

## **Human Dignity—An Economic Approach**

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**ABSTRACT:** Attention to human dignity is reflected in the economic life of the individual. This paper explores the interplay of human dignity and basic socio-economic rights of human beings. Access to basic economic and social services is crucial, not only to people's physical basic needs, but also to enable the development of their potential to shape their own lives and to be active agents in the shaping of a "dignified society". Human dignity as a relational concept requires society to respect the equal worth of all the people regardless of gender and social or economic status.

**KEY WORDS:** human dignity, human rights, economic rights, value, duties (moral), respect, human being and principles.

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### **Introduction and concept**

Centuries ago<sup>1</sup>, the most precious metal was the pure gold of Ophir<sup>2</sup>. To compare a human being with the fine gold of Ophir is to bring the highest tribute to the man and also recognition of human dignity and value.

What is man? Understanding what man is, we will be able to treat him as man deserves, in other words, treat man with dignity. The answer to this question can be quite varied, depending on the design from which

the question is made, the cultural field and even the personal beliefs of each individual. It is clear that the man has a different nature from that of animals, able of governing himself and also having the ability to understand himself as an individual and, at the same time, as part of a society that interacts with others.

A discourse about the human dignity and its value present a complex problem, and the interlocutor finds himself or herself in a delicate dilemma: to talk about human dignity is difficult, not to talk about it is inhuman. In particular we can highlight an inevitable aspect to be recognized and is very clear: yes, human life has immeasurable value, human dignity is an element that goes into the package called life and should be respected as a right of every human being.

In the beginning we will reflect on the idea of human dignity. That allows us to target its conceptualization and helps its conceptual use as an element that serves to clarify the conflicts and dilemmas that are occurring in various areas of economic and social life. Only with a clear concept of dignity is it possible to construct the means for its defense and development in economic and social life.

The English word 'dignity' is derived from the Latin word *dignitas*, which in turn is derived from *dignus*, whose sense implies a position of prestige or honor, "deserving" and corresponds in its Greek sense to *axios* or worthy, valuable, appreciated, precious.

In the XV century, Pico de la Mirandola developed the concept of human dignity that would later be followed and enriched by many<sup>3</sup> writing his *Discourse about human dignity*, in which he speaks of the special and distinct nature of human beings as God's creation. The human being is different from other living things, it has the capacity to act autonomously, to guide their future and to make decisions<sup>4</sup>.

In one of his work, Ronald Dworkin offers a theory of dignity that comes from mating of two principles: self-respect and authenticity; which lead a person to obtain respect and recognition based on their own actions.<sup>5</sup> However, we are aware that in the time in which we live, this is not always the case as we will see throughout this article.

## **Human dignity from an economic perspective**

In its historical development, the idea of human dignity has referred to various aspects of the human condition or has been understood from different perspectives or dimensions. Francisco Garcia Moreno, for example, identifies what he calls the four dimensions of dignity: a) political and social; b) religious or theological; c) ontological and d) ethical, personal and social in the sense of autonomy<sup>6</sup>, which corresponds in some way to its evolution or development throughout history.

To talk about human dignity without taking into account the economic perspective would be equal to denying the reality in which we live. In a society where the focus is on the human condition and meeting the needs of the people, the economy plays a central role in human dignity. I am aware of how sensitive this subject (human dignity from an economic perspective) is, because, as Wiliam R. Waters said "The major concern of social economics is explaining the economy in its broadest aspect, that is showing how man deals with the ordinary business on using human and physical resources to achieve a level of material comfort"<sup>7</sup> a certain level to human dignity I can say.

We ignore how the world will be in the next 30 or 40 years, but we do know it will be very different from what it is now. In some way or another we will be faced with some of the most formidable challenges that the humanity has ever encountered:

the consequences of climate change, depletion of the primary source of energy (oil) and the necessity to accommodate 2 billion more people (from the current 7,4 billion<sup>8</sup> to 9,4 billion, the population projected by mid-century).

