1 a day, predominantly women. Less well-known is that 3 billion live on less than \$2 a day; and the gap between rich and poor is ever widening.

Stricken tigers

Recently I returned from a CCIC-led mission to South East Asia, as part of the 'In Common Campaign' to investigate the roots of the economic crisis, the impacts particularly on the poor, and lessons for poverty-fighting strategies. What we found was a human and developmental crisis of staggering proportions.

The tragedy is that South East Asia had made, however controversially, gains against poverty. Absolute poverty had been virtually eliminated from South Korea, Malaysia, and Thailand. Indonesia was rapidly approaching the same goal. Today they face an acute and worsening situation.

Countries hailed as models of economic growth have fallen hard and fast with devastating impacts for the poor, with whole new classes of working people falling into poverty due to layoffs as well as to bank and business closures. Gains so hard won have been lost in a matter of months.

The crisis is far from over. With little in the way of social safety nets to protect them, the future looks grim for the region's poor and newly poor. By the end of the year Thailand may witness 12 million people, a fifth of its population, plunge below the poverty line. But in Indonesia, the fourth most populous nation of the planet, the situation is worse still. The economy is still in free fall, and the number of people living in poverty may grow to half the population—100 million people, with projections of 15 to 25 million people unemployed.

We heard strong and widespread testimony that the International Monetary Fund has worsened the impact of the crisis by demanding tough fiscal and monetary policy measures that forced government