Crisis & Opportunity: Documenting the Global Recession

With a report on human rights and the global economic crisis
Crisis & Opportunity: Documenting the Global Recession

This exhibition catalog is a collaboration between SocialDocumentary.net and the Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR). The photographs are by the winners of a Call for Entries conducted by SocialDocumentary.net in the fall of 2009 on the theme, Crisis & Opportunity: Documenting the Global Recession. The report in the back of the book, Human Rights and the Global Economic Crisis, was written by Sally-Anne Way and Shira Stanton at the Center for Economic and Social Rights.

An exhibition of the winners of the Call for Entries will be at powerhouse Arena in Brooklyn, NY, February 16-March 15, 2010, and at the Gage Gallery at Roosevelt University in Chicago in the fall of 2010. Other locations to be determined.

All submissions to the Call for Entries, including the winners, can be found on the SDN website at www.socialdocumentary.net.

Thank you to everyone who submitted work to this Call for Entries!

Photo by Sheikh Rajibul Islam Rajib from “Waiting to be Registered”
Crisis & Opportunity: Documenting the Global Recession

The mission of the Gage Gallery at Roosevelt University is to exhibit contemporary documentary photography that addresses important social issues of our time in consonance with the mission of the university and its ideals of social justice. Past exhibitions include "The Promise of Public Housing," The Alten- muth Project (All's Only Half the Story), Photographs by Iqbal Civilians, and The Border Film Project.

The Gage Gallery was founded in 2001, shortly after Roosevelt University's expansion into the historic Gage building on Michigan Avenue. Situated directly across from Chicago's Magnificent Mile, the gallery has exhibited nationally and internationally renowned photographers including Eugene Richards, Nina Berman, Farah Nosh, Jon LeeVesteen, and Carlos Javier Ortiz. In addition, the gallery has hosted numerous public lectures, panel discussions, and symposia. The Gage Gallery is affiliated with, and supported by, the College of Arts and Sciences at Roosevelt University.

Preface

What does it take for a lone individual, camera in hand, to delve into a scene—anywhere in the world, often among strangers—and extract meaningful images? Visual poems, provocative and protest, speak volumes about life, self-de- termination, love, war, despair, boredom, poverty, freedom, human suffering, and human resilience. We are a special tribe, photographers, supportive yet independent, finding ways to thread together every last detail in order to create a story to share with each other, and more importantly share with the world at large details that otherwise might not be noticed, even things passed by every day.

SocialDocumentary.net is little more than a year old, but in its first entries for this first Call for Entries—Crisis & Opportunity: Documenting the Global Recession—covered stories in 25 countries on 4 continents focusing on a wide spectrum of today’s social, political, economic, and cultural issues.

For the Places Winner Tomasz Tomaszewski, a native of Poland, whose background in magazine photogra- phy (including National Geographic), and Honor- able Mention, Khaled Hasan, a young man from Bangladesh intent on using photography to affect change, both created emblematic images of lives built around disappearing traditions of manual labor. Tomasz Tomaszewski’s vibrant color photographs provide a window into Upper Silesia, Poland, “where the work ethos, traditions, and related customs seemed to be most alive, apparent and colorful while paying homage to the families and men whose livelihoods are dying out. Lyrical images of children at play and men at work in one photograph, the soul of a coal mine becomes the backdrop to a child saving a soccer game goal in mid-air. Khaled’s beautiful black and white images from Bangladesh show us people affected by the global recession in one of the furthest corners of the world. The abstract images are representative of all that harm this industry brings to the environment and the stone-laborers themselves. In both Tomasz’ and Khaled’s work, harsher realities are balanced with images of joy, the human spirit overcoming the most difficult of circumstances. Shishu Fukada and Michael McElroy, who received Honorable Mentions, show us the great losses suffered by older men in lands of plenty—Japan and the United States. Shishu Fukada, a young Japanese woman, brings us into a world of men lost to poverty, homelessness, illness, and loneliness due to the loss of labor sector jobs, the dismantling of high tech development in Japan. American photographer Michael McElroy tells a very touching and memorable story of one man who lost his savings paying the high medical costs of caring for his dying wife, making personal the need for changes in the U.S. healthcare system, while bringing to light the difficulties so many families are facing during the current recession.

The lines between documentary photography, fine art, and photojournalism are blurring. And even as traditional media outlets shrink, new venues are expanding the way photography is seen. While the monetary compensation is not what it should be, and hopefully will be, these outlets now reach across the globe. With support from venues such as SocialDocumentary.net, Open Society Institute, Multimedia Studies at Indiana University, various online, and even traditional, print outlets, there is no longer some venues no longer need to reverberate in galleries and fine art institutions, alongside newer traditions in fine art photography. Photographs are documents of our time, preserva- tions of realities in flux, statements on current affairs or personal testimonies, history, and time capsules. I can’t imagine that we will ever be without the me- dium or places eager to showcase it in all its forms. Lori Grinker Advisory Committee, SocialDocumentary.net
Human Rights and the Global Economic Crisis

Coming at the confluence of the financial, fuel and food crises, the global economic crisis has devasted lives and livelihoods across the world. And it has rapidly turned into a human rights crisis.