These challenges may be at the gates of a potential economic crisis, which may be triggered by multiple causes (the unsustainability of the deficit in the trade balance in certain areas of the world, the explosion of new financial and / or property bubbles, the refugee crisis, just to name a few). In the same context we have the threat of permanent global war and growing social inequality, triggering large migratory flows, as well as poverty and exclusion.

There are many that consider that society has reached the limits<sup>9</sup> in which humanity finds itself. The way in which we produce and distribute the goods that satisfy our needs has put world economies on the brink of collapse. The liberal utopia of self-regulating market has proved that is a crude chimera.

Different economic systems have not been able to meet the most basic material needs of the population (more than 1 billion people survive on less than one dollar a day; 1 billion do not have clean water...), nor is a sign that they will get it soon. Data from 2003 shows 54 countries were even poorer that year than in 1990<sup>10</sup> so this seems to indicate that a lot of persons in some parts of the world, day by day lose human rights therefore, lose the right to have dignified life.

### **Economic rights in the name of human dignity**

Human rights have to be based on principles of dignity and freedom. Unfortunately today, “both are severely compromised”<sup>11</sup> because a lot of human beings cannot meet their basic needs of food, peace, freedom, and education.

In the name of human dignity, every person should be able to enjoy the main economic and social rights such as the right to work in a safe environment, the right to social security, the right to own property, the right to education, the right to food, and the right to health. These rights do not guarantee that every citizen will have all of these, but they do guarantee that every citizen will be given the opportunity to have all of these basic rights. Some organization, as NESRI<sup>12</sup>, highlights the importance and the necessity that every person be afforded conditions under which they are able to meet their needs. They highlight the big importance of the basic rights as: education, housing, work, etc. Contrary to civil and political rights, which are immediately applicable and essentially based on the prohibition of States from doing something, the economic rights tend to be considered as requiring States to take action, usually in the form of specific legislation, policies or programs, so those rights can be realized. The realization of those rights is seen as progressive: full economic, social, and cultural rights can be achieved only gradually<sup>13</sup>. Resources and time may be required, though international legislation clearly states that full rights should be reached over time, and that States have a legal obligation to take immediate and continued action to do so.

The right to education must ensure access to quality schools and to an education that is directed towards the full development of the human personality. Every child must have equal access to quality education adapted to meet his or her needs. The aims of education must be directed toward the development of each child's personality and full potential, preparing children to participate in society and to do work that is rewarding and reasonably remunerative.

Yet time and again, children from poor and marginalized communities are denied an education or experience discrimination.

Education prepares a child to become a dignified adult. According to the New Internationalizes—*State of the World*, Feb 1997—, just one per cent of what the world spent every year on weapons was needed to put every child in school by the year 2000 and yet it did not happen. Nearly a billion people entered the 21st century unable to read a book or sign their name<sup>14</sup>. There must be equitable distribution of resources in education across communities according to need.

Schools must also respect the inherent dignity of every child creating an environment of respect and tolerance in the classroom, preventing practices and disciplinary policies that cause harm or humiliation, and instead promote a spirit of self-confidence and self-expression.

The right to food guarantees freedom from hunger and access to safe and nutritious food. Food should be available in a quantity and quality sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, free from adverse substances, and acceptable within a given culture.

It is estimated that 8,500 children die each day due to severe malnutrition and 160 million children suffer rickets. On the other side of the coin, 42 million children are overweight<sup>15</sup>.

The spectrum of nutrition can be seen in two forms: by excess and by deficiency, both forms severely affect human dignity. First form has to do with self-respect, human dignity as a product of a persons' own actions, and the other form has to do with a right which partially depends of others. The excess is represented by obesity, and the deficiency is represented by malnutrition. Malnutrition affects one in every three people in the world with a further 794 million who have nutritional deficiencies; contrasting with 1,9 billion overweight adults<sup>16</sup>.

