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## POVERTY: An Obstacle To Human Rights

*"So long as every fifth inhabitant of our planet lives in absolute poverty, there can be no real stability in the world."* (Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General)

With some 1.2 billion people living in extreme poverty (i.e., on less than one dollar a day), poverty is the most widespread violation of human rights there is. It knows no boundaries. It is most strongly present in the least developed countries (LDCs), but it afflicts both developing and developed countries. It is marked by inadequate standards of living, weak health, hunger, unsanitary housing, homelessness, unemployment, social exclusion and illiteracy. It particularly affects indigenous peoples, women, children, the elderly and the disabled. The World Health Organization calls it the *"most ruthless killer and the greatest cause of suffering on earth"*. It is a major contributor to mental illness, stress, suicide, family disintegration and substance abuse.

The 1995 World Summit for Social Development reaffirmed that the right to development, which implies an ultimate eradication of poverty, is a fundamental human right. The United Nations proclaimed the years 1997 to 2006 as the First Decade for the Eradication of Poverty. In 1998, the theme *"Poverty, Human Rights and Development"* was chosen, in the context of this decade, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

People who live in poverty describe it as a vicious cycle of interlinked misfortunes. Poverty eradication will mean breaking that cycle through preventive and sustainable measures that provide relief and empowerment, and ensure that people, particularly those who may be vulnerable, do not sink further into poverty. Sustainable measures will involve both relief

and empowerment.

There are many causal factors to poverty in the world today. There is the historical background of colonialism, slavery, apartheid and the cold war; there is the problem of male dominated societies that degrade the status of women; there is the present economic system, skewed against economically weak countries; there is a lack of good governance, partly due to corruption, at the national and international levels; and there are the regional wars and the disproportionate allocation of funds for military expenditure in both the developed and the developing world.

At the launch of the International Decade for the Eradication of Poverty, Kofi Annan called for the participation of the poor themselves in the process of poverty eradication: "To those in poverty ... We ask you to tell us how we can work to meet your aspirations; not for you but with you." In line with this, it is essential that processes be established to enable the poor themselves to participate at every stage of the process of devising policies and programs intended to help them.

*There is an important role here for VIVAT International. Many of our members have long-term experience in and with the poor. Our task is to bring this experience, and with it the voice of the poor, to the discussion table. With this edition of the newsletter, we introduce the basic processes for the promotion of poverty eradication at the UN. On the last page of the newsletter, we request cooperation from the membership of VIVAT International.*

# UN PERSPECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

## THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, in his Millennium Report, used the example of a village to highlight the inequalities of the world:

*Say this village has 1000 individuals, with all the characteristics of today's human race distributed in exactly the same proportions. What would it be like? What would we see as its main challenges?*

*Some 150 of the inhabitants live in the affluent area of the village, about 780 in poorer districts. Another 70 or so live in a neighborhood that is in transition. The average income per person is \$6000 a year, and there are more middle-income families than in the past. But just 200 people dispose of 86% of all the wealth, while nearly half of the villagers are eking out an existence on less than \$2 a day.*

*Men outnumber women by a small margin, but women make up a majority of those who live in poverty. Adult literacy has been increasing. Still, some 220 villagers—two-thirds of them women—are illiterate. Of the 390 inhabitants under 20 years of age, three-fourths live in the poorest districts and many are looking desperately for jobs that do not exist. Fewer than 60 people own a computer and only 24 have access to the Internet. More than half have never made or received a phone call.*

*Life expectancy in the affluent district is nearly 78 years, in the poorer areas 64 years—and in the poorest neighborhoods a mere 52 years. Each marks an improvement over previous generations, but why do the poorest lag so far behind? Because in their neighborhoods there is a far higher incidence of infectious diseases and malnutrition, combined with an acute lack of access to safe water, sanitation, health care, adequate housing, education and work.*

*(Kofi Annan, Millennium Report, April 2000)*

## A GLOBAL ANTI-POVERTY PACT

The UN, working together with civil society, is trying to bring its experience and resources to bear on a single issue—the eradication of poverty.

At the Millennium Forum (22-26 May 2000), 1350 representatives from over 1000 civil society organizations made poverty eradication the first and foremost issue addressed in their declaration. At the Millennium Summit (6-8 September 2000), 147 Heads of State and Government and 191 nations in all participated in the largest ever gathering of world leaders. Their document, the UN Millennium Declaration, is a landmark document developed over months of talks that allowed people's voices to be heard.

