

Conference Report

Poverty in the Muslim World and Communities: Causes and Solutions

The international conference on “Poverty in the Muslim World and Communities: Causes and Solutions” was held at the Legend Hotel and at the campus of the International Islamic University Malaysia, Gombak, Kuala Lumpur, December 14-15, 2005. It was jointly organized by the International Institute for Muslim Unity (IIMU) and the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). Representing ten countries, the participants explored the problem of poverty in the Muslim world through the following channels:

6 Keynote presentations, three in English and three in Arabic,
1 panel discussion composed of scholars and activists, and
69 paper presentations of which 35 were in Arabic.

Of the participants, 48 were from Malaysia and the remaining 27 came from outside Malaysia including six from United Arab Emirates and five from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Rationale

The two-day conference was organized, according to the chairman of IIMU, “to pool our resources and formulate ways and means of eradicating poverty, which is plaguing the Muslim World.” It is commonly agreed that most Muslims constituting one fifth of the world’s population, are poor and live on less than \$1 a day. The source of this situation is definitely not religion which enjoins Muslim to reflect upon their individual and civilizational responsibilities and to strive hard to build ethically sound and socially, politically and economically developed systems. This conference was meant to enlighten the general public and the elites in the Muslim World, through honest and serious scholarly investigation, the causes and

solutions to the poverty in the Muslim world. It was hoped, as expressed by the Rector of the IIUM, that “this conference will help towards actualizing a strategic plan of the O.I.C. to alleviate the suffering of millions of people due to poverty and deprivation.”

The Inaugural Speech

The conference was officiated by Tan Sri Dato’ Nor Mohammed Yakob, the second Finance Minister of Malaysia, who represented and read the speech of the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. The Prime Minister’s speech began by reminding the audience of the abject poverty in the Muslim World where for many “even the fulfillment of basic needs is a luxury” and where people rank at the bottom of the Human Development Index. Half-hearted measures embarked upon in some countries have not succeeded in eradicating poverty and even some sincere efforts have not yielded the desired result.

One major stumbling block in the fight against poverty, according to the Prime Minister, “is the mindset of the ruling elite and the ‘haves’ of a society.” They look at the problem of poverty as the problem of the poor only. Instead, the government of Malaysia looks at poverty as a barrier to “our” progress.

The Malaysian government’s philosophy, according to the Prime Minister, is that “if the conditions of the poor improve, it will improve ‘our’ progress and the rich will also get richer hence the entire society will progress.” The solution to the problem of poverty is not just in terms of “soup kitchens” but to find ways and means to help the poor enhance their productivity. The poor need to be trained in skills, educated and employed to become productive and even tax payers. This holistic approach has done wonders for Malaysia and it has brought stability to the society and the polity.

The Prime Minister as the chairman of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) announced the establishment of the World Institute of Poverty Eradication (WIPER). This institute will undertake research relating to poverty, provide forum for training workers in poverty-related issues, and disseminate information on poverty to various institutes, agencies and the governments. This announcement was warmly endorsed by the participants.

Conference Papers

The inaugural speech was followed by 6 keynote speeches. The speeches in English were given by Shukor Kassim of Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia, Chamhuri Siwar of the National University of Malaysia and Amer al-Roubaie of IIUM. The Arabic speeches were delivered by Sheikh Ahmad bin Hamad al-Khalili, the Grand Mufti of Oman, Ayatollah Muhammad Ali al-Tashkiri, special advisor to the President of Iran and Abdul Majid al Najjar from the European Centre for Studies and Research, France. They agreed that there is no other way to conquer the problems of poverty in the Islamic world but through improving the capacities of the concerned countries in the fields of education, scientific research, qualification and training by extending thereto technical and material support so that they can transcend the threshold of poverty, surmount scientific weakness and access a new world that opens up for them large vistas of equal development. Shukor Kassim provided examples of “what has worked” in fighting poverty and improving living standard at a small scale. The speakers and panel discussants agreed that poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon requiring a comprehensive set of well-coordinated measures. Aid dependency and moral sermonizing will not help eradicate poverty. Its eradication requires participation of both the stakeholders and the beneficiaries.

The ten paper presentation sessions were highly lively. These presentations discussed the causes, consequences and the course of actions to be taken for alleviating poverty in the Muslim world from political, economic, socio-cultural, and globalization dimensions. They expressed concern over rapid population growth, declining standards of maternal and child health, increasing environmental degradation, the demeaning consequences of globalization, and massive urbanization, which pose a threat to the process of socio-economic development and welfare of the people. It was pointed out in at least 14 papers that the collective GDP of the entire Muslim world was less than the GDP of a developed and industrialized country.

It was also pointed out by almost all speakers that the abysmal socio-economic indicators should be a wake-up call for all Muslims. If they do not devise and follow concrete policies in this respect, they will not be able to curb poverty and make progress despite

possessing 70 per cent of the world's natural resources. The increasing challenges resulting from the rapid changes through which the world is going in all areas require devoting the utmost attention to the promotion of educational infrastructure, the modernization of educational curricula and the provision of adequate working means and financial resources for education. This will certainly entail a positive qualitative shift in the whole educational process, in accordance with the cultural particularities and national choices of each country. Muslim scholars should emphasize a correct understanding of Islam and discard ritualistic and obscurantist interpretations.

There were thirteen papers presented in two parallel sessions devoted to the role of Muslim women in eradicating poverty. The participants pointed out that women were destined to contribute pivotally as their bringing up the new generation had a great bearing on shaping the society. The papers emphasized the need to do away with obscurantist interpretations which went against women and were contrary to the teachings of Islam. Some speakers called upon the government for political empowerment of women as women's contribution to the politico-economic development process is critically important.

Conference Resolutions

The two-day conference on Poverty concluded on Wednesday, December 15, 2005 with the adoption of the resolutions read by the Chairman of the Steering Committee and the Deputy Rector (Academic) of IIUM, Dr. Azmi Omar.

The Conference resolved to adopt the strategies for the eradication of poverty outlined by the Prime Minister. These are to improve productivity of human capital through greater access to knowledge and education, greater empowerment of women, and to implement good governance. The Conference proposed the government of Malaysia to be the host of the World Institute for Poverty Eradication (WIPER). In addition, the Conference called upon the Muslim countries:

1. To establish an international council for poverty eradication in the Muslim world and communities.

2. To mobilize funds and resources required for the eradication of poverty.
3. To encourage and facilitate intra Muslim Direct Investment in order to ease trade and investment among Muslim countries.
4. To institutionalize the collection and distribution of *zakāh* and *ṣadaqah* in all Muslim countries, and to revitalize the institution of *zakāh* and charity.
5. To provide education, especially primary or vocational, on a compulsory basis in all Muslim countries and communities. This is because of the belief that education is the key element in the battle against poverty.

Finally, the conference also believes that the eradication of poverty relies equally on development of human capital through acquiring skills, knowledge and discipline; therefore, the Muslim leadership should enhance productivity, transparency and competency in Muslim countries and communities.

Indeed, it is expected that the IIUM and IIMU will set up a committee to monitor and follow up the implementation status of the conference recommendations.

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