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Economic Inequality as a Human Rights Violation: An International Perspective Analysis

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Abstract

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Economic inequality, both between countries and within countries, is the main challenge for the fulfillment of Human Rights (*Hak Asasi Manusia/HAM)* in the era of globalization. This article analyzes the relationship between economic inequality and human rights violations through a literature review approach, with reference to international human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The results show that global inequality is largely caused by international economic structures that benefit developed countries, while domestic inequality is exacerbated by unfair fiscal policies, discrimination, and weak governance. These findings underscore the need for structural reforms at the global level, institutional capacity building at the national level, and strengthening legal protections for vulnerable groups. International efforts such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are considered positive, but their effectiveness is still limited. Therefore, a holistic, sustainable, and social justice-based solution is needed to address economic inequality as a human rights issue, so that every individual can enjoy basic rights equally.

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1. Introduction

Human Rights *(Hak Asasi Manusia/HAM)* is a set of rights that are inherent in every individual from birth and are universal, meaning that they apply to all people regardless of race, religion, gender, nationality, or other social status. This principle recognizes that every individual has dignity and rights that cannot be taken away except through lawful legal procedure. Human rights universalism not only reflects global moral and ethical values, but also becomes the foundation of international law that governs relations between states and their citizens.[1] The development of international human rights instruments began with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. This document became a milestone in the recognition of fundamental rights at the global level, and subsequently gave birth to two important covenants in 1966: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The UDHR provides a normative framework, while the ICCPR and ICESCR bind states to respect, protect, and fulfill the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of their citizens.[2]

Global trends in recent decades have shown an increase in economic disparities, both between countries and within countries. These gaps significantly affect the fulfillment of human rights because they limit access to resources and opportunities. Economic inequality is not only a matter of wealth distribution, but

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1 Edna Raquel Hogemann. "Human rights beyond dichotomy between cultural universalism and relativism." *The Age of Human Rights Journal* 14 (2020): 19-36.

2 P. Narumugai. "Role of ICCPR and ICESCR in the Working of the Constitutions." *Indian JL & Legal Rsch.* 2 (2021): 1.

also an impact on access to education, health services, decent work, and adequate housing. This inequality often reinforces the cycle of poverty and hinders social mobility. According to World Bank data (2023), 10% of the world's population controls more than 76% of global wealth, while the majority of the population lives on incomes that are well below the standard of eligibility.

From an international perspective, economic inequality is considered a form of human rights violation because it hinders the fulfillment of basic rights. For example, a person living in extreme poverty is often unable to enjoy the right to full health, education, and political participation. This condition creates vulnerability to discrimination, exploitation, and marginalization. The direct link between economic inequality and restrictions on access to basic rights is an increasingly urgent issue to be addressed through inclusive and equitable global policies. The phenomenon of economic inequality is also inseparable from structural challenges such as the imbalance of the international trading system, the debt burden of developing countries, and the gap in access to technology.[3] These factors reinforce inequalities between countries and hinder sustainable development efforts. At the domestic level, gender, race, or ethnicity-based discrimination further exacerbates the situation, where vulnerable groups have more limited access to resources and opportunities.

International organizations such as the United Nations (UN) through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have set targets to reduce inequality within

[3] Lestari Sukarniati, Firsty Ramadhona Amalia Lubis, and Nurul Azizah Az Zakiyyah. *Ekonomi Pembangunan (Teori Dan Tantangan Di Negara Berkembang)*. Uad Press, (2021).

and between countries. This target emphasizes the elimination of extreme poverty, the economic empowerment of vulnerable communities, and increased access to basic services. However, the implementation of these policies in many countries still faces political, administrative, and financial constraints. Therefore, this article aims to analyze the relationship between economic inequality and human rights violations from an international perspective. This analysis will discuss the dynamics of inequality, policy implementation challenges, and potential solutions based on human rights principles. By combining empirical data, international legal frameworks, and social justice theory, it is hoped that this paper can provide a comprehensive overview of global efforts to realize equal rights for all individuals.