The third major part of the declaration opens with the following statement:

*We will spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty. We are committed to making the right to development a reality for everyone and to freeing the entire human race from want.*

(Millennium Declaration, no. 11)

The declaration includes the following resolutions:

➤ *To halve, by the year 2015, the proportion of the world's people whose income is less than one dollar a day and the proportion of people who suffer from hunger and, by the same date, to halve the proportion of people who are unable to reach or afford safe drinking water.*

➤ *To ensure that, by the same date, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling and that girls and boys will have equal access to all levels of education.*

➤ *By the same date, to have reduced maternal mortality by three quarters, and under-five child mortality by two thirds, of their current rates.*

➤ *To have, by then, halted, and begun to reverse, the spread of HIV/AIDS, the scourge of malaria and other major diseases that afflict humanity.*

➤ *To provide special assistance to children orphaned by HIV/AIDS.*

➤ *By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers as proposed in the "Cities Without Slums" Initiative.*

*(Millennium Declaration, no. 19)*

These are followed by a list of concrete strategic resolutions:

➤ *To promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable.*

➤ *To develop and implement strategies*

*that give young people everywhere a real chance to find decent and productive work.*

➤ *To encourage the pharmaceutical industry to make essential drugs more widely available and affordable by all who need them in developing countries.*

➤ *To develop strong partnerships with the private sector and with civil society organizations in pursuit of development and poverty eradication.*

➤ *To ensure that the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communication technologies, are available to all.*

*(Millennium Declaration, no. 20).*

## THE LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES, (LDCs):

### Business as usual or a new deal?

LDCs are home to a very large proportion of the 1.2 billion people who live in extreme poverty. 48 countries are currently designated by the United Nations as LDCs ([www.unctad.org](http://www.unctad.org)):

**Africa (33):** Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Dem. Rep. of Congo, Congo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau,

Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia.

**Asia (9):** Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Yemen.

**Pacific Islands (5):** Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Vanuatu.

**Caribbean (1):** Haiti.

## VIVAT International Participation in the Poverty Reduction Process

Lawrence Correa SVD, has been actively involved in the process leading to the Third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries (UNLDC III—see following page for more information). This involves participation in the following activities:

**Preparatory Committee Meetings (Prepcoms):** During the last two preparatory Committee Meetings (5-9 February 2001 and 2-6 April 2001) Lawrence contributed to the NGO Statements. He made specific requests to the governments and the European Union to allot money for the participation of the NGOs from LDCs. He will participate in the up-coming UNLDC III in Brussels

**Financing for Development (FfD) PrepComs:** The Second Substantive Session was held 12-23 February 2001 (<http://www.un.org/esa/ffd>). Besides following up on various themes, Lawrence contributed especially on the issue of debt cancellation. In a statement presented on 16 February to the FfD PrepCom, VIVAT International, in affiliation with Franciscans International, was included in the list of NGO working groups on debt cancellation.

**NGO Committee on Social Development and Sub-Committee on Eradication of Poverty Secretariat:** Lawrence is the secretary of both of these NGO groups and the VIVAT International Office is considered the secretariat. Through this service, VIVAT International is slowly becoming known among the NGOs committed to Poverty Eradication.

## CONFERENCE ON THE LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES (UN LDC III)

This conference is to be held in Brussels, Belgium, 14-20 May 2001. It will be an important forum for the international community to address the special problems of the LDCs in the following areas:

- Governance
- Enhancing productive capacities
- Financing growth and development
- Action on international trade
- Food security and sustainable resource management
- Human resources

This could be a productive agenda provided that governments come with genuine political will.

An NGO Forum will run parallel to the UNLDC III, 10-20 May 2001. At least 600 NGOs, including 250 NGOs from LDCs are expected to participate. What results do NGOs look for from the UNLDC III? Here are some of the main items:

- Cancellation of all LDC debt, granting of free access to northern markets to LDC products, rectification of the inequities in World Trade Organization (WTO) trading

*To all who have made contacts with us, we thank you for your initiative and interest.*

*A very special thanks to "our silent partners," the Holy Spirit Adoration Sisters. Rev. Mother Maria Aurora, Superior General wrote: "We wish to send you an assurance of our faithful prayerful support..." VIVAT counts on this support.*

rules and in structural adjustment programs, coordination of efforts among donors, including the IMF, the WB and governments; adoption of measures to end wars, conflicts and arms sales;

- The promotion of good governance in the LDCs and a strengthening of their positions in global negotiations; promotion of efforts to enable them to take a united position to solve their problems;

- Attention to the issues of refugees, HIV/AIDS, gender equality and environmentally sustainable growth.

NGOs believe that it is crucial for the UN LDC III to have a clear follow-up programme of evaluation and clear "bench marks" to be included in the Programme of Action. They will try to be part of an official UNLDC III monitoring team or, if necessary, will set up their own ([www.oneworld/liaison/forum/](http://www.oneworld/liaison/forum/)).

## To all members of VIVAT International:

To make our representation of VIVAT International in the United Nations concrete and visible, we ask you to help us realize an important position paper:

### *THE VOICE OF VIVAT INTERNATIONAL ON POVERTY ERADICATION.*

We would be grateful if you would begin sending to our Central Office here in New York ([viny@vivatinternational.org](mailto:viny@vivatinternational.org)):

- the faces and the voices of those with whom you journey who are living in poverty;
- information of the advocacy in which you are engaged with and for them,
- information of any monitoring you may be doing of governments, funding institutions or business interests in line with our priority focus on Poverty Eradication.

On receiving your contributions, we will be able to develop our own stance on Poverty Eradication as VIVAT International. Thank you for your early response.