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Reducing Income Inequality by Promoting Human Well-Being through the use of the Social Enterprise

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Reducing Income Inequality by Promoting Human Well-Being through the use of the Social Enterprise

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I. Introduction

According to Pickett (2015), there has been a growing body of evidence that inequalities in income and wealth have caused economic instability, in addition to a range of health and social problems, and have interrupted the adoption of strategies and behavior that support the protection of the environment. Thus, for Pickett (2015), inequality emerged as a central issue for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For him, social and economic inequalities fragment the cohesion of society and strongly contribute to environmental problems; they also, according to him, prevent nations and the individuals that comprise them from reaching their full potentials.

There are five reasons why we need more equality in the world.

1. *Health*

In societies in which there is a great amount of inequality, life expectancy is shorter and mortality rates are higher, and interestingly, this applies to both the poor and to the rich in these societies. The rates of infant mortality, mental illness, and obesity are also two to four times higher in societies that exhibit inequality; likewise, in more unequal developing and developed countries, the prevalence rates of HIV infection are higher.

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2. *Social Relationships*

Further, in societies that exhibit a great deal of inequality, the levels of social cohesion, including trust and social capital, are lower, and the indicators of the status of women also tend to be worse. Additionally, societies that exhibit greater inequality among its citizens have been seen to have greater property crime and violence, especially in terms of homicides.

3. *Human Capital Development*

In countries where inequality is prevalent, the scores on the UNICEF index of child well-being are significantly worse, and these scores decline as inequality rises. Additionally, mathematics and literacy scores are also lower in these countries, a greater number of young people drop out of school and training, and many teenage girls become pregnant. Further, social mobility is restricted by inequality; when there is greater equality in terms of outcomes, there is a greater number of opportunities for success and growth. Innovation in fact can be seen in countries in which equality is more prevalent, and this is likely due to the greater amount of social mobility seen there.

4. *Economic Progress and Stability*

The reduction in poverty cannot be achieved where there is income inequality. This notion is supported by the International Monetary Fund, which indicates that long-term economic growth stems from the reduction in inequality, and may in fact be two sides of the same phenomenon. In both rich and poor countries, inequality is strongly correlated with less growth, and inequality is associated with more frequent and severe "boom-and-bust cycles," which can make economies more vulnerable to crises.

5. *Sustainable Economies*

It has been asserted that inequality drives competition, which in turn drives personal debt and consumerism. Societies that have greater equality promote the common good of the individuals living in them; for example, there is a greater amount of recycling, more is spent on foreign aid, and they have higher scores on the Global Peace Index, to name just a few examples. Further, the business leaders in these countries come to agreements regarding the protection of the environment more frequently. Additionally, when there are differences in equality between countries, cooperation tends to be interfered with or even blocked, including the development of international agreements on climate change.

In order to achieve sustainable development, greater equality in societies is required, and according to the present author this is best achieved through the promotion of human well-being, including health, education, and sustainability through social enterprises (SEs). It is the intention of this study to pinpoint some of the deficiencies in human well-being in terms of health, education, and sustainability, and some of the increases that can be seen in income inequality nowadays. Furthermore, the study also proposes to use the SE as a tool for solving the problem of income inequality through the promotion of human well-being *via* health, education, and sustainability.

II. Literature Review

a) *Health and Well-being*

Thailand as a developing country has been quite successful in alleviating the problem of poverty but not quite right with the problem of inequality. In 2002, Thai government decided to implement universal health coverage (UHC). According to the World Bank (2021), universal health coverage ensures that people have access to the healthcare that they need without facing financial difficulties. This can be considered a key to achieving the World Bank Group's (WBG) two goals of ending extreme poverty and increasing equity and shared prosperity. This can also be considered the driving force behind all of the WBG's investments in health and nutrition. UHC allows countries to take greatest advantage of their strongest asset—human capital. Supporting health is a fundamental investment in human capital and in economic growth; without good health, adults are unable to go to work and children are unable to go to school. Healthcare is one of the largest sectors of the global economy, providing over 50 million jobs, the majority of which are held by women.

i. *Global Movement toward UHC*

Health is also a crucial part of the Sustainable Development Goals. For example, the SDG 3.8 target aims to "achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health care services, and access to safe, effective, quality, and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all." In addition, SDG 1, which calls to "end poverty in all its forms everywhere," could be in trouble without UHC, since almost 90 million people in the world are impoverished by health expenses yearly. Access to affordable and quality primary healthcare is the basis of UHC; however, many people in the world struggle with basic healthcare needs. Further, mental health is often overlooked, but it is also an important element of UHC, as it is significant in terms of people's ability to lead a productive and happy life.

