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**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and
the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:
priority theme: promoting empowerment of people in
achieving poverty eradication, social integration and
full employment and decent work for all**

Statement submitted by the International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

Participation-linked empowerment

The call of the priority theme of the fifty-first session of the Commission for Social Development, “Promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all”, reminds us of the commitments made in the Declaration on Social Progress and Development, adopted by the General Assembly at its twenty-fourth session, in 1969, and the Programme of Action adopted at the World Summit for Social Development, held in 1995.

The fact that the Heads of State and Government had recognized the link between empowerment and participation in achieving the goal of social development to improve and enhance the quality of life of all people was reflected in the following statements:

Empowerment requires the full participation of people in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of decisions determining the functioning and well-being of our societies.

Empowerment and participation are essential for democracy, harmony and social development. All members of society should have the opportunity and be able to exercise the right and responsibility to take an active part in the affairs of the community in which they live.

Responses on the right to participate

The invitation from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to contribute to the report concerning the right to participation of people living in poverty in decisions that affect their lives, to be submitted to the Human Rights Council in June 2013 by the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona, prompted the members of the NGO Subcommittee for the Eradication of Poverty to initiate conversations among people living in poverty with whom and among whom they work in various parts of the world. The following are a few of their responses.

Obstacles to participation faced by people living in poverty relate to lack of:

- Education, sustainable income, health facilities and basic public services such as clean water, sanitation and electricity
- Self-esteem, parental and community activism, behavioural modelling, resources, capacity development, access to capital, programmes ranging from the local to global level, and support networks
- Job opportunities, legal status, adequate transportation and gender equality.

Some of their grievances, as expressed by them:

- The poor are always isolated from decision-making because they are considered illiterate
- No poor person can dream of participating in any decision-making group

- Programmes are just imposed: for example, poor people who want to sell their maize are required to have bank accounts, which prevents them from selling maize, as they do not have enough money to finance it
- For the most part, those who live in poverty are rarely asked about the challenges they face or whether they see ways to move out of poverty
- Although the local government invites people to meetings, information about the meetings does not reach them on time, and they do not believe that their voices count
- Union representatives are invited to meetings, but their voices are not sufficiently heard

Good practice regarding empowerment and participation

The article entitled “From food security to food justice”, by Ananya Mukherjee, Professor and Chair of Political Science at York University, Toronto, illustrates a good practice of empowerment and participation, followed in the state of Kerala, India, that enables people living in poverty to exercise their rights and responsibilities in improving the quality of life for women and their families.

In the article, Ms. Mukherjee tells the story of the research conducted in an experiment, “Sangha Krishi” (group farming), a part of the Kerala state government’s anti-poverty programme, “Kudumbashree” (prosperity of the family), initiated in 2007. The experiment is seen as a means to enhance local food production. As many as 44,225 collectives of women farmers lease fallow land, rejuvenate it, farm it and then sell the produce or use it for consumption.

Kudumbashree involves a network of 4 million women, most of whom live below the poverty line. Kudumbashree is not merely a project or a programme, but a social space in which marginalized women can collectively pursue their needs and aspirations. The primary unit of Kudumbashree is the neighbourhood group. Neighbourhood groups, consisting of no more than 20 women, are, for the overwhelming majority of participants, the first opportunity to take part in society outside the home. Neighbourhood groups compose area development societies, and these in turn compose community development societies at the *panchayat* (local governance) level. Today, there are 213,000 neighbourhood groups in Kerala. Kudumbashree office holders are elected. A crucial process for the programme’s participants, these elections help to bring women into politics, and the women bring with them a different set of values that can change the face of politics.

The neighbourhood group is very different from a self-help group in that it is structurally linked to the state, through the institution of local self-government. This ensures that local development reflects the needs and aspirations of communities, which are not reduced to mere implementers of government programmes. What is sought is synergy between democratization and poverty reduction, and this occurs as a result of the mobilization of poor women’s leadership and solidarity.

This experiment is transforming the sociopolitical space that women inhabit and has had three major consequences: first, there has been a palpable shift in the role of women in agriculture in Kerala. Thousands of women participating in Kudumbashree who had formerly been underpaid agricultural labourers have abandoned wage work to become independent producers. Many others combine

wage work with farming. Secondly, the experiment has enabled women, in particular those from marginalized communities, to salvage their dignity and livelihoods amid immense adversity. A survey of 100 collectives in 14 districts found that 15 per cent of the farmers were Dalits and Adivasis and that 32 per cent came from minority communities. Thirdly, the experiment is having important consequences for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in Kerala. Given the high wages paid to men in Kerala, the Scheme has become predominantly a space for women in the state (93 per cent of the employment generated has gone to women, compared with a national average of 50 per cent). One of them said, “We have created life ... and food, which gives life, not just 100 days of manual labour.”

The information presented above, which is based on the article “From food security to food justice”, underscores the following:

- Participatory forums at the neighbourhood level, small enough for people living in poverty to come together to have an ongoing say in decisions that affect their lives, ensure inclusion and are productive
- Neighbourhood-level participatory forums, when established at various levels, result in collective participation at wider levels, leading to increased empowerment
- Government programmes, when implemented in partnership with people at the local level through such federations of neighbourhood forums, result in people-centred development
- The existing forums for participation, which in India are parliamentary constituencies, state legislative assembly constituencies and *gram sabhas* (local governance assemblies), are not adequate to assist people living in poverty in having an ongoing, effective say in decisions that affect their lives

Bottom-up, inclusive and accountable governance

In both the responses on the right to participate and the good practice regarding empowerment and participation, the key issue is the quality of governance.

The Secretary-General’s High-level Panel on Global Sustainability noted that democratic governance and full respect for human rights were prerequisites for empowering people to make sustainable choices.

Furthermore, in its report entitled *No Future without Justice*, the Civil Society Reflection Group on Global Development Perspectives called for “a change in the tone of multilateral governance from one that prescribes solutions and then institutes legal and financial frameworks to implement them or ensure compliance, to one that protects bottom-up governance”.

Bottom-up governance not only refers to the directions of influence from the local to the global; it also calls for more governance space and implementation to be retained at the local and subnational levels. For example, such governance is aimed at enabling small farmers and peasant communities to exercise their rights in retaining their own stocks of seed, growing nutritious foods without genetically modified organisms and gaining access to medicines without paying unaffordable prices set by transnational companies and protected by intellectual property rights.

Bottom-up democratic governance requires not only the strengthening of civil society in terms of governance skills, but also the refocusing and restructuring of governance institutions and the overcoming of governance gaps at the national and global levels.

Recommendation

Therefore, the International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary urges Member States to:

- Consider planning-by-people processes, such as that employed in Kudumbashree, to ensure the participation of people living in poverty in decisions that affect their lives
 - Create enabling environments for the realization of the right to participate, which is already enshrined in the relevant international instruments
 - Refocus and restructure governance institutions to overcome related governance gaps at the national and global levels.
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Note: The statement is endorsed by the following non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Council: Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Dominican Leadership Conference, Passionists International, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, UNANIMA International and VIVAT International.