We at the Center for Economic and Social Rights have examined and analyzed the human rights dimensions of this crisis. The ability to document the crisis through photography, however, greatly aids our understanding of it, and the work by photographers presented here is at once poetic and grounded in reality.

The effects of the crisis have tended to be discussed in terms of fa...
Left: The Labendy Factory was once a very famous flagship of the Polish heavy industry. Today, it has lost over 70% of its workers, and is only providing simple services.

Top: Zbigniew Talda has two years to go before he retires from the Bobrek Coke Factory. He is very afraid that the management will shut down the factory before then due to the current recession. This was the first private factory in Silesia.

Above: The steel factory of Katowice was the biggest and best of all the steel factories in Poland. Today, there is only one working “Big Oven” out of seven used to produce high-quality steel.

This exhibit pays homage to people who perform hard manual labor—workers who once were very proud of their positions but are now losing their jobs due to the recession.

In Upper Silesia, Poland, the work ethos, traditions, and related customs are alive and colorful. But, in recent years, half of the existing coal mines here were shut down, along with 70% of the heavy industry factories. Very little is done by the state to help those who have lost jobs, including men traditionally accustomed to supporting their families.

These photographs depict tasks, places, and objects that are becoming things of the past. It is a story about Silesia and what it is today.

This series of photographs was taken from March through August 2009.

Tomasz Tomaszewski

Specializing in press photography, Tomasz Tomaszewski has had his photos published in the world’s major magazines appearing in several dozen countries: Stern, Paris Match, Geo, New York Times, Time, US News & World Report, and numerous others. He has also authored a number of books— including Remnants, The Last Jews of Poland, Gypsies, The Last Once in Search of America—and has co-illustrated over a dozen collective works. His numerous individual exhibitions have been held in the U.S., Canada, Israel, Japan, Madagascar, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Italy and Poland. He is the winner of Polish and international awards for photography. For over twenty years, he has been a regular contributor to National Geographic Magazine, where 18 of his photo essays have been published. Tomaszewski teaches photography in Poland, the U.S., Germany, and Italy.

See complete exhibit at: socialdocumentary.net/exhibit/Tomasz_Tomaszewski/701
Left: Kristina has been working in the coal mine “Peace” for over 25 years, and hopes to retire here, before they shut down the entire mine.


Above: The well-known “monument factory” in Gliwice stays alive due to the fact that it gets a lot of orders from the US. It still had to reduce the work week to only four days.

Above right: Collecting pigeons is an old tradition and passion among the coal miners of Silesia. It is an excellent way to kill time for the retired, or these days, the jobless.

Tomasz Tomaszewski
Religion was always very strong in Silesia. Now, in these difficult times, it plays an additional important role, to keep the spirits of people high.

Bobrek is a bad neighborhood near the town of Bytom. It is a place for poor, jobless people who have no money to pay for the rent. Young kids are exposed to heavy drinking by the adults.

In the coke factory, the workers have a year-long competition “for the best kept and most creative piece of land” on the factory field. Coke Factory “Jadwiga.”
End of Labor Town: Dumping Ground of Old Men in Japan

By Shiho Fukada

In Osaka, Kamagasaki is home to about 25,000 mostly elderly day laborers, with an estimated 1,000 who are homeless. It used to be called a “laborer’s town,” but now it’s called a “welfare town,” a dumping ground of old men. Alcoholism, poverty, street death, suicide, TB, and most of all, loneliness, prevails here. These men don’t have family ties and live and die alone as social outcasts from the mainstream “salary man” culture. Labor towns, like Kamagasaki, are on the verge of extinction in Japan.

According to the most recent government report, Japan’s economy, the world’s second largest, is deteriorating at its worst pace since the oil crisis of the 1970s, setting off more unemployment among young and educated and layoffs among big corporations. It is even more hopeless for graying men of the construction industry to find work here.

See complete exhibit at socialdocumentary.net/exhibit/shiho_fukada/728

Left: A man plays pachinko.
Above: People wait in line to receive a charity meal at a church.
Right: Hiromi Minakami, 70, lives in a tiny room paid by welfare.
Below: Tamiichi Kuwata, 65, depends on welfare.

Photographs taken in January 2009 in Osaka, Japan.
Above: Probal Das (age 67) and Priti Rani Das (age 39) are a couple working together as stone laborers. They have worked here for four years. They have two daughters. They used to earn 400 taka ($5.79) per day. But now each of them earns only 150 taka ($2.17) per day. Some days, they only get 80 taka ($1.15) for their work.