In recent years, UHC has gained momentum around the world, and the first UN high-level meeting was held in September 2019. A political declaration was adopted unanimously by member states, which affirmed their strong political commitment to UHC, outlining several important actions. Additionally, twelve co-signatories, including the WBG, also launched the Global Action Plan for Healthy Lives and Well-being for All (GAP) in order to jointly support countries in terms of reaching the SDG3 targets. In January 2020, the second UHC Forum was held in Bangkok, which aimed to increase the political momentum regarding UHC in forums internationally.

ii. *Providing Affordable, Quality Primary Healthcare*

Long-term investment in human capital is represented by affordable, quality health services in the community—in particular to women, children, adolescents, and people affected by mental health issues. Primary health services are a fundamental aspect of UHC; however, present research cautions that if the current trends continue, up to five billion people will be unable to access healthcare by 2030. Today, child and maternal mortality remain high in many parts of the world, and more than one-fourth of girls and women in Sub-Saharan Africa are not able to gain access to family planning services. This can lead to unplanned pregnancies and maternal and child mortality and morbidity. In 2015, the WBG and partners set up the Global Financing Facility (GFF), which__a multi-stakeholder initiative that on helps countries improve their health services for children, adolescents, and mothers.

Many countries are experiencing rapid population growth, which represents the possibility of driving economic growth and reducing poverty. However, in order to realize the benefits of these demographics, it is necessary for countries to invest in the health and well-being of their citizens in order to increase the quality of their human capital and growth that includes all.

In order to fully realize the goal of universal health coverage and to improve human capital outcomes in the world, mental health programs must be integrated with service delivery at the community level, and this must include financial protection arrangements. Estimates suggest that nearly one billion people live with a mental disorder, and in low-income countries, more than 75% of the people with a mental disorder do not receive treatment for a variety of reasons. It has been noted that approximately half of all mental health disorders appear by the person's age of 14, and approximately 20% of children and adolescents over the world suffer from some type of mental disorder. In countries where the citizens are affected by fragility, conflict, and violence, more than one in five people (22.1%) suffer from mental challenges and problems.

Those that are disproportionately affected, for example, are women and children that have experienced violence, migrants and refugees displaced by conflict, soldiers returning from war, and the poor and other vulnerable groups in society. Further, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused a global increase in mental health disorders for various reasons, including job losses and lockdowns, while at the same time disrupting or even bringing to a stop critical mental health services in 93% of countries worldwide. Since mental and substance use disorders have been seen to have an early age of onset—often in childhood or early adolescence—and are highly prevalent in the working-age population, they can contribute to losses in the economies of the world estimated to be between $2.5-8.5 trillion, and this is projected to nearly double by 2030.

iii. *Mobilizing Resources for UHC*

In June 2019, the President of Japan hosted the first G20 Finance and Health Ministers joint session, where the discussion aimed at unifying the G20 countries in terms of the common goal of financing UHC in developing countries. A World Bank report showed that people in developing countries spend half a trillion dollars annually, over $80 per person, on accessing health services. The poor suffer the most from these expenses and are a long-term threat on health progress.

