

**Opening address by**

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**OHCHR Seminar on the Draft Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty  
and Human Rights**

**Palais Wilson, OHCHR, 28 January 2009**

**Conference Room 1, 10.00 am**

Mr. Chairman,  
Excellencies, Representatives of States, National Institutions,  
intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations,  
Colleagues,

It gives me great pleasure to participate in the opening of this seminar on the Draft Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, which is being held pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 7/27.

On behalf of the High Commissioner, let me extend a warm welcome to all, especially those of you who have travelled long distances to be with us today, and particularly to the representatives of people living in conditions of poverty, whose needs and rights lie at the core of relevance of our discussion today. I look forward to hearing your perspective which will substantively enrich our discussions, as well as inform our work now and in the future.

This seminar comes at a pivotal juncture. The advancement of human rights over the years is undeniable: all countries have ratified at least one of the core nine international human rights treaties, and more than 80% have ratified four or more, giving concrete expression to the inherently universal nature of human rights. The broad adherence to conventions fleshing out labour rights under the ILO buttresses this positive trend. And so does the growth and strengthening of regional human rights arrangements, as well as the absorption of human rights standards into national constitutions and laws. Moreover, international expert bodies - the 'treaty bodies' and Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council - are helping to clarify the normative content of international human rights, and promoting stronger accountability. Through evolving practices, these mechanisms, and the recently created Universal Periodic Review procedure of the Human Rights Council, occupy an increasingly important place in implementation of human rights norms.

National courts are also proving more and more responsive to human rights claims in recent years, including those regarding economic, social and cultural rights, which are central to many people's and communities experiences of poverty. The recent adoption of the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the Optional Protocol for the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, are among the other crucial developments.

Against this backdrop, central to our work is obtaining a clear understanding of whether and how human rights norms are affecting the poorest individuals and communities and how they can be harnessed to empower them. This knowledge is indispensable for sharpening our ability to reach out to these communities and to promote their human rights interests. We are all painfully aware that violent conflicts, structural discrimination and rising inequalities remain a harsh reality in many countries. Thousands of children continue to die each day from avoidable disease, malnutrition and poor sanitation, and more than half a million women continue to die each year in childbirth, a shameful indicator of discrimination and neglect.

Economic growth has spurred aggregate human development progress in some parts of the world, notably in East Asia. However, this welcome outcome has not generated sufficient opportunities or benefits for the poorest and equitable redistribution of wealth is still far from being adequately addressed, not to mention achieved, in most countries. Furthermore, the concomitant challenges of the global financial, food and climate crises are causing additional hardship for the poor everywhere.

What do human rights instruments, principles, institutions and strategies have to offer, particularly to those living in extreme poverty, in such difficult circumstances? This is where the Draft Guiding Principles process, and your deliberations, must make a contribution. Whatever the scale of the practical challenges to be confronted, it is clear that much greater focus must be placed on the human dimension of the causes and consequences of these challenges. In this respect, I have no doubt that the human rights

normative framework, so far under-utilized, while by no means a panacea, must become a core component of our overall strategies in the fight against extreme poverty.

A human rights approach to poverty reduction strategies keeps a sharp focus on countering discrimination and inequality. Both conditions are often to be found at the roots of poverty. A human rights approach challenges the assumption that poverty, particularly extreme poverty, is somehow natural or inevitable, rather than the outcome of policy choices and trade-offs which either neglect the most vulnerable or deliberately marginalize them. The human rights framework demands an examination of the unequal power relations that perpetuate extreme poverty, providing the tools for accountability fairness and justice. It levels the playing field for all.

The issue of extreme poverty and human rights has been on the international human rights agenda for many years now, from the path-finding work of the former Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, successive Independent Experts on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, including Ms. Magdalena Sepulveda who is with us today. Indeed, a wide range of Treaty Bodies and Special Procedures have tackled different dimensions of this issue.

The consultations leading to this workshop give a clear testimony to the important role that guiding principles on extreme poverty and human rights could play in empowering people to claim their rights, combating discrimination, and strengthening the framework for accountability. This is our shared aspiration.

I hope your deliberations during the coming two days will make much headway in helping to turn this aspiration into a reality.

Thank you.