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COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Sub-Commission on Prevention of  
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Agenda items 7 and 15

THE NEW INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC ORDER AND THE  
PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS,

PROMOTION, PROTECTION AND RESTORATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS  
AT THE NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS

Written statement submitted by the International Federation  
Terre des Hommes, a non-governmental organization in  
consultative status (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following communication, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[27 July 1989]

1. On 28 and 29 April 1989, in Luxembourg, the International Federation Terres des Hommes held a general meeting on projects in the field in which representatives of nearly all the Federation's member movements participated. After discussing the situation of children in society in various parts of the world and the patterns of development that will make it possible to bring about genuine improvements in living conditions where this is necessary, the participants in the meeting arrived at the following conclusions in the light of the problems encountered in the field.

2. Children are the weakest link in society and always the first victims in the case of political, social or economic problems. Subjected to situations of violence and deficiencies of all kinds or to brutal separation from their parents, children suffer acutely and sometimes irreparably. Children are also the majority group in the developing countries, where, as in all countries, they represent the future of a given population. Helping children means dealing with the root causes of all the problems that affect them adversely and also means helping the adult population of today in the developing countries to achieve living conditions that will guarantee their children, the adults of tomorrow, an acceptable future. As stated by Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, Director-General of the World Health Organization: "On the eve of the twenty-first century, it becomes more and more clear that health goes hand in hand with economic and social development". This is particularly applicable to children, wherever they may be, and this principle of interaction can also be extended to many other aspects of human and children's rights.

3. There is a difference between the western view of the nature of children and that of the developing countries. In the industrialized countries, children are considered to be developing beings who must be protected until they are of age and sometimes even longer. In the low-income countries, children often have to contribute to the family budget from the age of six or seven, especially when their parents cannot find work. From the age of three, they may be required to sell various articles and, in some cases, this is enough to keep them more or less fed. These children have responsibilities and thus reach maturity early, since they are able to solve quite a few problems at their particular level. If assistance is to be effective, account must therefore always be taken of the situation of children within their social environment for they to participate fully in their society's problems and encounter the same difficulties as their parents, especially when they work.

4. Children can thus not be helped unless their parents are helped to achieve an adequate economic, political and cultural level. Among the basic factors in this regard are a decent wage for the head of the family and the role of women. The more the status of women is promoted and improved, the better their children's lives will be. The full range of rights, both in the family and in society, access to education and health care, the opportunity to learn and practise a paid profession and to have a genuine share in the decisions that concern their lives are factors which will, by improving the status of women, also raise their children's standard of living. They guarantee, for example, adequate food and the possibility of access to education in countries where it is not provided by the State. Attempts by women in developing countries to establish structures to improve their status and increase their influence over local, regional and national decisions thus also hold out hope for the younger generation, since the development of women is indissociable from that of children.

5. There are currently very few developing countries that have established adequate legislation for the protection of their children. Children are not a "pressure group" or an influential political entity in terms of balance of power. For this reason, their rights and basic needs are all too often ignored and this may frequently lead to situations - often described in this Sub-Commission - of economic exploitation (cheap or bonded labour, child prostitution, sale for various purposes, etc.), while their social, cultural and occupational development is neglected. To improve the long-term prospects

of children throughout the world, their rights have to be defined and upheld, while their parents have to be helped to achieve integrated development which maintains a proper balance between the social, economic, political and cultural sectors and focuses efforts on the most underprivileged, whose situation is a sort of gangrene in the flesh of society. In the opinion of the International Federation Terre des Hommes, such a pattern of development is an indispensable tool for guaranteeing the rights of children and ensuring that these rights do not stay within the realm of generous wishes, but become a reality for them. With the well-thought-out, active and indispensable participation of the entire target population in development projects guaranteeing respect for local social and cultural traditions and aiming at as much self-sufficiency as possible, the rights and present and future lives of children can be ensured, their cultural identity strengthened and their opportunities for integration into the creative and productive life of their countries guaranteed.

6. Emergency or short-term assistance is not enough to ensure development which is capable, in the long term, of establishing living conditions that will eliminate the exploitation of children and give them prospects for the future worthy of human beings. It may be necessary to bring about structural changes in society. National organizations that are working for such changes are, however, often regarded by their Governments as potential threats and are the targets of harassment, occasionally violent attacks and obstacles of all sorts to their work. Development is not only an economic process; it is linked to respect for the basic rights and fundamental freedoms that make it possible for all levels of society, including children, to take part in the process. Respect for human rights is also essential in order to guarantee normal working conditions for national and international non-governmental organizations whose reason for existence is to remedy the lack, the ineffectiveness or the insufficient will of certain State structures.

7. In conclusion, the International Federation Terre des Hommes would like to recommend that the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities should use every means available to it in order to encourage States:

(a) To sign and ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child within the required time-limit;

(b) When making decisions for Government action and intervention, to consider the idea that a development plan also aimed at improving the situation of the most underprivileged children and adults is the best investment for their country's future;

(c) To avoid making the most underprivileged and the most vulnerable bear the brunt of adjustment policies;

(d) To guarantee working conditions that respect the human rights of non-governmental organizations and local communities working for far-reaching improvements in the situation of the most underprivileged children and adults.

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