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*He who is not afraid of one's
conscience would fear nothing.*
Mohammed Mahdi Al-Jawaheri
(20th-century Iraqi poet)

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TOMORROW
Kerry Boyd Anderson on the
many ways in which Trump's
second presidency will be
different from his first.



ILLUSTRATION FOR ARAB NEWS: PEP BOATELLA

Poverty — our last great challenge

In an era where technological advances and economic integration promise unprecedented opportunities, nearly 700 million people worldwide continue to live in extreme poverty — surviving on less than \$2.15 per day. This staggering figure not only signifies a monumental humanitarian failure, it also highlights the complexity and multidimensional nature of poverty, which remains deeply entrenched globally.

Despite decades of progress, the reduction in global poverty has slowed to a virtual standstill, exacerbated by periods of sustained low economic growth, the still-palpable repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and increased fragility in vulnerable regions.

But just what is poverty?

Poverty, often perceived in simplistic terms as mere economic deprivation, is a multifaceted phenomenon. Beyond the immediate lack of financial resources, poverty encompasses a range of deprivations, including limited access to education, healthcare and basic amenities. It entrenches social exclusion, stifles potential and perpetuates intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.

For instance, about 3.5 billion people, or 44 percent of the global population, grapple with poverty by the standard of \$6.85 per day. This reveals a chilling reality: Economic growth alone has not been sufficient to uplift large swaths of humanity.

Poverty, far from being a mere statistic or a transient economic shortfall, is an omnipresent attribute of all societies across the planet, with extensive implications. It does not just manifest as mere lack or a myriad other deprivations, it also encompasses deficits in nutrition, education and healthcare — cornerstones of human development. A critical understanding of poverty's persistent and pervasive nature reveals its ability to perpetuate cycles of disenfranchisement and exclusion.

This self-reinforcing loop is responsible for some 1.1 billion people living multidimensionally impoverished lives around the world — with nearly half of them trapped in conflict zones, where barriers to poverty alleviation are impossibly high.

Despite an extensive array of analytical tools, policy frameworks and development programs proposed over decades, the

eradication of poverty remains a formidable challenge. In other words, while our understanding of poverty may have vastly evolved — with the global community even sharing a deep awareness of poverty's roots and its repercussions — finding a universal remedy remains as elusive as ever.

The persistence, elasticity and complexity of poverty are nowhere more evident than in sub-Saharan Africa, where 67 percent of the global population living in extreme poverty resides, despite the region accounting for only 16 percent of the world's population. The implications are profound: Without significant changes to the current trajectory, an estimated 622 million people are projected to remain in extreme poverty by 2030. Moreover, about 3.4 billion people will subsist on less than \$6.85 a day, illustrating that the scope of poverty extends far beyond the extreme, affecting nearly half of the global population.

The Middle East and North Africa region, on the other hand, faces a deeply embedded crisis of poverty and inequality driven by structural failures in governance and persistent socioeconomic disparities. Chronic poverty afflicts nearly two-thirds of the region, with key indicators revealing 41 percent of citizens in some states classified as poor and 25 percent as vulnerable. In addition, the middle class is shrinking, notably in non-oil-producing countries, where it has decreased from 45 percent to 33 percent. This widespread economic struggle is compounded by systemic issues such as labor informality, with more than half of the region's workforce engaged in the informal sector, where pay is often low and erratic, without any protections.

Furthermore, the region's demographic pressures, heightened by recent increases in fertility rates, further strain inadequate social services and stagnant economic systems, entrenching poverty across generations. Poor governance in addressing corruption and deploying effective reforms worsens prevailing crises. It is fostering a sense of perceived injustice and helplessness among citizens given the still-growing disparity in wealth — where the top 10 percent of individuals hold nearly two-thirds of the region's wealth.

Going forward, poverty must be understood as a multidimensional threat. It



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undermines social cohesion, exacerbates vulnerabilities to climate change and fosters inequality. High inequality remains concentrated in the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, reflecting a dearth of socioeconomic mobility and inclusive growth. Today, about a fifth of the global population lives in countries grappling with significant inequality, hindering their prospects for economic advancement and poverty reduction.

Furthermore, the climate crisis looms large as a formidable barrier to poverty alleviation. One in five individuals globally faces the risk of extreme weather events during their lifetime, threatening to dismantle the fragile gains made in poverty reduction. Climate change amplifies existing vulnerabilities and necessitates a dual approach: reducing greenhouse gas emissions while simultaneously enhancing risk management to protect the most vulnerable populations.

As we look toward 2025 and beyond, the future of global poverty is painted with a cautious yet necessary pessimism. Despite incremental advances in poverty reduction, fast-growing populations in the world's most vulnerable regions threaten to outpace these modest improvements. While statistics may show a decrease in the percentage of people living in extreme poverty, the absolute number of individuals facing dire economic conditions remains daunting.

Population growth in Africa, the Middle East and parts of Asia particularly exacerbates this issue, with millions more expected to struggle with inadequate access to sanitation, healthcare and education. Such complexities require the global community to rethink its approach and scale up investments radically if it is to have any hope of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by the 2030 deadline.

At present, tackling acute poverty necessitates an unprecedented level of international cooperation and investment. Smart investments in health, education, energy, agriculture, infrastructure and digitization have been identified as critical drivers to markedly improve living conditions. Funds should be redirected from military expenditures to allow a push forward with the "Pact for the Future," a strategic UN framework aimed at addressing global challenges. The

pact outlines actionable interventions across sectors vital to human security and development, while offering structural financial foundations to address poverty at its roots.

To feasibly combat acute poverty, the world must also ensure that financial assistance, technological support and development aid are not just increased but strategically targeted. Enhancing social protection, fostering climate resilience in agrarian communities and implementing fair trade policies represent some of the concrete steps that could transform the current trajectory.

Despite these actions, the global community's failure to classify multidimensional poverty as a planetary threat akin to climate change is perplexing. Multidimensional poverty encompasses various deprivations beyond mere income, including health deficiencies, educational gaps and a lack of basic services, yet it has not galvanized the same global urgency as climate issues. This lack of recognition might stem from a segmented approach to policymaking, in which economic development, social welfare and environmental sustainability are often treated as separate domains rather than interconnected crises.

Addressing this misalignment is vital as we move forward; otherwise, we risk superficial improvements that fail to address the broader, underlying causes of poverty. Indeed, the grim reality faced by millions, especially women and rural populations, suggests that a real-world perception of improvement will remain an elusive goal without deeper systemic changes.

In sum, poverty remains the world's last great challenge due to its profound, interconnected impacts and the sheer scale of those affected. Breaking the cycle of poverty requires more than just economic growth; it demands targeted, inclusive and sustained efforts to improve education, healthcare, infrastructure and job creation. International cooperation and innovative policies tailored to the unique needs of different regions are imperative. Achieving a world free of poverty on a livable planet is not merely a matter of economic expedience but a moral imperative. The journey will be arduous and fraught with complexities, yet it is the definitive test of our collective resolve and humanity.