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### Commission for Social Development

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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: poverty eradication**

### **Statement submitted by VIVAT International, 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.

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\* E/CN.5/2011/1.

## Statement\*

### Poverty and culture

1. The 2010 Human Development Report includes new indices such as a gender inequality index, inequality-adjusted human development index and multidimensional poverty index, including civic and community well-being. Consideration of indices such as these calls attention to cultural factors and highlights what is the social capital in communities.

2. Structural adjustment programmes have operated at the national level. Social and economic reforms have been designed to address issues associated with the labour market, formal and informal institutions and social processes. Such programmes and reforms are important, yet their effectiveness is compromised if cultural factors are not taken into account. By cultural factors we refer to the learned processes of meaning-making that guide people in their shared view of how the world works. Since human action is both limited and enabled by the meaning people give to their actions, these dynamics must be an essential part of our understanding of poverty and the ways to eradicate it.

3. Cultural issues include a heterogeneous array of constraints and opportunities which influence how people make sense of their experience and, for example, how and with whom a person might seek support. Admittedly cultural issues are more difficult to measure than income or gross national income per capita; however, qualitative tools of analysis are available.

4. Social capital is a helpful concept with which to consider the sense of common good in a community. The term “social capital” is best understood here to refer to the level of trust within the community of a specific population. This in turn influences their motivation to actively contribute to the progress of their society. The way people feel a duty to contribute to the community has a marked influence on the possibilities for concerted action. Examining culture through the lens of social capital can help to identify the extent to which people lack the trust in the system needed for them to actively work together to raise themselves from their impoverished state. Thus, low social capital can be viewed as a significant factor contributing to the widely observed cyclical nature of “chronic poverty”.

5. Increasing access to political, educational, and social outlets augments the means available to a population that is struggling to break free of chronic poverty. These empower them to develop their full potential as individuals and as members of a society. At the most basic level, as addressed by a number of the Millennium Development Goals, honouring the rights of a community to education, free political systems, and non-discriminatory social structures, leads the population to garner more trust in the system and a stronger sense of duty to work together to build a healthier, more sustainable, and more vibrant community. Cultural factors are relevant here since they help explain how people living in poverty respond to structural conditions and the substantial variation in responses to similar constraints. People’s resilience and ability to take advantage of opportunities often are associated with cultural identity and other related issues. For this reason, cultural

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\* Issued without formal editing.

factors must be taken into consideration in efforts to eradicate poverty and consideration of these factors is essential to achieve long-term results.

6. The public discourse on poverty is also influenced by cultural beliefs, attitudes and assumptions of those who make the policy decisions that affect people's living conditions. These may include: beliefs about dependence and welfare, deservingness, empowerment and responsibility.

7. VIVAT International has 30,000 members working in 130 nations. Below are two examples that demonstrate what has been presented above.

8. VIVAT International has active membership within the Jhalod community in Gujarat, India. While Central Gujarat has become a relatively developed area, there are still impoverished local villages and communities that rely solely on farming and other rural projects for income. Their inhabitants are still highly dependent on daily wages for their day-to-day welfare. The working population is predominantly made up of seasonal labourers who can only find work during the farming season. For the rest of the year they have no opportunity for employment. Resignation and low social capital feed into the bleak economic prospects and dire living conditions.

9. In Jhalod, VIVAT International members, have begun a community-based development programme with the people of the impoverished rural communities. The intention is to increase social and economic capital in order to help transform the collective culture of chronic poverty in the region into a culture of hope. Their means of doing this is to empower the population by creating self-help systems and making use of village structures for leadership training and the enhancement of the status of women. Through the formation of eight village developmental societies, 500 men and 1,500 women have become members of self-help groups aimed at educating, training, and empowering the rural population. People have been motivated to benefit from education and health care. School enrolment has risen 40 per cent. Primary school dropout rates have fallen from 40 per cent to 8 per cent. Through the programme rural communities are developing social capital as they gain necessary skills and knowledge to actively participate in political, social, and economic society.

10. The second example comes from a project of the active membership of VIVAT International in the Smokey Mountain area in Tondo, Manila, Philippines. Recently Ben Beltran was named the Philippines "Millennium Development Goals Warrior" for his 30 years of work with the Smokey Mountains Community. Beltran and his associates, with their programme of economic, physical, cultural and spiritual development, have been instrumental in markedly improving the lives of the "poorest of the poor" in Tondo. Plans include an "ecological village" for 20,000 families. The programme contributes to social capital with principles of integrity, solidarity and creativity forming the basis for social empowerment, facilitating opportunities for people to participate in systems of exchange and production so as to uplift their status. An important aspect of the programme is the Mga Anak ni Inang Dalgdig (Children of Mother Earth) — an environmental performing arts group. The way they draw on dances and rituals from indigenous, Christian and Muslim traditions from various parts of the Philippines helps to promote care for creation and intercultural and interreligious respect.

11. The imperative of eradicating chronic poverty in countless communities is urgent. As the above examples demonstrate, VIVAT International believes that to

stimulate positive results in the long-term, cultural factors must be taken into account in any discourse regarding poverty. It sets out the following recommendations to the 49th Session of the Commission for Social Development:

- That cultural factors be included, along with structural and social factors, in the study and analysis of poverty and how to eradicate it.
- That cultural factors be taken seriously in the planning of programmes since they help influence how poor people respond to structural conditions and point to the substantial variation in responses to similar constraints.
- That in confronting poverty policymakers also consider seriously the culture and world view of the people who are poor. It is essential to involve the people who are living in poverty, the major stakeholders, themselves in the planning process, monitoring of policies and evaluation of them.
- That priority be given to educational programmes that help build social capital in impoverished communities in order to break the cycle of poverty.
- That policymakers be aware of the extent to which they themselves and their own cultural beliefs, attitudes and assumptions influence deliberations and decisions.

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*Note:* Statement endorsed by the following non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the council: Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Congregations of Saint Joseph, Dominican Leadership Conference, Franciscans International, International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Salesian Missions and Sisters of Mercy.