World Bank/World Health Organization (WHO) research from 2019 shows that if the world is to close the huge coverage gaps and meet the health targets agreed on under the SDGs, countries must increase their spending on primary healthcare by at least 1% of their gross domestic product (GDP). A lack of universal access to affordable and good-quality health services endangers the long-term economic prospects of countries and makes them more vulnerable to pandemic risks, which people have become more award of since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. If urgent action is not taken, developing countries that are faced with non-communicable diseases and aging populations will find it extremely difficult to close the gaps between the demand for health spending and available public resources, and this will only prolong citizens' (patients and their families) dependence on their own, inadequate, financial resources.

b) Educational Well-being

The Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith perhaps demonstrated the best focus on education—he believed that education can result in an increase in the ability of the individual and increase his or her capabilities; and he also believed that societies can benefit from this growth in education (Smith, 1776). Further, John Stuart Mill, an English philosopher, indicated that education improves the power of foresight as well as the refinement of the individual (Mill, 1848). In his opinion, educating the labor force can bring about greater productivity and income for society and for the workers that comprise it, and according to Marshall (1961), education and training can be considered a national investment because they can also bring about great changes in the people of a society. He argues that, even if the topics are not related to their current jobs, all people in a society should be required to pass general training courses. There are numerous channels for training and education that can have an impact on income inequality. The first is through the outcome rate of investing in human capital; that is, paying for education based on the individual's ability and income distribution theory. Becker and Chiswick (1966) for example believe that if all people invest equally in human capital, the distribution of income will be the same as their distribution of ability. Therefore, if the distribution of abilities is the same, incomes will be the same as well. Since persons that are more skilled are those that are more willing to invest in human capital, the incomes will tend to be unequal. Another channel is based on Schultz's (1963) studies. He notes that changes in the investment in human capital are a vital factor in the reduction of inequality in people's income distribution—a quick rise in human capital in comparison with a slow rise can result in greater unequal distribution of income. However, Fields (1980) maintains that there is a positive relationship between the average level of education and income inequality, and therefore the relationship between education and income inequality is positive.

Many studies have investigated the effect of education on income distribution. For example, Becker and Chiswick (1966), Chiswick (1971), Tinbergen (1972), Sakharopolos and Woodhall (1991), Lam and Levison (1991), De Gregorio and Lee (2002), and Checchi (2001) used the mean standard deviation for years of education as the educational index, and the Gini coefficient as the index for income inequality, concluding that there is a positive relationship between education and income inequality. On the other hand, Ram (1984), Park (1996), and Digdowiseiso (2009) found no significant relationship between education and income inequality. Further, Rodríguez-Pose and Tselios (2009) used the Theil index in order to estimate income inequality in the European Union states, and the findings showed that greater inequality in education can result in greater unequal distribution of income.

Lin (2007), Yang *et al.* (2009) and Abdelbaki (2012) investigated the effect of the inequality of human capital on income inequality using the Gini coefficient index and concluded that less inequality in training might result in less income inequality. Schultz (1971) treats human capital as a part of the general concept of capital and views it along with financial capital as a supplement to human capital—he believes that defining the rate of economic growth in the past and personal distribution of income without considering human capital is inadequate and incomplete, and argues that the workforce exhibits different qualities, skills, and expertise according to the training that individuals receive and according to which one person can be distinguished from another. For this reason, it is not possible to see the workforce as a homogeneous factor because the quality of each individual differs too greatly according to the level of his or her training acquired at different stages of life.

Chenery et al. (1974) studied the effect of different factors, such as training and education, on income inequality in 66 countries using cross-sectional analysis, and the findings showed that there is a significant positive relationship between education and income inequality. This means that the effect of the enrollment rate in primary schools is significant in terms of increasing the income share of the lower 40 percent, and the effect of the enrollment rate in secondary schools, according to the same study, is significant in terms of increasing the income share of the middle 40 percent. Further, in a cross-country study from 1960 to 1990, Gregorio and Lee (2002) concluded that greater availability of educational facilities and equal distribution of training play important roles in the equal distribution of income. Sylwester (2002) focuses on the effect that educational costs have on inequality. Using data from 50 countries, he concluded that countries dedicating greater financial resources to general education may experience less income inequality in the future, and that this effect might be stronger in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries than in less-developed countries.

c) *Sustainability of Well-being*

There is strong evidence that the result of the failure to achieve sustainability harms poor countries and poor people more than rich countries and rich people (Neumayer, 2011; UNDP 2007; United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change; (Committee for Development Policy, 2009). The UNDP 2007-8 estimated that high-income counties faced 2% of the risk of being affected by natural disasters from 1980 to 84 and just 1.5% from 2000 to 2004 (UNDP 2007), while the poorer countries and poor people will be more affected for the following reasons.