At least 80% of the human population lives on less than \$10 a day. The poorest 40 percent of the world's population accounts for 5 percent of global income. The richest 20 percent accounts for three-quarters of world income<sup>17</sup>. This figure is based on purchasing power parity, which basically suggests that prices of goods in countries tend to equate under floating exchange rates and therefore people would be able to purchase the same quantity of goods in any country for a given sum of money. That is the notion that a dollar should buy the same amount in all countries. Hence if a poor person in a poor country living on a dollar a day moved to the U.S. with no changes to their income, they would still be living on a dollar a day.

The human right to health means that everyone has the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, which includes access to all medical services, sanitation, adequate food, decent housing, healthy working conditions, and a clean environment.

Everyone has the right to the health care they need, but not everyone can receive it. Approximately 660 million people without sanitation live on less than \$2 a day, and some 385 million live on less than \$1 a day. Close to half of all people in developing countries suffer from health problems caused by polluted water and sanitation deficits. The costs associated with health spending, productivity losses and labor diversions are greatest in some of the poorest countries. Sub-Saharan Africa loses about 5% of GDP, or some \$28,4 billion annually, a figure that exceeded total aid flows and debt relief to the region in 2003.<sup>18</sup>

The right to housing is part of the guarantee for human dignity. Everyone has a fundamental human right to housing, which ensures access to a safe, secure, habitable, and affordable home with freedom from forced eviction. The access to this right

must be provided to all persons irrespective of income or access to economic resources.

We all have the right to housing, yet over 10%<sup>19</sup> of people worldwide live in a slum or informal settlement. Living conditions are often dire with overcrowding, little or no access to clean water, toilets or healthcare. Many people living in slums or informal settlements are not protected from harassment such as forced evictions because their right to live there is not legally recognized.

I do not think that human rights are just an abstract concept, but I am sure that for many, it is. Rights only have meaning if it is possible to enforce them. But there has to be some mechanism for that enforcement. I will readily concede that the enforcement of certain civil and political rights has economic ramifications. To respect these rights or not, having access to them or not, will decide the level of human dignity.

At this very moment, billions of people around the world are trying to solve their material needs for a dignified life; we are wondering if they will ever attain these needs.

### **A reality with many suitors**

Through the development of modernism and post-modernism, dignity assumed a wider dimension by becoming understood not as a fact, but as a duty of respect.<sup>20</sup> Economic and social importance was attributed to<sup>21</sup> the authority of the state.<sup>22</sup> The respect of human dignity should be stated in legal standards of the highest level, such as constitutional texts<sup>23</sup>.

Many times people generally seem too busy in the day-to-day projects to worry about what they are doing complies with the basic principles of human dignity, which is a mistake in my



opinion. Meanwhile, neither researchers nor the government can agree on how to label the phenomenon.

In the chase for money, looking to increase their wealth, people have become more aggressive and more isolated. Politeness and care for fellow man has disappeared. Rarely the rich help the poor or a neighbor in their neighborhood. A teenager no longer offers a seat to an old lady and more often than not human relations break down resulting in intolerance, debauchery, envy, selfishness, indifference, betrayal, dissatisfaction, and hatred.

As often as a person encounters situations to defend their own dignity and the dignity of others, I urge you esteemed reader to be a person who promotes and “remembers” how to act with dignity in every situation. This is the duty of every human being.

On an individual level, these obligations encompass the requirement that we treat others with care and respect (Edel, 1969; Pritchard, 1972). For organizations, communities, or nations, they imply a need for forms of social order that promote fairness, equality, and equitable access to the basic resources that ensure “dignified living” (Arnason, 1998; Edel, 1969; Johnson, 1971; Liebenberg, 2005; Oyaya & Kaseje, 2001; Sacks, 2002; Schachter, 1983; Tinder, 2003). Such meaningful attention to dignity at the societal level “requires a theory of justice that magnifies dignity as one of its guiding principles” (Horton, 2004 Horton, p. 1084)<sup>24</sup>.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “I will make a man more precious than fine gold; even man than the golden wedge of Ophir”. Bible, Isaiah 13:12

<sup>2</sup> For centuries, Ofir’s location has been a mystery for those who study the Bible. Some thought it would have been located somewhere in India, others believed it was in any point on the south

coast of Arabia and there were some who believed that it was founded on the coast of Somalia. But more recent archaeological discoveries, indicate that this location was legendary emporium in Dilmun, an ancient town on an island in the Persian Gulf near Kuwait, where was developed the Gulf War.