Far left: Modern machinery, such as cranes, has caused stones to become extinct in some places in Piyain. For this reason the stone collectors have to work harder. Every night they travel upstream to collect stones and dock their boats on the banks — ready to supply.

Left: Alya Begum, a stone crusher and mother of two children, could not go to work because of illness. But without her wages, she does not have money to buy food and medicine. There is no sick leave in the stone industry.

Left: Alfar Hossain is a stone collector living in Banglabazar, two and a half kilometers from Jaflong. He either walks or takes a boat ride from his house to work. Every day he collects three boatfuls of stones and earns 150 taka ($2.17) per boat.

Living Stone: A Community Losing its Life
By Khaled Hasan

This story is about a hard working community in Jalpaiguri, in the northeastern part of Bangladesh. At dawn every day, more than a hundred little boats carrying thousands of men, women and child stone laborers enter the Piyain River, buckets and spades on board. During the monsoon season, the river currents wash down precious rocks and pebbles.

The stones that tumble down the riverbed from India are increasing in volume and the laborers are taking risks by crossing politically sensitive no-man’s land along the Indo-Bangla border.

The large stones are put into crushers and the chips are transported to the city to be used at construction sites and for building roads and highways.

Uncontrolled and unstoppable, stone extracting and crushing poses a serious threat to public health by creating air and sound pollution and harmful dust particles, to the environment, and to agriculture. The stone workers also fear losing their jobs in the coming years.

See complete exhibit at socialdocumentary.net/exhibit/Khaled_Hasan/639
An American Nightmare
By Michael McElroy

Across the U.S., more and more people are falling through the cracks: losing their homes, jobs, and health care. There was a time when we believed in the American dream and the pursuit of a better life. Unfortunately, that dream has become a nightmare for countless families who have seen everything they’ve worked so hard for slowly slip away. Howard Mallinger is one of those Americans whose dream has been shattered. This is his story.

Left: Howard comforts his wife, Dorey, during her monthly chemo treatment.
Above: Howard visits the cardiac unit at the Cleveland Clinic. Since his wife’s diagnosis, Howard’s health has also suffered but he refuses to get any treatment for fear of not being able to be at his wife’s side during her battle with cancer.
Right: Howard says Jewish prayers of comfort at his wife’s gravesite.

See complete exhibit at socialdocumentary.net/exhibit/Michael_McElroy/680
Once known for its bounty of coal, slate, clay and timber, Southeastern Ohio was stripped of its resources by the mining corporations that thrived from the 1820s to the 1960s. When they had mined all that they could, the corporations left and the residents remained. For the past three years, Matt Eich has been documenting the people of this region. The foothills of Appalachia have been his home for the past five years. He met his wife here and their daughter was born here; he sees lack of opportunity that has plagued the residents of Southeastern Ohio for decades has forced Eich and his family to move.

Rampant unemployment, poor housing conditions, drug abuse and sub-standard schools have left many families here in crisis. In 2006, Athens County, one of the poorest counties in the state, had a poverty rate of 27% and a per capita income of just $14,171. With the economic downturn of the United States, these numbers have only gotten worse.

Foreclosed Dreams
By David Wells
"Foreclosed Dreams" is a photo-essay exploring the empty homes and foreclosed dreams littering the American landscape in the wake of the foreclosure crisis across the United States. Owning a home was once the American dream. Now that dream, like those homes, is being foreclosed on. More than 1 in 10 American homeowners are either behind in mortgage payments or in foreclosure — twice the number from a year ago. The empty homes and foreclosed dreams are powerful symbols of lives shattered, families devastated and communities destroyed.

After the foreclosure and before the houses are cleaned up and returned to the market, there is a fleeting moment when the ghosts of the one-time owners are all that are left. The remaining signs of life that Wells photographs during this period of time echo the voices and footsteps that once filled these newly emptied houses. Marks on the wall, property left behind, all remind us of what, and who, used to be there.
What is Happening and Why

Far from being an unpredictable event, the financial crisis was predicted by a number of organizations, including the Bank for International Settlements (an association of central banks) which warned in June 2007 that “years of loose monetary policy had facilitated a giant global credit bubble, leaving us vulnerable to another 1930s slump” (Ibid, in Wade, 2008).