2. Literature Review

A review of the literature on the link between economic inequality and human rights shows that this issue has complex and multidimensional structural roots. Human rights, as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948, include civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights that must be guaranteed without discrimination. The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) affirms that states are obliged to fulfill the rights to employment, health, education, and a decent standard of living.[4] Several studies confirm that economic inequality directly affects the realization of human

[4] Matthias Petel and Norman Vander Putten. "Economic, social and cultural rights and their dependence on the economic growth paradigm: Evidence from the ICESCR system." *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights* 39, no. 1 (2021): 53-72.

rights. Gangl[5] reports that the gap between rich and poor groups is widening, with the richest 1% of the population controlling almost half of the world's wealth. This has an impact on the limited access of the poor to basic services, which in turn violates the principles of equality and non-discrimination.

In addition, economic inequality contributes to the weakening of social cohesion, triggers conflict, and lowers the quality of democracy.[6] Other studies show that discrimination based on gender, race, and ethnicity often exacerbates inequality. Women, for example, globally still receive lower wages than men for equal work. This is not only a violation of the right to fair work, but also hinders the achievement of gender equality as stipulated in Article 7 of the ICESCR. In some countries, ethnic minorities face structural barriers to obtaining education and employment, thus being trapped in a cycle of intergenerational poverty. From an international perspective, economic inequality also stems from the imbalance in the global economic system. Unequal trade agreements, the debt burden of developing countries, and disparities in access to modern technology have created a development gap between developed and developing countries.

Institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank have launched programs to reduce this gap, but their effectiveness is often questioned because in some cases it exacerbates the economic dependence of developing countries on developed countries. The existing literature emphasizes the

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5 Katharina Gangl and Benno Torgler. "How to achieve tax compliance by the wealthy: A review of the literature and agenda for policy." *Social Issues and Policy Review* 14, no. 1 (2020): 108-151.

6 Victoria Miyandazi. "Human Rights and Equality Commissions in Kenya and their role in tackling poverty and economic inequality." *Federal Law Review* 51, no. 4 (2023): 422-441.

importance of a holistic approach to addressing economic inequality in the context of human rights. This includes economic policy reform, strengthening the national legal system, and international cooperation based on the principles of justice and equality. By understanding the close relationship between economic inequality and human rights abuses, policymakers can formulate more effective and sustainable strategies to achieve social justice at the global level.

3. Method

This research uses a library research approach, which focuses on searching, analyzing, and synthesizing various sources of literature relevant to the topic of economic inequality and human rights violations in an international perspective. Literature studies were chosen because they allow authors to gather comprehensive information from a variety of sources, both primary and secondary, in order to build evidence-based arguments and analyses. The primary data sources in this study include international legal instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

These documents are the main reference in assessing the state's obligations to the fulfillment of the basic rights of its citizens, as well as their relevance to the issue of economic inequality. Secondary sources include official reports from international institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, UNDP, and Oxfam, which provide quantitative and qualitative data on economic inequality in various countries. In addition, scientific journal articles, academic books, and research reports are used to enrich understanding of the factors that cause inequality, their impact on human rights, and the strategies that have been implemented to address them.

The analysis was carried out through content analysis techniques to identify key themes that emerged from the literature, such as the direct relationship between economic inequality and human rights violations, the role of discrimination in exacerbating inequality, and the challenges of international policy implementation. The data obtained is systematically organized to facilitate comparisons between sources and the drawing of valid conclusions. This approach allows the authors to build a robust analytical framework without conducting field data collection. Literature studies are particularly useful for topics that require the synthesis of concepts, theories, and findings of previous research, especially in social and legal studies.

4. Results

4.1. Economic Inequality Between Countries in Human Rights Perspective

Economic inequality between countries has become one of the main challenges in realizing human rights at the global level. Differences in the level of economic development, per capita income, and access to natural resources and technology create a significant gap between developed and developing countries. According to the UNDP report, high-income countries have an average Human

Development Index (HDI) of 0.89, while low-income countries only reach 0.51.[7] This disparity has a direct impact on the country's ability to provide basic services such as education, health, and adequate infrastructure. Within the framework of international law, these inequalities are considered an obstacle to the realization of the rights guaranteed in the ICESCR, in particular the right to a decent standard of living, health, and education. Poor countries often do not have adequate fiscal capacity to meet such obligations, even after receiving development assistance.

