

2004 Social Forum: A human rights approach to poverty reduction

The 2004 Social Forum of the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights was held in Geneva from 22-23 July, addressing the theme of "Poverty, rural poverty and human rights." The Forum included a number of debates, in particular on the problem of defining "poverty" and on the main characteristics of a human rights approach to poverty reduction strategies (PRSS).

Operating within the framework of the Sub Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, the two-day Forum brought together representatives from international organizations, academic experts, grassroots organizations, social movements and NGOs. It provided an opportunity for a number of actors not often represented at the UN to present their concerns, and participants were able to outline a number of guiding principles on human rights in the context of poverty reduction strategies (PRSS). Four panels were held over the two days: "Poverty and human rights: empowerment of people living in poverty;" "Rural poverty and extreme poverty: special groups;" "The role of human rights in the development of operational strategies to address poverty;" and "Recommendations on elements for incorporating human rights into poverty reduction strategies."

Since 1990, the Commission on Human Rights has considered the relationship between human rights and extreme poverty. In 2004, a set of draft guidelines developed by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights were released. *Human Rights and Poverty Reduction: A Conceptual Framework* places people as active rights-holders at the centre of poverty reduction efforts.

José Bengoa (Chile) Chairman of the Forum, said at the opening session that the Social Forum must be a cultural movement going towards poverty eradication. He quoted Nelson Mandela, saying, "Poverty is the modern version of slavery." During the panel discussions, a number of questions arose: How to think about poverty in the context of human rights? Does poverty mean a lack of control over economic resources? Is it necessary to make a distinction between poverty and extreme poverty?

According to Siddiq Osmani (Professor of Development Economics at Dhaka and Ulster Universities), in order to work effectively towards poverty reduction, strategies that are based on a clear definition of poverty need to be elaborated. Leandro Despouy, (Special Rapporteur on the Independence of the Judiciary) argued that there is not a single definition for poverty. Instead, he suggested that criteria are needed. Poverty is the negation of all human rights; it is cumulative, increasing, and inherited generation after generation, he stressed. Chaloka Beyani, Professor of International Human Rights Law at the London School of Economics (LSE), underlined that the poor have no hope, no self-esteem and no self-confidence, adding that this is why the conception of poverty has to do with basic rights, recognized as being a fundamental value for a level of minimal human dignity.

The Forum sought to analyse the link between poverty reduction and human rights and what could be achieved to reduce poverty

based on this analysis. It outlined a number of features essential for a human rights approach, including: empowering the poor; active and informed participation; non-discrimination and equality; accountability of States; progressive realization

Paul Hunt (Special Rapporteur on the right to health and former Rapporteur on the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural rights) reminded participants that a human rights solution is only a solution among others. He suggested that in order to use human rights to fight poverty in an efficient way, one question must be asked: How to make a human rights approach operational? He pointed out that the application of a human rights approach to poverty reduction is complex; there is no such thing as a single strategy, and the various types of poverty that exist must be taken into account.

Kari Tapiola, Executive Director for the Rights Sector of International Labour Organization (ILO), suggested that economic security is a key element in the fight against poverty. Indeed "economic insecurity and deprivation feed xenophobia and racial and religious discrimination." He stressed the creation of decent work as a central pillar of national action.

Taking into account the remarks made, the Social Forum, through its recommendations, recognizes "the existing separation between approaches and decisions of international economic organizations and those of human rights bodies and organs," and formulates a call to establish "dialogue and coherence among those institutions." The Forum also noted that poverty is massive (millions live in extreme poverty and are unable to overcome it); visibility is needed to raise awareness of the many difficult situations worldwide; a gap is growing between countries and social groups; poverty is one of the main sources of violence and conflict and represents a major form of exclusion and human rights violation.

The Social Forum's provisional conclusion and recommendations were presented during the 56th session of the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, also held in Geneva from 26 July-13 August 2004. Next year's theme will be "Poverty and economic growth—challenges to human rights." The Sub-Commission has recommended that the Social Forum be held for a duration of five working days instead of two.

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