The financial crisis began as the “sub-prime crisis” in the United States in August 2007 and then erupted into a global credit crisis in September 2008. It was caused by the combination of loose monetary policy, deregulation, excessive risk-taking by banks, and the explosion of credit/debt between 2002-2007 (UNCTAD, 2009). The “sub-prime crisis” was the result of the usurious and predatory lending of mortgage brokers to people whose salaries were too low to pay off the loans (“sub-prime” mortgages). Instead of keeping these high-risk loans on their books, banks and brokers invented new ways of packaging and selling them to other banks and investors (see Baily et al, 2008). At the same time, many banks and investors took out insurance against the default of these new assets (“credit default swaps”) from companies such as U.S. insurer American International Group (AIG) (see Merskyewycz, 2008). This contributed to an explosion in credit derivatives, which investor Warren Buffet called “financial weapons of mass destruction” because of the huge threat they posed to the stability of the financial system (cited in The Economist, 2008). Such warnings were ignored, however, because of the opportunities for short-term profits. But these profits were unsustainable once as soon as house prices started to fall and borrowers started to default on their high-risk loans, the bubble burst. The value of “collateralized debt obligations” was wiped out, insurance failed as AIG collapsed, and the credit markets froze, bringing down a series of banks – including major U.S. investment bank Lehman Brothers on September 15, 2008. Bank regulators, who had stepped back from strong regulation because of an increasingly strong belief in the infallibility and efficiency of markets, had to step in to rescue the banking system and prevent systemic collapse. In a rapid and unprecedented response, trillions of dollars were spent bailing out bankrupt banks.

However, the prevention of systemic financial meltdown did not prevent the global economic downturn. As problems of the financial sector spilled over into the real economy, it has had, as we shall see, devastating effects on lives and livelihoods across the world, especially on the poorest people in the poorest countries, with women and children, migrants and minorities bearing the brunt. The economic crisis threatens the full range of human rights. It threatens not only to protect them from severe poverty and deprivation, but also to ensure that they are able to realize the rights to an adequate standard of living and the rights to health, housing, food and education, and also civil and political rights.

It is too early to tell the full extent of the damage caused by the crisis, but poor and low-income families across the world are being hardest hit. The World Bank is estimating that up to 90 million more men, women and children may be pushed into poverty in addition to the estimated 160-200 million people who fell into poverty as a result of the food crisis between 2005 and 2008. Greater poverty, and the hunger that it brings, will threaten the right to life and health of many of these people, especially children. Every year during this crisis, as many as 400,000 more children will die before they reach their fifth birthday simply because their families cannot afford food or basic medical care for preventable diseases, according to one estimate (World Bank, 2008). And the impacts will be hardest in the poorest countries. “While people in developed countries are feeling the impacts on their standards of living, their jobs and their homes, people in developing countries are bearing the brunt of the crisis, with few or no safety nets to protect them from severe poverty and deprivation, and without the fiscal capacity and space to soften the blow” (ESCR-Net, 2009).

The Consequences of the Crisis

Impacts on the realization of human rights

As the financial crisis spilled over into the real economy, it has had, as we shall see, devastating effects on lives and livelihoods across the world, especially on the poorest people in the poorest countries, with women and children, migrants and minorities bearing the brunt. The economic crisis threatens the full range of human rights. It threatens not only to

ECONOMIC CRISIS

A report by the Center for Economic and Social Rights

20 Crisis & Opportunity Documenting the Global Recession

21 Crisis & Opportunity Documenting the Global Recession

The Consequences of the Crisis

Impacts on the realization of human rights

As the financial crisis spilled over into the real economy, it has had, as we shall see, devastating effects on lives and livelihoods across the world, especially on the poorest people in the poorest countries, with women and children, migrants and minorities bearing the brunt. The economic crisis threatens the full range of human rights. It threatens not only to protect them from severe poverty and deprivation, but also to ensure that they are able to realize the rights to an adequate standard of living and the rights to health, housing, food and education, and also civil and political rights.

It is too early to tell the full extent of the damage caused by the crisis, but poor and low-income families across the world are being hardest hit. The World Bank is estimating that up to 90 million more men, women and children may be pushed into poverty in addition to the estimated 160-200 million people who fell into poverty as a result of the food crisis between 2005 and 2008. Greater poverty, and the hunger that it brings, will threaten the right to life and health of many of these people, especially children. Every year during this crisis, as many as 400,000 more children will die before they reach their fifth birthday simply because their families cannot afford food or basic medical care for preventable diseases, according to one estimate (World Bank, 2008). And the impacts will be hardest in the poorest countries. “While people in developed countries are feeling the impacts on their standards of living, their jobs and their homes, people in developing countries are bearing the brunt of the crisis, with few or no safety nets to protect them from severe poverty and deprivation, and without the fiscal capacity and space to soften the blow” (ESCR-Net, 2009).

World hunger will reach an historic high in 2009 with more than one billion people going hungry every day (FAO, 2009). This means that one in six people will be forced to eat inadequately. This food crisis that occurred as a result of the rapid rise in food prices in 2008 is far from over, as food prices remain high in 40 developing countries and the loss of jobs and remittances produce further food insecurity (UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, 2009). Chronic malnutrition will affect children’s physical and intellectual development and food insecurity is a cause of the deep poverty and social exclusion among the world’s poorest people.

