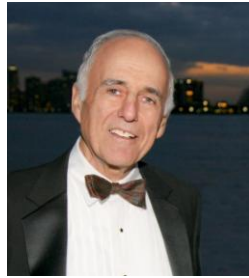


Technology as a Means of Reducing Poverty

Robert SILMAN
President Emeritus
Robert Silman Associates
Boston, MA, USA
silman@silman.com



Robert Silman received Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Civil Engineering from New York University and Bachelor of Arts from Cornell University. His structural engineering firm, founded in 1966, has offices in New York, Washington and Boston. He has taught at Columbia and Yale Universities.

Summary

IABSE and its members can play an active role in alleviating world poverty. We have the means, it just takes the will.

Keywords: Poverty, technology, distributive justice, fairness, opportunity, equality.

How does poverty come to exist in today's world? Certainly there is enough to go around for everyone to live a life comfortably above the subsistence level. It is obvious that what causes poverty is the unequal distribution of the total sum of goods in the world. Now surely there can never be an exactly equal share of the world's riches bestowed on each and every individual. There will always be some inequalities that result from the accidents of birth, nationality, geography, etc. And there will be other inequalities due to the difference in abilities, work ethic and type of work pursued.

However even when we allow all of these factors as inevitabilities, there must still be a way to insure that deep poverty is eliminated from every reach of our planet.

We have sufficient means to guarantee this.

What we lack is the will.

We live in the age of technology. But how we benefit from technology depends on the level of well-being we enjoy. The method by which we establish how to apportion the fruits of technology is called distributive justice.

I will discuss distributive justice, particularly as technology and even structural engineering can contribute to its effectiveness. I will propose a model for what we, as technologists, as structural engineers, can do to insure that desirable principles of distributive justice are fitted together with those available opportunities so that we can significantly alleviate poverty, if not eliminate it altogether.

Most developed countries adhere to the philosophy of Utilitarianism, providing the greatest good for the greatest number of people. But in this philosophy, there is no guarantee that the least well off members of society will not get left behind and become even poorer.

There is another approach that was developed by the American philosopher, John Rawls. Rawls found it unacceptable that there would be a certain segment of our society that would never benefit from a general increase in resources or opportunities; they would perpetually get left behind. He proposed a system called 'Justice as Fairness.'

In a system of justice as fairness, there are two basic principles that must be adhered to when making up the rules for the social group to which you belong.

1. The first deals with liberty and rights. This principle says that all persons must be free to choose whatever life style they wish as long as it conforms to the rules of their group. In addition, opportunities for careers and jobs and appointments must be open and equal for all members of the group. These rights cannot be compromised under any conditions.



2. The second principle deals with the distribution of material things such as wealth and income. It is understood that there will be initial differences or that some people will accrue more goods and wealth over time than others. However, under this rule, any benefits that accrue to those who are better off must also help to improve those who are the least well off. This is commonly referred to as “a rising tide lifts all boats.”

I would propose that IABSE become the international leader in a program to alleviate poverty. It is very likely that we would be dealing mostly with the issues under the first principle of justice, namely that all have equal opportunities. We could concentrate on that one issue at first and not consider how goods and wealth might be distributed fairly, for that is really beyond our ken.

I am proposing a new initiative for IABSE. We should and must adopt new rules that apply to all members. We, as part of the more well off in our world today, must share the benefits that we have with those less well off. IABSE can establish contacts with countries and societies that are in need of alleviation from poverty and develop programs that begin to provide training in our area of expertise. It is not only money that is needed, but some method whereby we can share our knowledge in training programs. Imagine if each of the almost 4,000 members of IABSE were to mentor just one person from a poverty-stricken society. A program of distance learning can be established whereby this is possible. Of course this would not be a full scale university training but I could envision that we might establish teaching programs that would be of enormous benefit.

What are some of the specific ways that IABSE as an organization and each of us as individual members can participate? First, IABSE can establish contacts with countries that are less well off and then can provide some basic curricula that can be used selectively by individual members as part of a training program. Each individual can be assigned a mentee by IABSE, one who has language in common. Working with this mentee, each member can tailor advice individually. Hopefully a personal relationship will develop between the two. The IABSE member can furnish books, periodicals and supplies including computer hardware and software. They may even be able to invite their mentees to IABSE events such as Symposia or smaller targeted meetings and presentations. We should establish a category of membership for these mentees so that they feel a part of our organization and are able to participate without economic burden.

Everyone must participate or the initiative will fail. Part of John Rawls’ assumption in justice as fairness is that everyone is aware of the rules and has the right to assume that the other members of the group are abiding by them. We must undertake a large scale public relations program among our members and then to the outside world so that we will be recognized for our efforts and our members will not only feel the obligation to participate, but will assume the mantle of pride as leaders in a new world wide effort to alleviate poverty. We must not wait. We must act now. Lives are at stake. Let each of us make known to the leadership of IABSE that alleviation of poverty should be our number one priority.

Reference: RAWLS, John. A Theory of Justice. (Second Edition), Harvard University Press, 1999.