

# A MORAL BUDGET FROM A MORAL MOVEMENT

**Shailly Gupta Barnes**

- *The Poor People's Campaign* •

## ABSTRACT

*The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival is a national campaign in the U.S. that has grown to more than 40 states across the country. Taking up the legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, the Campaign is targeting the interrelated injustices of systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation and militarism, and the distorted moral narrative that perpetuates them. It is redefining morality, religion and human rights through its fusion coalition model of organizing, and challenging the existence of poverty in the U.S. In June 2019, the Poor People's Campaign released a Poor People's Moral Budget: Everybody Has the Right to Live! The Moral Budget establishes that there is an abundance of resources to meet the needs and demands of the poor and, in fact, if the country allocated its resources towards meeting those needs, its economy would grow and its delicate social fabric would be renewed.*

## KEYWORDS

United States | Poverty | Campaign | National Budget | Moral Renewal

On 17 June 2019, nine of the candidates running in the United States' (US) Presidential election – including top Democratic contenders Senator Elizabeth Warren, Senator Bernie Sanders, Vice President Joe Biden, and Senator Kamala Harris – made appearances at a Candidates' Forum organised by the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival.<sup>1</sup> This was the largest candidates' forum to take place before the official party debates began later that month and it was the only forum where candidates answered questions directly from poor people.



These questions were not about the candidates' plans to grow the US economy or opportunities for them to riff on their stump speeches. Instead, the candidates were asked about their plans to guarantee living wages for workers, healthcare for all people, and a habitable planet for our children. They were asked how they plan to end voter suppression, attacks on immigrants, mass incarceration and unchecked military spending. This audience wanted to know how the candidates planned to make our economy work for everyone, especially the 140 million people<sup>2</sup> – or 43% of the US population – who are poor or one emergency away from being poor in the wealthiest nation in the world.

The candidates' forum was part of the Poor People's Campaign's Moral Action Congress.<sup>3</sup> Also as part of the Congress, the Campaign released a Poor People's Moral Budget: Everybody Has the Right to Live!<sup>4</sup> Indeed, for the 140 million people who are poor and struggling to make ends meet, the Campaign's Moral Agenda<sup>5</sup> and Declaration of Fundamental Rights present

a comprehensive response to the systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation, militarism, and war economy plaguing the US today. These demands are necessary to ensure our survival. The Moral Budget asks, given the resources of the country, whether these demands are also possible. It flips the question of costs and raises the question of the benefits of enacting the Poor People's Campaign's Moral Agenda. It is already costing our society to suppress voting rights, not provide healthcare and to keep wages low. There is a price to inequality.

The Moral Budget, therefore, looks at how much better we could be as a nation if we addressed inequality.<sup>6</sup> It declares that the moral thing to do is also the economically responsible thing to do. We have been investing in killing people; we now must invest in life. We have been investing in systemic racism and voter suppression; we must now invest in expanding democracy. We have been investing in punishing the poor; we must now invest in the welfare of all. We have been investing in the wealthy and corporations; we must now invest in the people who have built this country.

## 1 • A History of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival

The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival is a revival of the 1968 Poor People's Campaign led by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and other religious and grassroots leaders, to focus the nation's attention on racism, militarism, and poverty by bringing together millions of poor black, white and brown Americans. The 1968 Campaign followed the Civil Rights Movement and acknowledged its limitations. As Rev. Dr. King said in 1967, "We have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights, an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society... We must recognise that we can't solve our problem now until there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power."<sup>7</sup>



After King was assassinated on 4 April 1968, the 1968 Campaign continued to organise this vision. In May and June that year, 3,000 people arrived in Washington, D.C. and set up camp on the National Mall. For 6 weeks they revealed the deep crises of poverty facing millions of people in the country. Their “Resurrection City” was broken up by police, but continued to inspire generations of activists, organisers and clergy who saw the potential of this historic campaign.