The economic crisis has left many people facing foreclosure, bankruptcy and eviction, and the collapse of banks has led to a precipitous drop in lending, forcing many people into economic retrenchment. At the same time, the housing crisis has left many people working out of economic desperation, while in Kenya, teachers in Nairobi have reported an increase in student pregnancies as girls exchange sex for food (ODI, 2009).

Bankruptcies and economic retractions mean that the increase in food prices was just one of the direct result of the economic crisis is likely to reach 18 million by the end of 2009 (ILO, 2009). The right to decent work is under threat as companies radically reduce costs, laying down wages and allowing working conditions to become more hazardous. At the same time, the housing crisis has left many people without homes or shelter. The sub-prime mortgage crisis has left many people facing foreclosure, some of them victims of fraud and abusive practices by mortgage brokers (UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing, 2009). In developing countries, the number of people living in slums will rise, and mil-
The economic crisis is both a direct impact on children’s right to education, and also a cause of the right to participation in government policy decisions (HRW, 2009), Greece (IPS, 2009a) and several Eastern European countries (IPS, 2008). The underlying causes of the crisis lie in what has been termed “market fundamentalism”—the belief that unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest in the financial markets has done little more than encourage greed and the unfettered pursuit of se...
even more vulnerable to the effects of economic crises. Without government regulation and intervention, crises have become more prone to crises. In the Outcome Document of the UN’s June 2009 conference on the crisis, governments recognized that the crisis was caused by "regulatory failures, compounded by over-reliance on market self-regulation, overall lack of transparency, financial integrity and irresponsible behavior." (UN General Assembly, 2009 para 7).

It is ironic: irresponsible banks, which have long campaigned against government regulation or intervention in markets, have been the first to demand government help to rescue them from bankruptcy. Trillions of dollars in banking bailouts have effectively transferred losses onto taxpayers, amounting to a massive transfer of wealth from ordinary people to the wealthy. This has been particularly visible in how economic policies have been implemented and imposed. As Nobel prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz has pointed out:

“During the East Asia crisis, one decade ago, America and the IMF demanded that the affected countries cut their deficits by cutting back expenditures—even if, as in Thailand, this contributed to a resurgence of the AIDS epidemic, or even if, as in Indonesia, this meant selling off crucial social infrastructure for the starving. America and the IMF, several countries to raise interest rates, in some cases by more than 10 percent. They lectured Indonesia about being tough on its banks—and demanded that the government not bail them out. What a terrible precedent this would set, they said, and what a terrible intervention in the … mechanisms of the free market.” (Stiglitz, 2009).

But now even the prophets of free markets are repenting. Markets left to themselves have not achieved social welfare. Even the oft-cited American Alan Greenspan, former president of the Federal Reserve, admitted that he placed too much faith in the ability of markets to self-regulate (NYT, 2008). Billionaire investor, George Soros, has argued that governments must regulate to correct for the excesses of self-interest that markets encourage. Long a critic of market fundamentalism, Joseph Stiglitz has argued that “…special interests must be curbed, otherwise they will capture and skew the government’s actions to benefit themselves: ‘...elite business interests—financiers, in the case of the U.S.—played a central role in creating the crisis, making ever-larger gambles, with the implicit backing of the government, until the inevitable collapse. More alarming, they are now using their influence to prevent precisely what the standards set in human rights law. Gov- ernments must step in when markets fail to regulate the activities of private actors and ensure the duty of non-discrimination and the duties to refrain from harming or abusing human rights (UN General Assembly, 2009)."

Other human rights obligations give the context of limits: resources, may be achieved progressively over time but governments have to prove that they are taking positive steps, using the maximum of available resources and making constant progress in the realization of these rights. (See table on p. 26).

Human rights advocates, like many human develop- ment economists, cite evidence that “private enterprises and market forces cannot be relied upon to produce outcomes that satisfy the immedi- ate obligations for non-discrimination and equality and minimum core standards. To achieve this, private enterprise and market forces need to be carefully regulated by the state and complemented by a well-functioning public sector.” (Balakrishnan and Elson, 2008).

Redressing the balance between the state and the market is therefore an essential part of constructing a sustainable long-term response to the crisis. This will require replacing the ideal of the “minimal state” with the ideal of a “rights-fulfilling state” that acts in accordance with the standards set out in human rights law.
Crisis & Opportunity
Adopting a human rights approach

“States can neither overlook nor limit their obligation of protecting civil, economic, political and social human rights in times of crisis. Rather, by fully integrating human rights principles and standards into law and practice, all governments are able to respond to an economic downturn in a truly sustainable manner.”