- Countries that are more dependent on agriculture are likely to be more affected, and within countries, small farmers are likely to be more affected than large farmers and to be less able to adapt. There will be adverse effects in arid and semi-arid countries in Africa, which are among the poorest in the world.
- Food supplies are likely to be negatively affected, with lower growth and greater fluctuations, which will lead to a rise in food prices and greater volatility, both affecting the poor more as they spend more of their income on food. Some of these effects can already be seen.
- Low-lying countries, especially small island countries, will be more greatly affected by rises in sea level, and in fact in some cases their existence itself is in jeopardy. Many of the small island economies are categorized as least developed and there have already been numerous disasters affecting small islands (Committee for Development Policy, 2009).
- Poor people tend to live in areas that are likely to be affected by natural disasters, such as flooding, hill slides, and other natural disasters.
- Poorer countries and poorer people have less capacity to adapt because they possess fewer resources, both human and financial.
  - For example, poor countries may lack the resources to invest sufficiently in safeguards against flooding.
  - The people in poor countries have much more limited state insurance, and they rarely have private insurance and have fewer assets that they can utilize during crises.
  - Poor people's houses are less strong and are more vulnerable to hurricanes and other natural disasters.
  - In addition, poor countries are likely to be less efficient in providing relief during disasters, so more people tend to die or to be injured. When hurricanes sweep over Cuba and Haiti, for example, deaths are typically greater in Haiti, where housing is makeshift.
  - The IPCC has concluded that "countries with high levels of income inequality experience the effects of climate change more profoundly than more equal societies" (IPCC 2007) 2007; chapter 4). One reason is that weak social cohesion (associated with high vertical and/or horizontal inequalities) reduces the quantity and quality of support systems, both of the state and the community.
- Measures taken to lessen the damage of climate change or to protect a country against the effects of climate change often create the largest burden on the poor, for example, rises in the prices of fossil fuel, the expenditure of which tends to form a greater proportion of income among poorer groups.
- Structural changes to reduce carbon emissions tend to raise skill requirements at the expense of unskilled labor, again with a bias against poor countries and poor people.

An irony has often been pointed out that poor countries and poor people contribute minimally to the emissions that lead to global warming, but on the other hand they suffer the most from their effects. This irony has important implications, because it means that the people that are the most affected are least able to do anything about it, and those whose actions would make a huge difference have less incentive to take action because they can protect themselves from many of the negative effects of global warming. They can turn up the air conditioning in their cars and houses, or they can move to less affected areas, and they can increase their insurance against natural disasters. It is they, not the poor, that benefit from the profits generated by growth, by the industries that create the pollution, from the extraction and sale of fossil fuels, from new products, and from travel by air and car and so on.

d) *Social Enterprise as a Tool to Reduce Income Equality*

A SE can be defined as an operator in the social economy whose main objective is to exert an impact on society rather than make a profit for its owners or shareholders. It operates by providing services and goods for the market in innovative and entrepreneurial ways and uses its profits primarily to achieve objectives that are social. Further, the SE is managed in a responsible and open manner and, in particular, involves stakeholders, employees, and consumers that are affected by its commercial activities.

Promoting the SE can bring about inclusive and sustainable growth and can help to address deep-rooted social problems, particularly those that are caused by income inequality. The SE therefore can play an important role as a compliment to traditional philanthropic and government approaches to development.

The world in which we are living is rife with inequality, to say the least, yet possibilities of innovation and social entrepreneurship are available even in developing and poor societies. Connectivity now plays a huge role in creating novelty and accessing knowledge and social mobility. The Encyclopedia Britannica has defined social mobility (https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-mobility) as the movement of individuals, families, or groups through a system of social hierarchy or stratification. Indeed, the number of self-employed people and small and medium-sized enterprises has increased in many countries, and social movements are often fueled by educational opportunities. It never sufficient to emphasize the role of education in achieving social mobility and consequently increasing income mobility. As the Encyclopedia Britannica points out, “most recently, in postindustrial societies, inequality seems to be increasing between highly educated and poorly educated workers or between those with access to evolving technologies and those who lack such access.” This is the point when some people begin to think about the famous question, “What if the solution for whatever big problem is on the mind of someone that had no proper access to education.” Even though the pandemic has slowed down reforms and progress toward sustainable development goal 4 (https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/), accessible education for everyone still must be a priority for all societies, and in fact education will be crucial for recovery during the post-pandemic economy and in terms of social recovery because of its essential role in increasing economic growth.

