Report of the 2nd Käte Hamburger Lecture

Beyond 2015:
Getting Serious about Global Justice

with Prof. Thomas Pogge, 6 December 2012
While the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) have focused attention on continuing severe deprivation suffered by poor people worldwide, their impact has been diminished by the lack of clearly assigned tasks and responsibilities. At the second Käte Hamburger Lecture, organised by the Centre in cooperation with the Development and Peace Foundation (SEF), Prof. Dr. Thomas Pogge spoke about new approaches beyond 2015 for achieving global justice.

Today, more than seven billion people are living in the world, large numbers of whom are suffering severe deprivations that are poverty-related. Over the last few years, the question was often whether these deprivations have got better or worse. According to Prof. Thomas Pogge, that question is irrelevant seen from a moral point of view. What really matters is: How many of these deprivations are necessary, and how many avoidable?

Referring to statistics, Professor Pogge stated that about a third of all human beings have died from poverty-related causes. That is about 400 million since the end of the Cold War. In Pogge’s view, this questions the commitment of the international community to human rights.

Asking why this is happening, Pogge said that put simply, income growth is poorly distributed. Further inquiring why the global share of income by population is so unequally distributed, he stated that a very important part of the explanation is the regulatory capture. For example during the US elections around six billion dollars were spent on candidates that were running for office in the US. This money was literally invested for political results in return. In this system the strongest participants have the greatest opportunities and incentives to achieve effective lobbying. They believe that the return from lobbying, by shifting the rules in their own favour, exceeds the cost of lobbying. In this regard, it is a simple investment decision: each time they successfully invest they increase their share and in the next round become even more able to lobby effectively for favourable rules and practices.

This phenomenon has been well-known for many decades. But now, Pogge argued, we have reached a new stage through globalisation, through the very fast emergence of a supranational architecture of rules and regulations. According to Pogge, at that stage it is easier to carry out effective lobbying because of the lack of democracy, transparency, and accountability. Consequently, often very high returns are reached. Moreover, in a competitive system moral concerns are subordinated. Moral concerns on international agreements at the national level can be set aside with the argument that others do not abide by these constraints, so one cannot afford to do so either.
Nowadays, the most cost-effective lobbying seeks to shape the design of supranational global institutional governance. The result of this in terms of global income distribution is that only the top 5% have experienced a gain, whereas the greatest losses have been at the bottom quarter. In figures, this means that the bottom quarter loses a third of its household income. In consequence, the poor are not participating in growth, so growth is not helping them.

So what are the main institutional constraints at the supranational level that affect the poor especially?

According to Pogge these are:

- protectionism (in the form of subsidies),
- pollution rules (which do not exist),
- pharmaceuticals (too high costs, no access),
- illicit financial flows,
- labour standards (as there are no global ones),
- privileges,
- and the arms trade (as oppressive regimes stay in power because of them).

As a result, these rules and conventions at the supranational level put a question mark over human rights, which seem very far from that architecture.

Pogge dealt with a widely used and often repeated counter-argument to the theory that the supranational architecture causes a great deal of poverty today. This counter-argument states that the theory cannot be true because of obvious differences in performances. Therefore, so the argument goes, not global but rather local factors are the important ones. Pogge gave this counter-argument a conceptual answer: the local factors are not the most relevant, but merely show co-responsibility.

**Beyond 2015: the MDG successors**

While the MDGs will expire in 2015, consultations about them have started. For Pogge the MDGs have been more like an isolated wish list, inasmuch as so far people have not agreed on any responsibilities. They were detached from any assignation of particular responsibilities to any agents, whereas the poorest countries were given the greatest burdens. Therefore, at the end of his lecture Pogge argued that in the successors to the MDGs, the affluent and powerful countries should be given more responsibilities resulting in specific obligations.
Prof. Pogge suggested what institutional reform goals for post-2015 could look like:

1. Eradication or compensation of protectionist trade barriers
2. Fees for compensation to those that are most vulnerable to pollution & climate change
3. Although it is probably impossible to eradicate, at least a fee or tax on the arms export into the developing world
4. Minimum tax for every multinational corporation on their profits
5. Complete eradication of the maintenance of secret bank accounts
6. No obligations for a population through large debts if they have not been beneficial to the population (e.g. accumulated by their rulers for purposes that were not approved by, nor beneficial to the population)
7. Ensuring that massive natural resource outflows are beneficial to the population
8. Making pharmaceutical innovations affordable and the establishment of a Health Impact Fund

Comments by Prof. Jan Aart Scholte and Margret Thalwitz

Margret Thalwitz, Senior Expert Fellow at the Centre, here began her comments on the lecture by agreeing with Pogge, stating that the data were compelling. After reading Pogge and spending most of her professional career on “the supply side of development”, it feels for her like maybe she should sit in jail for the moral failure of having too easily neglected the negative duty side. Intellectually, she said, everybody understands Pogge’s negative duty argument quite well. Therefore, she asked, why is it difficult to act accordingly?

Furthermore, based on Pogge’s proposals on global taxes and new global institutions to deliver the revenues required, Margret Thalwitz asked how these can be protected from the same kind of influences that have ruled institutions that we have today. For, evidently, we have still the same capitalist market system.

The second commentator, Prof. Dr. Jan Aart Scholte, Senior Fellow at the Centre, introduced his comments by saying that he would make four points that would complicate the arguments of Pogge and also four points to process them. First, he pointed out that there are also other values, e.g. democracy and solidarity, meaning that justice has more dimensions. Hence the question is how to incorporate them. With his second point, Scholte referred to household incomes, which Pogge used as a class type of hierarchy. Scholte asked about other forms of hierarchy which perhaps make no reference to household income. Third, Scholte mentioned the importance of the fact that governance has not only moved from the national to the supranational level, but that governance is also moving from the public to the private (e.g. in the area of finance).
Before turning to his “processing” comments, Scholte pointed to his fourth “complicating” fact: cultural diversity in relation to global justice. Talking about so-called obvious injustices, like basic health and nutrition, perhaps it would be justified to say that one does not have to talk about culture and cultural diversity. However, Scholte doubted that, when people across the highly plural and diverse ‘would-be’ global society addressed issues of what is a good life and a good society, everyone would be on the same page. Hence perhaps it is not that clear how to handle cultural diversity in this respect.

With his so-called processing arguments, Scholte asked Pogge about his proposed reforms, which seem to create a lot of institutions and things that happen on the global level. Scholte wondered about the people that are served by this; how are they part of the process of creating their own better conditions? What kind of global democracy would Pogge suggest? Furthermore, he asked if the normative theory of Pogge should not also be extended by an explanatory theory.

In the final general round of questions by the audience, there was a particular focus on the possibility of implementing Pogge's suggested institutions. It seems that as there is no world government, implementation is difficult, because even at the level of the UN it would need the agreement of states.

Pogge agreed with these statements and stated with reference to incentive problems that we are in a very difficult situation. But it will get even more difficult with more inequality. He therefore concluded that a reform programme is needed and issues that many people can agree on have to be found.