<sup>3</sup> Peces Barba, Gregorio, “Derechos fundamentales”, en [http://e-archivo.uc3m.es/bitstream/10016/10462/1/derechos\\_Feces\\_RJCM\\_1987.pdf](http://e-archivo.uc3m.es/bitstream/10016/10462/1/derechos_Feces_RJCM_1987.pdf), versión castellana de la voz “*Diriti e doverifundamental?*” destinada al *Novísimo Digesto Italiano* en la parte referente a los derechos, 7.

<sup>4</sup> See Pico De la Mirandola, Giovanni, *De la dignidad del hombre* (Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1984), 105.

<sup>5</sup> Roland Dworkin, *Justice for Hedgehogs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 204.

<sup>6</sup> García Moreno Francisco, “El concepto de dignidad como categoría existencial. Un recorrido del concepto a lo largo de la historia de la filosofía,” el *Búho*, *Revista Electrónica de la Sociedad Andaluza de Filosofía*, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> William R Waters, Review of Social Economy, *Social Economics: a solidarist perspective*, vol. XLVI, n° 2, 1998, 1

<sup>8</sup> According to World meters in 2016, <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population>

<sup>9</sup> C Gretchen C. Daily and Paul R. Ehrlich, Population, Sustainability, and Earth’s Carrying Capacity: A framework for estimating population sizes and lifestyles that could be sustained without undermining future generations.

<sup>10</sup> UNDP, Human Development Report 2003, *Millennium Development Goals: A compact among nations to end human poverty*

<sup>11</sup> NESRI, National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, *Economic and Social Rights*, C. Albisa Executive Director 2015.

<sup>12</sup> NESRI (National Economic and Social Rights Initiative) advocates for public policies that guarantee the universal and equitable fulfillment of the basic human rights in the United States.

<sup>13</sup> Reviewing Implementation of Social and Economic Rights: An Assessment of the “Reasonableness” Test as Developed by the South African Constitutional Court.

<sup>14</sup> UNICEF, *The State of the World’s Children*, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Are the data collected by *the World Nutrition Report 2015*, Fazle Hasan Abed Founder and President.

<sup>16</sup> World Bank, *Key Development Data & Statistics*, World Bank, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Shaohua Chen and Martin Ravallion, *The developing world is poorer than we thought, but no less successful in the fight against poverty*, World Bank, August 2008.

<sup>18</sup> United Nations *Human Development Report 2006*, 6 & 35.

<sup>19</sup> World Bank, *Key Development Data & Statistics*, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Pelè, Antonio, “*Una aproximación...*”, cit., 3.

<sup>21</sup> García Moreno, Francisco, “*El concepto.*”, cit., 7.

<sup>22</sup> see Gómez Sánchez, Yolanda, “*Dignidad y ordenamiento comunitario*”, *Revista de Derecho Constitucional Europeo*, España, Universidad de Granada, año 2, no. 4, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> The first Constitution that established the State’s obligation to respect human dignity was the Irish Constitution of 1937, which expressly stated in its article 1 .: “The dignity of man is untouchable. Respect and protect it is the duty of all state power.” From then gradually the different constitutions in the world, have been incorporating human dignity in its various aspects in their articulated. For example, Article 10.1 of the Spanish Constitution of 1978, etc.

<sup>24</sup> Nelson Jacobson, paper *Dignity and Health: A Review*, 2007.