Fifty years later, the current campaign has picked up those same issues with renewed intensity. From Mother’s Day, May 2018, to the Summer Solstice, June 2018, it organised a season of moral action that spanned 40 states. For 6 consecutive weeks, thousands of people who were directly impacted by poverty, racism, ecological devastation and militarism, along with moral and religious leaders and activists, gathered in state capitols and Washington D.C. for mass meetings, direct action, teach-ins and cultural events. There were more than 200 actions across those 40 days, with over 5,000 people presenting themselves for nonviolent civil disobedience, tens of thousands witnessing and millions of people following online and through social media. This was the largest and most expansive wave of nonviolent civil disobedience in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the United States.



More than just a series of actions and rallies, the Campaign is catalysing a new organising model. By many measures, conditions have deteriorated<sup>8</sup> since the 1968 Campaign. We have fewer voting rights, good jobs and government programs or support for education, water and sanitation and housing. We have more wealth inequality, homelessness, prisons and war. One out of every two federal discretionary dollars goes to the US military, while only 15 cents goes

to anti-poverty programs. The current administration is interested in cutting those programs even further, threatening the lives of millions of children, elders, people with disabilities and families struggling everyday. This includes more than half of our children (38.5 million), 42% of our elders (21 million), 59.7% of Black non-Hispanic people (23.7 million), 64% of Latinx people (38 million), 40% of Asians (8 million), 58.9% of indigenous people (2.1 million) and one out of every three white people (66 million) in the US.

## 2 • A Poor People's Moral Budget

The Poor People's Moral Budget is an effort to prioritise the needs and demands of the poor, rather than the interests of the wealthy and powerful. Both the Republican and Democratic parties have accepted ways of talking about the economy that ignore nearly half of our country. For too long, we have been led to believe that those in positions of influence and authority will use the resources at hand for the betterment of our society. This orientation has justified tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations and work requirements for the poor; it has secured environmental shortcuts for industry and military expansion around the world; and it has yielded very little for the poor.

*I just question why is there not access to health care for young adults, or to anyone for that matter, that does not involve one going into bankruptcy, becoming homeless due to an Emergency Room visit, a simple primary care visit, the cost of medications...* (Mary Ellen Smith, South Carolina).<sup>9</sup>

This is not because there is a lack of resources to address systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation and militarism. We are a wealthy country. The Moral Budget shows that if we prioritise the needs and demands of the poor, we will create more jobs, build up our infrastructure and yield short- and long-term benefits that will grow our economy and protect our resources for future generations.

In the seven sections of the Moral Budget,<sup>10</sup> we look at policies and investments for seven critical areas of the Poor People's Moral Agenda: 1) democracy and equal protection under the law; 2) domestic tranquility; 3) peace and the common defense; 4) life and health; 5) the planet; 6) our future; and 7) an equitable economy. In each case, we have found that our nation has abundant resources to meet the demands of the poor and to address the widespread and systemic injustices we face. In contrast, the current realities of voter suppression, low and inconsistent wages, insecure access to health care and other basic needs, wealth inequality, war and climate change are costing us dearly.<sup>11</sup>

Our Moral Budget shows that it is possible to invest our resources in the ways demanded by the Campaign: to establish justice, domestic tranquility, security and the general welfare for all. It shows, too, just how wasteful systemic injustice is. The abundance of

our society will grow even greater when we stop investing in maintaining injustice to benefit the few and turn instead to policies based on the needs of the many.

This is not an argument for charity or goodwill to the poor. It is, rather, a simple recognition that the poor are not only victims of injustice, but agents of profound social change. Indeed, if we organise our resources around the needs of the 140 million, the Moral Budget shows that we will strengthen our society as a whole.

### 3 • The Poor Must Lead the Way

The Poor People's Campaign has been insistent that our policies must begin with the realities on the ground and those realities must inform the direction and content of our policies. This is why we insist on a broader measure of poverty<sup>12</sup> than what is currently used and why we will continue to insist on reformulating the definition of poverty to reflect today's conditions. This is why we insist on looking at the issues faced by the 140 million all together, rather than separately. The lives of the poor cannot be compartmentalised into simply a problem of healthcare, jobs or housing. Our policies and research must, therefore, also reflect the complexity of the daily lives of the poor.