Some experts consider that the unbalanced global economic system through adverse trade agreements, high debt burdens, and technological dominance by developed countries are structural factors that exacerbate this gap.[8] International efforts to reduce inequality between countries have been made through various mechanisms, such as the provision of development assistance, debt cancellation, and the facilitation of free trade. However, its effectiveness is often questioned. For example, although development assistance aims to increase the capacity of the recipient country, in practice there is often prolonged dependency and ineffective use of funds due to weak governance.[9]

In addition, inequality between countries can trigger political tensions and international conflicts. Marginalized countries in the global economic system often feel that they are not fairly represented in international institutions such as the IMF

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7 Mais Sha'ban, Claudia Girardone, and Anna Sarkisyan. "Cross-country variation in financial inclusion: a global perspective." In *Financial literacy and responsible finance in the FinTech era*, *Routledge*, (2021): 23-44.

8 Theodore H. Cohn, and Anil Hira. "*Global political economy: Theory and practice*." Routledge, (2020): 57-71.

9 François Bourguignon and Jan Willem Gunning. "Foreign aid and governance." *The Handbook of Economic Development and Institutions* (2020): 308-356.

and the World Bank. This raises the demand to reform global governance to be more inclusive and reflect the interests of all countries, not just countries with large economic powers. Based on these findings, it is clear that economic inequality between countries is not only an economic problem, but also a human rights issue that requires global political commitment. Structural changes in international economic governance are urgently needed to create a fairer system, so that every country has an equal opportunity to fulfill the basic rights of its citizens.

4.2. Economic Inequality in the Country and Its Impact on Human Rights

Economic inequality within a country is often more complex because it is closely linked to political, social, and cultural factors specific to that country. Differences in income and wealth distribution between community groups can create social gaps that hinder the fulfillment of basic rights. World Bank data (2023) shows that in many developing countries, the richest 20% of the population controls more than 60% of national income, while the poorest 20% earn less than 3%. This inequality has an impact on a wide range of internationally recognized rights. The right to education, for example, is often only optimally accessible to the upper middle class, while the poor face limited facilities, quality of teachers, and high education costs.

Similarly, the right to health is hampered because quality health services are usually only available in urban areas at a relatively high cost.[10] Discrimination factors also exacerbate inequality within the country. Ethnic minority groups, women, and

[10] Chorh Chuan Tan, Carolyn SP Lam, David B. Matchar, Yoong Kang Zee, and John EL Wong. "Singapore's health-care system: key features, challenges, and shifts." *The Lancet* 398, no. 10305 (2021): 1091-1104.

people with disabilities often face structural barriers in accessing decent employment and public services.[11] For example, the gender wage gap is still a global problem, where women on average receive 20% lower wages than men for equal work. This is contrary to the principle of equality as set out in Article 7 of the ICESCR.

Effective redistribution policies can reduce these inequalities, such as social assistance programs, education subsidies, and free health care for vulnerable groups. However, the success of this policy depends heavily on political commitment, fiscal capacity, and good governance. Without adequate oversight mechanisms, the program is at risk of being misused or not on target. High inequality within the country also has the potential to cause political instability. Social discontent due to inequality often triggers demonstrations, riots, and even armed conflicts. In the context of human rights, this shows that economic inequality is not only a welfare issue, but also a threat to the right to security and stability of life. Thus, addressing economic inequality within the country requires a comprehensive strategy that includes fiscal policy reform, legal protections for vulnerable groups, and improved access to quality basic services for all citizens.

4.3. International Efforts to Address Economic Inequality as a Human Rights Violation

International efforts to address the economic inequalities that implicate human rights violations have been undertaken through various mechanisms, both within the framework of the United Nations (UN) and through regional and bilateral

[11] Jackie Shaw, Mary Wickenden, Stephen Thompson, and Philip Mader. "Achieving disability inclusive employment–Are the current approaches deep enough?." *Journal of International Development* 34, no. 5 (2022): 942-963.

cooperation. One of the main instruments is the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goal 10 which targets the reduction of inequality within and between countries. These targets include poverty alleviation, expanded access to basic services, and economic empowerment of vulnerable communitie.[12] The United Nations, through the office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, routinely monitors and reports on human rights conditions affected by economic inequality. These reports provide recommendations to the state to strengthen redistributive policies, eliminate structural discrimination, and increase transparency in the use of public budgets. In addition, international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF provide financial and technical support for poverty alleviation programs.