—Navi Pillay, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in her statement to the UN General Assembly High-Level Conference on the World Financial and Economic Crisis and its Impact, June 18, 2009

Despite the human rights dimensions of the crisis, the language of human rights is still largely absent from the diagnoses or prescriptions proposed by national governments or the international community (Saiz, 2009). Responses to the crisis have so far focused on identifying human rights consequences of the crisis, and on governments’ capacities to meet their human rights obligations. This should start with governments’ recognition of the legally binding human rights obligations enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the core international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. While international human rights law does not prescribe a specific economic system, nor provide a set of detailed and specific prescriptions on how to reorient financial, economic and social policy, it does set clear priorities and clear boundaries.

Immediate responses to address the consequences of the crisis

In the immediate term, the first responsibility of governments must be to prevent and alleviate the devastating impacts of the crisis on human lives. It is unacceptable that 400,000 children under the age of five should die because of this crisis. That millions of street children are known to be infected with HIV/AIDS, that there is no retrogression in the provision of essential goods and services (including those necessary to prevent maternal and child mortality and to ensure completion of primary school education). It also means ensuring that economic stimulus packages and counter-cyclical economic policies (in countries where they are possible) should be focused on limiting the worst human consequences of the crisis, and the inequality in distribution of resources must be given to the most vulnerable and marginalized.

Refraiming from violating civil and political rights

Governments must refrain from violating civil and political rights, including the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of association and rights to information. Rather than using disproportionate force against protesters, social protest should be defused by permitting democratic debate and enabling active and meaningful citizen participation in the design and monitoring of policy responses.

Prioritizing a basic minimum of effective economic and social rights for all

Governments have an immediate obligation to ensure the “minimum essential levels” of social and economic rights which are essential for the survival and a life of dignity. Meeting this obligation must trump all other policy considerations. This means immediately instituting social protection programs to relieve poverty, hunger and homelessness. It also means ring-fencing government budgets to ensure that there is no retrogression in the provision of essential goods and services (including those necessary to prevent maternal and child mortality and to ensure completion of primary school education). It also means ensuring that economic stimulus packages and counter-cyclical economic policies (in countries where they are possible) should be focused on limiting the worst human consequences of the crisis, and the inequality in distribution of resources must be given to the most vulnerable and marginalized.

Protecting the most vulnerable and ensuring non-discrimination

Governments have an immediate obligation of non-discrimination which must be applied to all policies and programs. This prohibits responses to the crisis that benefit wealthier groups over traditionally marginalized groups or peoples. It also means taking into account, and compensating for the disproportionate effects of the crisis on different groups, in order to ensure substantive, as well as formal, equality (see UN CESCR, 2009). It also requires that governments take special measures to protect the rights of women, migrants, minorities and other groups that are being particularly threatened in the crisis.

Respecting human rights principles in policy processes as well as outcomes

The human rights principles of participation, transparency, accountability and redress, must also be integrated into policy responses. A human rights approach requires a focus not only with the consequences of policies and programs, but also on the processes by which these policies are adopted. This means that, in the crisis response, programs must be designed, implemented and evaluated in a manner that ensures transparency, full participation (including of women), and institutional mechanisms for accountability and redress (OHRCH, 2006).

Long-term responses to address the causes of the crisis

The global economic crisis is a threat to human rights, but also an opportunity to rethink the role of the state in complying with human rights obligations, particularly those related to economic and social rights. It provides an opportunity to rethink governance and accountability both at the national and global level. This systems collapse calls for a new framework for national governance – both domestically and increasingly at the international level – in which people and the environment, not banks or business, are at the center of economic policy-making (ESCR-net, 2009).
The eruption of the financial and economic crisis has demonstrated that markets may be necessary, but are not sufficient to guarantee the conditions for the realization of human rights. An essential starting point for redressing the imbalance between the state and the market is, to recognize and reaffirm that governments have duties to respect, protect and fulfill human rights, as well as obligations to meet the human rights principles of non-discrimination, participation, transparency and accountability. The implications of these standards and principles for longer-term responses to the crisis at the national level are outlined here.

The duty to respect human rights

The duty to respect is essentially a duty to “do no harm”. This means that governments must prevent, avoid or mitigate any negative impacts of government policies and programs, paying particular attention to the poorest and most marginalized groups, whose rights are most likely to be violated. Many of the economic measures implemented over the last three decades in the policy package of liberalization, deregulation and privatization have had harsh impacts on the poorest. This is often not evident from aggregate economic data. Redressing the balance will require recognizing that the state must have duties to respect, protect and fulfill human rights, as well as obligations to meet the human rights principles of non-discrimination, participation, transparency and accountability. The implications of these standards and principles for longer-term responses to the crisis at the national level are outlined here.

