

Socio-economic empowerment

In the context of minorities, socio-economic empowerment requires first of all adhering to the principles of respect for fundamental freedoms as explicitly affirmed by international laws. International laws in this respect are those clearly stipulated by UN declarations and conventions as well as by UN bodies such as the ILO. Like all components of the international human rights law, the state of the rights of minorities has been violated by a great many governments for decades. These violations are continuing at an alarming state particularly in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. As we are examining the state of the socio-economic empowerment of minority communities, we need to stipulate exactly what it entails.

Empowerment must signify, first of all, the affirmation of the right to self-determination, which in the minority context is the capability of a given community to make choices to determine and decide on the modality of life it opts to lead. It is all about the practice of this self-determined development which, by and large, revolves round the questions of social, economic and political relationships between minority communities and the powers that be. The United Nations has so far come out with one declaration after another unambiguously asserting its position on these issues principally putting forward the principles and policies to protect the rights of minorities globally.

The rights of minorities are enshrined in international laws that assert mainly the freedoms of minority communities that should not be trampled underfoot by any government. Adhering to these laws needed to lead towards respecting the freedom of minority communities to adhere to their traditional way of social organization. The realization of such freedom and the unhindered exercise of this right in particular is the first step forward towards social and economic empowerment. In other words, the powers that be must recognise the rights of minorities in this respect as stipulated by international law. That is the first step forward as there can be no empowerment without community institutions legally and independently functioning on the ground that are not independent to lead the lives of communities as empowerment is in the first place the exercise of freedom of choice.

Quite a number of governments in Africa seem to deny that minorities have the potential to socio-economic empowerment. The paradox is, however, the majority of Africa's population still lead life in traditional formations. Minority communities had existed for millennia before the advent of the modern state practicing self-empowerment and sustaining their communities. This had been the rule of the game in Africa. In this sense, the advent of colonization and the prevalence of neo-colonialism vowed to change the notion and meaning of empowerment. As a result, the powers that be imprisoned by the dominant discourse on development inherited from colonial and neo-colonial constructs failed to co-exist with traditional formations as it has been bent on replacing traditional formations with the market economy. This in turn led to the creation of incompatibility, if not mutually exclusiveness, between traditional formations and the market. As this is the reality in a great many countries in the South, governments in Africa, by and large, went even further by opting to destroy traditional systems such as pastoralism and hunting-gathering as witnessed in Tanzania, Kenya, Botswana and Ethiopia.

According to the dominant discourse, i.e. the market, traditional formations such as pastoralism and hunting-gathering are obstacles to development and should be renounced. The paradox is: which African country has ever progressed towards empowering society at large on the tracks of social-development a la the UN Social-Development Goals? On the contrary, after more than 60 years of independence, in many African countries, societies live on the margins of extinction. Had it not been for the forceful intrusion of the colonial and neo-colonial project, traditional formations have by contrast sustained their viable systems for millennia. Thus, the big question is: why should they abandon their ways of life for the market when the market system they are forced to embrace have failed to stand on its feet? On the contrary, studies unambiguously attest to the fact that traditional systems such as pastoralism have the potential to contribute to national economies.

In some countries, the potential of traditional livelihood systems is high not only in contributing to but also in generating national development. A 1997 study by the World Initiative for Sustainable Pastoralism indicates that the pastoral livestock production system has big potential to contribute to the national economies of five countries in the Horn of Africa. It is a paradox of immense

proportion that governments in the Horn of Africa cling to colonial and neo-colonial constructs of development completely ignoring the economic and development potential of pastoralism.

What is crucial in amplifying economic participation of people belonging to minority groups and emphasizing equal opportunities in both society, employment, and entrepreneurship is adopting a minority-friendly policy that begins with recognition of minority and indigenous livelihood systems as viable as any other traditional social system and adopting supporting policies that correspond with UN conventions and declarations on minority and indigenous communities.

Like all communities in the world, minority communities also need development. As stipulated in a number of UN conventions, education is the key link to social development in minority and indigenous communities. Be it in advancing the process of social and economic development in their own communities as well as in participating in the drive towards national development, empowering minorities in the education arena is the key.

Empowerment within the context of minority communities should not be restricted to the hindrances that emanate from relations with external factors. Conceptualizing empowerment within the context of minorities requires an inward and looking forward. A crucial component of the construct of empowerment in minority communities is working towards bringing equality between women and men. Empowerment without attaining gender equality is only an empowerment only to men.

Empowerment should also be forward looking. In this sense, children and youth should be seen as the generational domains of empowerment in minority communities. As the future belongs to children and the youth, it is crucial to empower them with education and democratic culture.

One crucial factor for empowerment in the context of minorities is self-determination particularly in using and preserving one's language, culture, traditions and knowledge system in general. Minorities are made to be sensitive about asserting their identities. Therefore preserving one's language, culture, tradition and knowledge system as a whole is essential for their identity. Asserting identity and preserving it crucial to minority communities.

The world is all the more becoming a global village. We have witnessed how a virus that broke out in Wuhan, China, engulfed the entire world only to wipe out millions. We still don't know when and where the next pandemic will breakout. One thing we know for sure is that wherever a deadly virus breaks out it is the entire world that becomes the victim. That much has the world become an interconnected and interdependent village. Economic, social and political factors are no longer local issues but global ones. That only calls for those endeavors devised to advance the empowerment of minorities should by necessity be global as well. In that sense all those involved in advancing the rights and empowerment of minorities should also cross the Rubicon to form a minority international.

Thank you