On the other hand, fast and efficient educational methods are required and entrepreneurial education is among them. People are born with many abilities, but one that is particularly impressing is the ability to adapt to change. In our world, which is changing at such a fast and to an extent unpredictable pace, the knowledge provided by traditional curricula might not be adequate. In such a world, children, youth, and adults need a mindset that allows them to think and arrive at innovative solutions in order to overcome challenges, or in more direct terms and bluntly, to survive. This is what happens in business; thus it is important to not forget this ability and to invest in a mindset that will help to identify solutions to problems in a rapid fashion.

Entrepreneurship has been characterized as a tool for economic growth, and if it is entrepreneurship that is driven by purpose, it can also be a tool for social change. Going back to our first question, entrepreneurial education with social concepts in mind can be seen as a solution for reducing social and economic inequalities.

e) *Successful Cases of Social Enterprises in Thailand that have Reduced Income Inequality by Promoting Human Well-being*

i. *SE that Promote Health and Well-being: Siam Organic*

Siam Organic (https://jasberry.net/) produces organic and healthy food products with the mission to improve the livelihoods of rice farmers in Thailand. These farmers are in the northeastern region of the country and are amongst the poorest in the country because of their use of low-quality seeds and inefficient agricultural methods, and this is exacerbated, especially recently, by climate change and rising production costs. The social venture’s signature product, Jasberry rice, is a non-GMO produce with jasmine-rice-like qualities and powerful antioxidant benefits. Jasberry rice contains 10 times more antioxidants than green tea and 2.8 times more antioxidants than blueberries, and this makes it the best value-for-the-money antioxidant compared to other superfoods. At the beginning of the season, Siam Organic provides its farmers with high-quality Jasberry rice seeds, and trains them in organic farming practices. Harvesting is done entirely by hand so that the best quality rice can be produced and so that the farmers’ environmental footprint can be minimized. Siam Organic works with scientists in advising farmers on the most ideal time for planting so that they can counter the unpredictable and adverse impacts of climate change, and Siam Organic also offers microfinance loans in partnership with the online lending platform, KIVA. This social enterprise requires 25% of the yield to stay in the farmers’ households in order to encourage healthy eating habits in their community. Additionally, Siam Organic guarantees payment for the remaining produce at twice the price of what they would normally receive for conventional jasmine rice. The impact of Siam Organic can be seen in the fact that at the beginning of its operations in 2011, it went from working with 25 farmers to over 1,800, thus improving the lives of more than 9,000 people. According to an independent social impact assessment in 2015, the farmers supported by this social venture at the time earned 14 times more compared to conventional rice farmers in Thailand, which was the equivalent of US$ 1.72 million. In 2017 alone, Siam Organic farmers planted 2,800 hectares of land, the equivalent of almost 4,000 football fields. Siam Organic is also the first food company in Thailand to have become a B Corps (https://jasberry.net/jasberry-thailands-firstfood-company-achieve-b-corporation-certi fication/), a certification that recognizes businesses that meet rigorous social and environmental performance standards and transparency and accountability.

ii. *SE that Promote Sustainability Education: The New Heaven Reef Conservation Programme (NHRCP)*

The New Heaven Reef Conservation Program (NHRCP) is a marine research, protection, and restoration training program on the island of Koh Tao in Thailand. It was established in 2007 by Somsak Boonkam, and it is a social enterprise organization that manages the marine resources of the island where Somsak Boonkam lives, while at the same time educating and increasing the capacity of local stakeholders and visitors. To date, it has trained thousands of students in its 2-to-4-week programs, providing them with the skills that they need to assist them in the on-going marine conservation projects and other projects worldwide, or to begin their own marine conservation programs where none currently exists. It has also published over 15 peer-reviewed scientific papers, as well as dozens of papers from its students' thesis projects.