The duty to protect human rights

The duty to protect is essentially a duty to regulate, and requires the provision of remedies in the case of abuses by non-state actors. This means that governments must regulate the activities of corporations and other non-state actors and hold those actors to account and seek redress in cases of abuses of human rights. The trend of deregulation has undermined governments’ capacities to regulate. This is particularly clear in the case of financial markets and the shift towards “self-regulation” of the financial industry. Many of the rules governing financial markets, which had been put in place after the financial abuses of the 1920s and the original Great Depression, were rolled back. Yet these rules remained in place, much of the damage caused by this financial crisis may have been avoided (see e.g. Baker, 2009). Redressing the balance will require recognizing that the state must play an important role in regulation, control and supervision, and that financial institutions (and other economic actors) to guard against excessive risk-taking, speculation and greed and to protect citizens and consumers against abuses of their rights.

The duty to fulfill human rights

The duty to fulfill is essentially a duty to take positive action, by putting in place measures and policies to guarantee human rights, including the minimum essential levels of each right necessary to guarantee human survival and a life of human dignity. This means providing emergency programs in times of crisis, but it also means maintaining a social safety net to guarantee a basic social minimum at all times. The trend to “roll back the state” has reduced the redistributive role of the state, leaving ever fewer resources for social programs that guarantee a basic minimum and reduce inequality. Redressing the balance will require recognition that the state needs to step in when the market does not provide for the poorest, as market prices for food, housing, health and education move beyond their reach.

Integrating human rights principles with economic policy-making

Human rights principles require establishing processes for policy-making that are participatory, transparent and inclusive mechanisms for accountability and redress. Rather than being subject to forms of democratic deliberation, decision-making on economic policies has become increasingly left to technocratic experts. Redressing the balance will require recognizing that it is not only outcomes, but also the processes that are important.

International level: rethinking global governance

The rapid escalation of the financial crisis into a global economic crisis also demonstrated that the liberalization of trade and markets has brought an unprecedented degree of integration and inter- dependence amongst economies and countries. While the economic crisis was generated in the countries of the global north, its impacts have disproportionately affected the countries and peoples of the global south, which are more vulnerable to economic shocks and have fewer resources to support those actors to account and seek redress in cases of abuses of human rights. Non-state actors and hold those actors to account and seek redress in cases of abuses of human rights. The trend of deregulation has undermined governments’ capacities to regulate. This is particularly clear in the case of financial markets and the shift towards “self-regulation” of the financial industry. Many of the rules governing financial markets, which had been put in place after the financial abuses of the 1920s and the original Great Depression, were rolled back. Yet these rules remained in place, much of the damage caused by this financial crisis may have been avoided (see e.g. Baker, 2009). Redressing the balance will require recognizing that the state must play an important role in regulation, control and supervision, and that financial institutions (and other economic actors) to guard against excessive risk-taking, speculation and greed and to protect citizens and consumers against abuses of their rights.

The one-size-fits-all policy package of the Washington Consensus has been widely promoted by the World Bank and the IMF, and often coercively imposed on developing countries through conditions on loans and grants (Stiglitz, 2009). Reform of the financial institutions should include ensuring that they operate in accordance with the UN Charter, the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the UDHR and other international treaties and ensuring that the policies that they propose or impose do not undermine the capacities of governments to respect, protect and fulfill their human rights obligations. At the same time, when acting within the World Bank, the IMF, and or other ad hoc meetings of the G-20, governments should guarantee their policies are consistent with and conducive to the realization of human rights (ESCR-Net, 2009). Reform of the governance of the World Bank and IMF should result in greater inclusion of less powerful states, on the basis of basis of ‘fair and equitable representation’ of developing countries, in order to increase the credibility and accountability of these institutions (UN General Assembly, 2009 para 44). Both institutions should also refrain from setting conditions that limit the policy and fiscal space of developing countries to take counter-cyclical economic stimulus policies in the context of urgent crisis responses.

Reform of global economic governance architecture and regulatory frameworks

The one-size-fits-all policy package of the Washington Consensus has been widely promoted by the World Bank and the IMF, and often coercively imposed on developing countries through conditions on loans and grants (Stiglitz, 2009). Reform of the financial institutions should include ensuring that they operate in accordance with the UN Charter, the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the UDHR and other international treaties and ensuring that the policies that they propose or impose do not undermine the capacities of governments to respect, protect and fulfill their human rights obligations. At the same time, when acting within the World Bank, the IMF, and or other ad hoc meetings of the G-20, governments should guarantee their policies are consistent with and conducive to the realization of human rights (ESCR-Net, 2009). Reform of the governance of the World Bank and IMF should result in greater inclusion of less powerful states, on the basis of basis of ‘fair and equitable representation’ of developing countries, in order to increase the credibility and accountability of these institutions (UN General Assembly, 2009 para 44). Both institutions should also refrain from setting conditions that limit the policy and fiscal space of developing countries to take counter-cyclical economic stimulus policies in the context of urgent crisis responses.
The primary responsibility for meeting human rights lies with national governments. But, under the UN Charter and human rights treaties, governments to international aid (that 0.7 percent of OECD countries' GDPs would be allocated to overseas budgets, but rather heed the calls to assist developing countries are to meet their basic human rights obligations. The UN Human Rights Council Special Session in February 2009, states committed themselves to respond to the consequences of the crisis from a human rights perspective, ensuring that there was a safety net wherever possible, and refraining from reducing their assistance commitments to international aid (that 0.7 percent of OECD countries’ GDPs) would be allocated to overseas development aid) (UN Human Rights Council, 2009), though for få løsninger har denne kommitté svaret.

