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ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Joint written statement* submitted by the International Council of Women (ICW-CIF), Franciscans International (FI) and the International Movement ATD Fourth World, non-governmental organizations in general consultative status, and the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), the International Federation of Human Rights Leagues (FIDH), the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) non-governmental organizations in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[3 July 2003]

*This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Extreme poverty and human rights

The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), the International Council of Women (ICW-CIF), the International Federation of Human Rights Leagues (FIDH), Franciscans International (FI), the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the International Movement ATD Fourth World, the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) are non-governmental organisations that defend human rights and fight poverty. In the light of our collective experience with the complex and systemic nature of poverty, we support the elaboration of a draft international declaration on human rights and extreme poverty by the Sub-Commission on the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights (Sub-Commission).

We emphasise the pertinence of a human rights based approach in dealing with poverty and extreme poverty related issues. As the Commission on Human Rights recalled in Resolution 2003/24, “extreme poverty and exclusion from society constitute a violation of human dignity.” Poverty is a nexus at which the violation of various human rights converge. As described by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the condition of poverty is,

*a sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights.*¹

In his final report (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1996/13) to the Sub-Commission, the Special Rapporteur on human rights and extreme poverty, Leandro Despouy, highlighted the link between extreme poverty and the long-term accumulation of vulnerabilities in terms of the enjoyment of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights, that seriously undermine the possibilities of those living in this condition to regain their rights and reassume their responsibilities in a foreseeable future.

The struggle against poverty and extreme poverty should not be limited to short-term remedies targeted at extending basic survival. It demands comprehensive action that promotes the full enjoyment of human rights against different factors that prevent individuals from living a dignified existence. In this respect, extreme poverty constitutes a denial of human rights. Faced with extreme poverty, human beings are unable to exercise their economic, political, social, civil and cultural rights; they are effectively treated as objects without human dignity.

As a global and systemic condition affecting the human dignity of the individual that impacts on all of his or her rights and demands the adoption of a specific response, extreme poverty recalls phenomena such as slavery (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1996/13, para 9).

¹ See document E/C.12/2001/10.

History teaches us that the eradication of such grave human rights violations is only possible when States adopt concrete national and the international action plans. As underlined by the coordinator of the ad'hoc working group in 2002, the growth of poverty, especially extreme poverty, has a historical and hereditary basis and is linked to the development of new economic models. Within this context, the poorest individuals and communities are left extremely vulnerable, a status that severely damages social integration and cohesion (E/CN.4/Sub.2/2002/15). The inherent dignity of individuals and their communities is an essential criterion in addressing poverty, especially extreme poverty. The re-appropriation of communal and cultural heritage as a positive identity is a slow but fundamental process. The struggle against extreme poverty must not therefore disregard the need to reinforce social cohesion and inclusion.

In the meantime, the struggle against poverty, particularly against extreme poverty, faces a difficulty common to all systemic phenomena: the interdependence of contributing factors. Modifying one factor has an effect on the others. Some factors may be seen to be of a more urgent nature, such as those directly linked with the physical survival of the human organism. However, acting selectively on certain factors may result in the stagnation of progress in other areas, causing the problem to continue. Therefore, the effects of extreme poverty cannot be dissociated from other social phenomena and will affect the overall social fabric, especially in the field of human rights.

We are convinced that an international instrument on extreme poverty and human rights should be developed. Such an instrument would be complementary to existing instruments protecting civil and political as well as social, economic, and cultural rights and would fulfil a similar role as the Conventions on Slavery and the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. It is imperative to confront the relationship between extreme poverty and human rights by highlighting the following two fundamental dimensions:

- extreme poverty is a fundamental denial of human dignity and a clear and multiple violation of all human rights - civil, economic, political, social and cultural;
- extreme poverty is a systemic phenomenon whose eradication implies the adoption of specific measures at the national and international levels, with the ultimate goal of the fulfilment of all human rights.

We therefore encourage:

- A participatory approach taking into account the experience and perspectives of people living in extreme poverty, drawing inspiration in this regard from past examples of such participation such as the Seminar on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights organised by the Human Rights Center in 1994 (E/CN.4/1995/101). Such an approach, by its very nature, respects the need to empower people within their environment. Respect for human dignity and the importance of effective action demand that those concerned have the cultural, social, legal and material means to build their own future.

- A systemic approach that recognises the indivisibility and the interdependence of rights.
- A universal approach which recognises that extreme poverty is not limited to certain countries, but concerns both developed and developing countries,
- An operational approach based on the principle of justiciability of rights and the need to establish obligations and precise objectives for States, which give all countries a shared responsibility in the struggle against extreme poverty on a global scale. Such an approach requires the identification, in consultation with the people and communities concerned, of pertinent indicators to measure the reality of extreme poverty.
- A global approach that includes the responsibilities of States, regional and international organisations, international financial institutions and specialised agencies of the United Nations.
- A societal approach that reinforces social inclusion and cohesion mechanisms promoting the full enjoyment of human rights and dignity by the poorest individuals.
- A contextual approach that respects the cultural dimension as a vector of social inclusion and pride. It is not possible to eradicate extreme poverty if esteem for oneself and his or her community is absent.