III. Discussion

COVID-19 has left an unimaginable mark on global development. The United Nations Development Programme's simulations of the real-time impact of the pandemic suggest that the Human Development Index fell in 2020 for the first time since measurements began in 1990. Similarly, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals are expected to be significantly disrupted and many of the historic gains over the past several decades may be reversed, at least temporarily. At the country level, the pandemic has revealed the way in which all areas of society and all societies are interconnected. COVID-19 has evolved from a health crisis to an educational and economic crisis, and even in high-income countries it has led to high unemployment, numerous and various types of social tensions, health systems that are failing globally. In low-income and developing countries, inequality has increased in several areas.

- Income The International Monetary Fund has predicted that income inequality for emerging markets and developing economies will increase to levels not seen since the global financial crisis of 2008 to 2009, and this will essentially erase a decade of development in these regions.
- Health Disparities in access to health services—due to factors such as gender, resident status, income, and race—have widened the gaps in life expectancy, and this has accentuated the vulnerability of disadvantaged groups in the poorer countries.
- Education According to UN data, because of COVID-19, nearly 1.5 billion students have been affected by school closures, and inadequate Internet connections have interfered with the ability of lower income countries to adapt to distance learning, which is often required by the pandemic. This is likely to increase educational inequality both within and between countries. The pandemic has reinforced the need for governments to look beyond income growth and GDP and to focus on the broader goal of individuals' overall well-being.

The COVID-19 pandemic is bringing to light some of the systemic inequalities of the global economic systems. For example, the UN University estimated that the economic results from the pandemic could push an estimated half a billion people into poverty and take global development progress three decades into the past, primarily in economies that are now, or were, emerging. In higher-income countries, regrettably, stimulus packages are not likely to be able to reach those that are already excluded from the economic mainstream. Last week, at the time of this writing, the International Labour Organization warned that the obvious and strong decline in the ability to work and operate due to the pandemic is creating numerous threats to the livelihoods of 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy, which represents almost half of the global workforce.

Social entrepreneurs and innovators have been working to solve failures in the market and have come up with more sustainable models to build inclusive economies for years. The Schwab Foundation 2020 Impact Report, "Two Decades of Impact," demonstrated how the network of the 400 leading social innovators and entrepreneurs it supports has improved the lives of more than 622 million people, driving movements for social inclusion, protecting livelihoods and environmental sustainability, and providing improved access to health, energy, sanitation, and education.

From providing services and reliable information and care for the most vulnerable. to mental health

Global Journal of Human-Social Science (H) XXV Issue IV Version I Year 2025

support through mobile phones and developing community tracing initiatives, the work of social entrepreneurs has become even more critical during the COVID-19 pandemic, as they attempt to reach those that governments and the market are unable to.

The four decades of social entrepreneurs' societal R&D, and their models of running sustainable and inclusive organizations that serve society—will be critical during the COVID-19 response and recovery period. With their responses, knowledge, and experience, it will be possible to revitalize the sustainable development agenda and build a more inclusive, resilient future.

IV. Conclusion

Income inequality is a critical, global issue that needs to be solved in order to make people happy. Economic measures, for instance economic growth and progressive taxes, have been implemented widely with the understanding that they can help mitigate the problem, but this does not seem to be sufficient, especially with the present hardest-hitting economic crisis—COVID-19. New measures are needed, and good physical and mental health is deemed to be necessary for people to function properly. Education and training attainments, which will provide people with the knowledge and skills they need to get jobs done effectively and efficiently, will enable people to obtain proper jobs and at the right wages. Further, sustainable well-being needs to be addressed because poor individuals and poor countries tend to be the hardest hit as compared to rich individuals and rich countries. The new actor, namely, the SE, is introduced in the present study and has been discussed in terms of its ability to reduce income inequality through the promotion of human well-being, including health, education, and sustainability. Such a SE will fulfill its function with the purpose of not only making a profit, which is the economic dimension of its existence, but also contributing to the social and environmental aspects of society as well.

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