



**THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST POVERTY:  
AN ETHICAL FOUNDATION AND FRAMEWORK**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

The recent revival of the Poor People's Campaign by SCLC under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Eric Lee, CEO, and Tyrone Freeman, SCLC Board President and President of SEIU-ULTCW, is to be welcomed and supported, not only because it is a continuation of the last and unfinished campaign of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (May he be blessed always), but because of its continuing and current urgency and relevance to our unfinished struggle for a just and good society. Moreover, it has implications for the world. For the success of a national campaign is related in great part, as Dr. King taught, to how much we restrain the ruling regime's waste of resources on war and the failed fantasies of empire. Also, as Min. Malcolm X (Peace and blessings be upon him always and everywhere) taught, it is dependent on our linking our struggles with the oppressed and struggling peoples of the world to create a new historical option and opportunity for us all. But to insure that this campaign is effective, sustainable and successful, we must understand and approach it by drawing on the best of our ethical thought and political practice. For our history and culture offer clear guidelines for understanding and asserting ourselves in the world.

The sacred teachings of our ancestors constantly call on us to actively express care and responsibility for the poor and vulnerable among us. We must, the *Husia* teaches, "give food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothes to the naked and a boat to cross over for those who have none." Moreover, we must be "a father for the orphan, a mother for the timid, a husband and helper to the widow, a shade for the child, a staff of support for the aged, an aid to the ill, an ally to the oppressed, an assistant for the stranger, a raft for the

drowning, and a ladder for those trapped in the pit (of despair)." Indeed, the Seba-Maat, the ancient teachers of Maat, the way of rightness in the world, taught that the moral measure of any society is how it treats its most vulnerable persons.

This ethical insight is rooted in the ancient African concept of the human person as a bearer of dignity and divinity, and that one should do nothing to others or oneself which would injure, offend or violate this sacred status. It is within this understanding that we must approach poverty, especially in its extreme forms, as an intolerable offense to the dignity of the human person and a violation of the right to a life of dignity and decency. It is a life in which persons must have, at a minimum, adequate food, clothing, housing, health care, education, justly compensated and dignity-affirming work, meaningful participation in communal and public life, and the ability to walk with dignity in the world.

Framing the campaign against poverty as a human rights struggle is key to its presentation, acceptance and success. For if freedom from poverty is understood as a human right, it creates a different and deeper urgency and rightness. It is Malcolm X who in the civil rights phase of the Black Freedom Movement taught us the importance of moving from stressing civil rights to the demand and defense of our human rights which he defined as God-given rights that one has by virtue of being born and being human. And he rightfully argued that these are inalienable and no state, group or person can rightly deny or take them from us.

Secondly, Malcolm maintained that to frame our struggle as a human rights struggle expands the nature and possibilities of our claims and actions beyond the

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oppressive system and raises the issue of its radical reconstruction. Also, Malcolm argued that from this vantage point, we are able to build on the international bodies of law, literature and institutions which deal with defining and defending human rights. And finally, he said that such a thrust would open up and strengthen our alliances with other oppressed, progressive and struggling people engaged in struggles for liberation and higher levels of human life all over the world.

To initiate and sustain a serious campaign to reduce and eradicate poverty, then, there are several requirements. First, the campaign must be human right-focused, i.e., on the protection and promotion of human life, human well-being and human flourishing. It must foster policies and practices that move the question of the reduction and eradication of poverty from one of providing charity or questionable welfare to its being a political and ethical obligation of society and a social and personal obligation for each of us. In a word, it is a matter of rights and justice in the strongest sense.

Secondly, a human rights and human-centered approach must deal with persons in the context of their family, community and culture. It must not try to separate persons from their people or ask them to deny their ethnic identity and the deep historical, spiritual and cultural meaning this has for them. On the contrary, it must recognize

each people and culture as a unique and equally valuable way of being human in the world and greatly resourceful in meeting any challenge which confronts them.

Thirdly, this approach must seek to create conditions for everyone, not only to have a job, but to share access and opportunities of human development and to share in the benefits of the goods of society and the world. Thus, the campaign for the poor must have an economic, political, cultural and educational thrust. This means avoiding the tendency to reduce the struggle against poverty to providing jobs, and to minimize the importance of racial, gender, cultural, educational, legal and political aspects of poverty. There's a tendency to say now that it's not about race but about class, but it's about both and also gender as history and current practices prove.

Finally, the poor must participate fully in any campaign to aid them as a matter of right and responsibility, i.e., in the formulation, implementation, monitoring, and assessment of all strategies and programs. In this process, they will gain not only material necessities and other resources of life, but also a deeper sense of self-respect and their own value and dignity. We must, as Kwame Nkrumah says, "go to the people, start with what they know, build on what they have" and together with them struggle to open the horizon of history and our future to the realization of true human freedom and flourishing for everyone.

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