This is a straightforward application of the fundamental principles of human rights: that our rights are universally endowed, indivisible one from the other and that those most impacted must be meaningfully included in addressing limitations, restrictions and abrogation of those rights. It is also a reflection of the basic values of every religion: that life is precious and we must allocate our social resources towards ensuring that we create the kingdom of God here on earth as it is in heaven.

We, therefore, begin with the conditions on the ground, as experienced by the poor and dispossessed and the insights of the poor. When a family's water is shut off because they can no longer afford payments and their neighbors start sharing water lines and running hoses in between their homes, it is clear that the issue is not a lack of water. There is plenty of water for everyone; rather, an economic system that insists on providing water – and other basic needs – only to those who can afford to pay for it is the problem. When fast food workers have to sell their blood to have enough money to keep their lights and gas on, it becomes clear that the issue is not their inability or unwillingness to work. It is that work itself does not pay what they need to live, especially when the basic costs of living have increased dramatically over the past few decades.

*I have experienced things such as water shutoffs, poverty and living in fear of being taken away from my home... not being able to shower, brush their teeth, or cook, it's wrong. No one wants to live in poverty. Being able to live with your basic needs, including water, is a human right. (Kailani Jones, Michigan).*

These and other insights have been gathered by the Campaign in mass meetings, hearings and town halls, when poor and impacted people have offered testimonies on the conditions they are living everyday. Their insights, alongside hundreds of community meetings with thousands of people, directed our research and inquiries; and we found capable partners in policy institutes who were willing to follow the direction that emerged from those observations and experiences. Instead of abstractly defining the problem, our policy experts helped elevate the individual experiences of those on the ground to trends that were unfolding across broad sections of our society.

This orientation towards recognizing the leadership of the poor – not just as victims, but visionaries – is a critical aspect of the revolution of values we need today. Otherwise, we will continue to blame the poor for our problems, be divided and pitted against each other and fed the lie of scarcity in the midst of abundance.

*The people who maintain this system want to blame this mess on us – like it's our individual choices that got us into this. We have to correct that – We have to remind people that homelessness is not an individual moral failure, it is society's collective moral failure... We are poor, but we aren't stupid. We know that we aren't the problem. We are the solution. (Zalonda Woods, North Carolina).*

This is why the Poor People's Campaign continues to organise and build power<sup>13</sup> among the poor today, to shift the narrative on poverty, impact policies and elections and show that a new way is not only necessary, but possible. After being launched at the Poor People's Moral Congress, the Moral Budget was presented to all sitting members of the House Budget Committee, one of the most powerful committees in the U.S. Congress, during a Congressional Hearing. Six testifiers from the Campaign spoke to the conditions they are facing and drew on the facts and arguments in the Moral Budget. In the weeks and months to come, the Campaign will continue to use the Moral Budget to raise awareness, especially in the 40 states where it is currently organized. Study groups and reading circles have already formed in some of those states and there are plans to have more systematic study of this document and its primary implication: there is no reason for poverty to exist in a time of plenty. This has the potential to become a rallying cry for a massive March and Assembly on Washington D.C. that the Campaign is planning for June 2020.

In every region of the country, poor people and people of faith and conscience are uniting across lines of race, religion, age, geography, gender and sexuality, political party and other lines of division. A new and unsettling force is awakening to revive the heart of democracy in America, declaring that it is time to “fight poverty, not the poor.”

## NOTES

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9 • This quote and the next ones are from people who have participated in or a part of the Campaign.

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**SHAILLY GUPTA BARNES** – *United States of America*

Shailly Gupta Barnes is the Policy Director at the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights and Social Justice and for the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. She has a background in economics, law and development and has been working with poor and marginalized communities for over 15 years.

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