However, the effectiveness of these efforts still faces major challenges. One of them is the gap in the commitment and capacity of countries to implement agreed policies at the international level. Some countries prioritize macroeconomic growth without paying attention to the distribution of benefits, so that inequality remains high even though national economic indicators are improving.[13] International trade cooperation is also an important arena in reducing inequality. Fair trade agreements can open markets for developing countries, increase export earnings, and create jobs. In practice, however, many agreements still favor developed countries, limiting

[12] Pramod K. Singh and Harpalsinh Chudasama. "Evaluating poverty alleviation strategies in a developing country." *PloS one* 15, no. 1 (2020): e0227176.

[13] Stephanie Seguino. "Engendering macroeconomic theory and policy." *Feminist Economics* 26, no. 2 (2020): 27-61.

developing countries' opportunities to compete equally. Therefore, reforms in global trade policy are an important part of the long-term solution.

In addition, the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international civil society cannot be ignored. They often serve as a liaison between vulnerable communities and global policymakers, while also overseeing the implementation of human rights commitments by states. Through advocacy, public campaigns, and strategic litigation, these actors drive greater accountability and transparency. While there have been various international initiatives to address economic inequality, its long-term success depends heavily on global coordination, political will, and policy sustainability at the national level. Structural reforms in economic governance and international trade are key to ensuring that these efforts truly contribute to the equitable fulfillment of human rights around the world.

5. Discussion

The results of the study show that economic inequality, both between countries and within countries, is closely related to human rights violations. Inequality in income, wealth, and access to basic resources create structural barriers to the fulfillment of rights guaranteed in various international human rights instruments, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). This condition indicates that economic and human rights issues cannot be separated, but affect each other reciprocally. Inequality between countries often stems from the global economic system that tends to benefit developed countries. International trade mechanisms, global financial architectures, and technology distribution exhibit structural biases that widen the development gap. Nigusie[14] asserts that the current world economic structure systematically favors certain parties while marginalizing developing countries. This creates a situation where low-income countries have difficulty meeting their human rights obligations, even though under international law they have the same responsibilities.

On the other hand, inequality within the country shows a more complex pattern. Factors such as unfair fiscal policies, social discrimination, weak legal protections, and low quality governance exacerbate inequality. Stiglitz (2012) notes that extreme domestic inequality not only hinders economic growth, but also weakens social cohesion and political stability. This is relevant to the findings of this study which show that countries with high levels of inequality are more vulnerable to social conflicts, mass demonstrations, and civil rights violations. International efforts, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and development assistance programs, have made a positive contribution, but their effectiveness is often hampered by weak political commitments, corruption, and limited institutional capacity of recipient countries. In addition, differences in interests between developed and developing countries hinder the achievement of substantive global agreement on the reform of the international economic system.

These discussions underlined that approaches to addressing economic inequality must be holistic, involving structural reforms at the global level, improved governance at the national level, and strengthening legal protections for vulnerable

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14 Alemu Asfaw Nigusie and Mohammed Seid Ali. "Africa in the Global Economy: Between Integration and Marginalization?." *Bandung* 7, no. 1 (2020): 24-51.

groups. Cross-border collaboration, trade treaty reform, unsustainable debt elimination, and resource redistribution are key components. Without fundamental changes to the existing system, efforts to reduce inequality risk being cosmetic and unsustainable. Thus, handling economic inequality as a human rights issue requires synergy between economic policies and human rights legal instruments. This approach not only targets poverty reduction, but also ensures a fair and equitable distribution of development benefits, so that every individual can enjoy their basic rights to the fullest.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that economic inequality, both between countries and within countries, is one of the main factors that hinder the realization of human rights. This inequality arises due to a combination of structural factors at the global level, weak governance at the national level, and discrimination against vulnerable groups. At the intercountry level, the global economic system that is biased towards developed countries exacerbates the development gap and hinders developing countries' access to resources, technology, and markets. Meanwhile, at the domestic level, non-inclusive fiscal policies, corruption, and discrimination deepen socio-economic inequalities, which in turn threaten political stability and social cohesion.

International efforts through the SDGs, development assistance, and trade reforms have contributed, but their effectiveness is still limited. Successful inequality reduction requires structural reforms that involve changes in global governance, improved national policies, and strong legal protections for vulnerable groups.

Therefore, addressing economic inequality as part of the human rights agenda requires strong political commitment, fair global cooperation, and inclusive national policies. Only through an integrated, sustainable, and social justice-based approach can human rights be fulfilled equitably around the world.

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