Action on these human rights responses is needed now

Despite the human rights causes and consequenc- es of the crisis, governments have been too busy recognising their obligations. The origins of the financial crisis, in the early 2000s, were a result of deregulation and lack of regulation of financial markets, but also to the underlying trends of financialisation of real economies and the rise of the “rights-fulfilling state”.

Ordinary people, and civil society, including human rights organisations have, found a voice to demand and push for urgent change in different forums around the world. The framework of hu- man rights may not provide the specific, detailed prescription for that change, but it does provide a language for making these claims and it starkly sets out the basic responsibilities of governments. The human rights framework roundly challenges the pervasive complacency in the face of the terrible consequences of the crisis. It locates the crisis of the crisis, not in unpredictable, uncontrollable market forces, but in the human decisions, actions and inactions that produced the crisis. Recognising this spurs a path for accountability and offers the potential for profound change.

References


Baker, D. & Tuck, I. (2009).Punam: palliative, palliate, palliation, Martha Nell, Robert C. Lane, Matthew J. Johnstone. (2009). The Origins of the Financial Crisis. Financial System Series 2: The Banking Institution. Macintosh H. and Mai U. (2009). "Teaching Economic Policy in the light of Economic and Social Rights, and the "Millennium Development Goals must be honored. Without external financing, there is little scope for developing countries to put in place the kind of fiscal stimulus packages that developed countries have been able to implement and are needed for developing countries to meet their basic human rights and development commitments (see World Bank, 2008). Among other things, this means that northern governments must reduce their aid budgets, and rather heed the calls to assist developing countries in the fulfillment of their core human rights obligations. At the UN Human Rights Council Special Session in February 2009, states committed themselves to respond to the consequences of the crisis from a human rights perspective, ensuring that there was a safety net wherever possible, and refraining from reducing their assistance commitments to international aid (that 0.7 percent of OECD countries’ GDPs) would be allocated to overseas development aid) (UN Human Rights Council, 2009), though for få løsninger har denne kommitté svaret.

Action on these human rights responses is needed now

Despite the human rights causes and consequenc- es of the crisis, governments have been too busy recognising their obligations. The origins of the financial crisis, in the early 2000s, were a result of deregulation and lack of regulation of financial markets, but also to the underlying trends of financialisation of real economies and the rise of the “rights-fulfilling state”.

Ordinary people, and civil society, including human rights organisations have, found a voice to demand and push for urgent change in different forums around the world. The framework of hu- man rights may not provide the specific, detailed prescription for that change, but it does provide a language for making these claims and it starkly sets out the basic responsibilities of governments. The human rights framework roundly challenges the pervasive complacency in the face of the terrible consequences of the crisis. It locates the crisis of the crisis, not in unpredictable, uncontrollable market forces, but in the human decisions, actions and inactions that produced the crisis. Recognising this spurs a path for accountability and offers the potential for profound change.

References


Shahidul Alam is a graduate of the South Asian Institute of Photography. He is a freelance photographer and has been published in Sunday Times Magazine, American Photo, Asian Geographic Society, Better Photography, Saudi Arabian World Magazine and others. His awards include the 2004 W. Eugene Smith Photography Program of National Geographic Society, Alexia Foundation Student Award (Award of Excellence), 2006 Grand Prix winner of “Europe and Asia: Dialogue of Cultures” organized by Museum of Photography (Russia), Mark Grootes Documentary Prize 2009, and others.

Photo by Leslie Alsheimer from “Net Gains” Girls Laughing, Rakai Village, Uganda

Tomasz Tomaszewski. See page 6

David H. Wells is a freelance photographer based in Providence, Rhode Island. He specializes in intercultural communications and the use of light and shadow to enhance visual narratives. His work has been featured in numerous publications internationally. He moved to Beijing in February 2004.

Her work has been featured in numerous publications internationally. She moved to Beijing in February 2004.

Tomasz Tomaszewski. See page 6

David H. Wells is a freelance photographer based in Providence, Rhode Island. He specializes in intercultural communications and the use of light and shadow to enhance visual narratives. His work has been featured in numerous publications internationally. He moved to Beijing in February 2004.

Her work has been featured in numerous publications internationally. She moved to Beijing in February 2004.