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**IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MANDATE CONTAINED
IN SUB-COMMISSION RESOLUTION 2005/8 AND
HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL DECISION 2006/102**

**The fight against poverty and the right to participation:
the role of women**

**Background note by the Office of the United Nations
High Commissioner for Human Rights**

* Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 60/251 of 15 March 2006 entitled "Human Rights Council", all mandates, mechanisms, functions and responsibilities of the Commission on Human Rights, including the Sub-Commission, were assumed, as of 19 June 2006, by the Human Rights Council. Consequently, the symbol series E/CN.4/Sub.2/_ , under which the Sub-Commission reported to the former Commission on Human Rights, has been replaced by the series A/HRC/Sub.1/_ as of 19 June 2006.

Introduction

1. The Social Forum is an initiative of the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights. There have been three sessions of the Social Forum, in 2002, 2004 and 2005, preceded by a preliminary meeting in 2001. It has been an annual event since 2004.

2. At its fifty-seventh session, the Sub-Commission adopted resolution 2005/8, in which it decided that the theme for the fourth Social Forum would be “The fight against poverty and the right to participation: the role of women”. It was further decided that the theme would be addressed within the context of the preparation of the review of the first United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006). This background note presents in more detail this theme and the programme for the fourth session of the Social Forum.

3. The Human Rights Council in its decision 2006/102 of 30 June 2006 decided to extend all mandates, mechanisms, function and responsibilities of the Commission on Human Rights, including the Social Forum. The Human Rights Council also decided that the Social Forum shall contribute to a Sub-Commission paper “on the Sub-Commission’s record that gives its own vision and recommendations for future expert advice to the Council, to be submitted to the Council in 2006”.

4. The fourth Social Forum will be held on 3 and 4 August 2006 in Geneva,¹ during the fifty-eighth and final session of the Sub-Commission, which starts on 31 July 2006. The Social Forum will dedicate the first day of its meeting to the theme of women and poverty. The first half of the second day of the meeting will be dedicated to a discussion of the report to the Sub-Commission of the ad hoc expert group on the need to develop guiding principles on the implementation of existing human rights norms and standards in the context of the fight against extreme poverty, including the draft guiding principles “Extreme poverty and human rights: the rights of the poor”. Finally, the Social Forum will also undertake a review of its work to date and make recommendations as to its future, contributing to the wider review of the work of the Sub-Commission and its working groups as requested by the Human Rights Council.

Theme of the 2006 Social Forum

5. Research on the topic of poverty has shown that women, among the world’s poor, often are the poorest and most vulnerable. This is true despite the fact that it is mostly due to women’s efforts, both in the labour market and in the home, that families and communities are held together. Among the many important themes that come to the fore with respect to this issue, three in particular have been selected for further consideration in the context of the Social Forum: first, the general trend of feminization of poverty; secondly, women and employment; and thirdly, the participation of women in decision-making processes - at home, at the community level and at the national level.

6. The Social Forum will have two panels devoted to the above-mentioned topics, with a view to having a constructive discussion and bringing to light best practices on the ground. A common thread of the two substantive panels will be the value-added of the human rights-based approach (HRBA) framework in efforts to enhance the role and participation of women in combating poverty.

7. A human rights-based approach is a conceptual framework for the process of human development that is normatively based on international human rights standards and operationally directed to promoting and protecting human rights. It seeks to analyse inequalities which lie at the heart of development problems and to redress discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power that impede development progress. Mere charity is not enough from a human rights perspective. Under a human rights-based approach, the plans, policies and processes of development are anchored in a system of rights and corresponding obligations established by international law. This helps to promote the sustainability of development work, empowering people themselves - especially the most marginalized - to participate in policy formulation and to hold accountable those who have a duty to act.

8. The outcome of the substantive panels will contribute to a final session, which will adopt concrete conclusions and recommendations, addressed to specific actors. These conclusions and recommendations will also be submitted to the General Assembly at its sixty-first session in September 2006, which will review the United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006).

Organization of the Social Forum

9. The two days of debate will be divided into three sessions on this year's theme on the first day and two sessions on the second day. The first day's sessions will be as follows: (a) the feminization of poverty: causes and effects; (b) women, employment and empowerment through participation; and (c) conclusions and recommendations. The second day's sessions will be as follows: (a) discussion of the draft guiding principles "Extreme poverty and human rights: the rights of the poor"; and (b) review of the work of the Social Forum and its vision and recommendations for the future.

10. In resolution 2005/8, the Sub-Commission requested Ms. Chin-sung Chung to prepare a working paper to be discussed in the Social Forum. The fourth Social Forum will also benefit from the deliberations of members of civil society, who will be invited to participate in the debates.

Draft programme

Opening session

Session 1: Panel - The feminization of poverty: causes, effects and solutions

11. The first panel will focus on poverty and gender inequality, and the trend of feminization of poverty throughout the world. Poverty has various manifestations that are suffered by both men and women in poverty, such as lack of food and productive resources sufficient to ensure a sustainable livelihood; hunger and malnutrition; ill health; limited or lack of access to education

and other basic services; increasing morbidity and mortality from illness; homelessness and inadequate housing; unsafe environments; and social discrimination and exclusion. It is also characterized by lack of participation in decision-making and in civil, social and political life. It occurs in all countries - as mass poverty in many developing countries and as pockets of poverty in developed countries.

12. Gender inequality in poverty means that women experience poverty differently than men. First, various studies have given estimates that approximately 55 to 60 per cent of the poor are women. Moreover, social, cultural and religious factors compounding gender equality have an exacerbating effect on symptoms suffered as a result of poverty. For example, concerning lack of food, hunger and malnutrition, in many societies women and girls are often expected to eat the leftovers after men and boys have finished eating. Ill health is another example: in countries where health care has to be paid for, women, when ill, are more likely not to go to hospital or clinics, and are more likely to either treat themselves at home or turn to traditional or alternative medicine. They are also more likely to take care of ill family members, which for women often means taking time off or even quitting their employment.

13. Another phenomenon of poverty that has a different impact on women and girls is unsafe environments. Gender-based violence, including rape, makes activities outside the home perilous for women in all societies. Home, for that matter, is not necessarily safe either, as domestic violence is widespread, and often condoned by society.

14. One of the alarming trends emerging from reviewing progress on the implementation of the Habitat Agenda is that legal and policy measures are not having much effect in reducing the gender poverty gap. The persisting gender bias in all aspects of society, including when it comes to addressing the problem of poverty, is based on social constructs developed over time. Gender can be understood as a social institution with both universal and variable - according to time and space - features. As such, differences and relationships between men and women are continuously elaborated by every society and generation, and can be observed in, inter alia, family structures, inheritance patterns and cultural practices. This is done culturally through beliefs and ideologies, institutionally through laws and organizations, and interpersonally through family and community. The cultural norms, institutional structures and interpersonal behaviours that reinforce male dominance are based upon the social principle known as “patriarchy”.

15. Questions and issues to be addressed by this panel will revolve around the causes and effects of gender inequality in poverty, e.g. best practices as experienced by the panellists in the work of their respective organizations, and how a human rights-based approach might complement or enhance their efforts. The panel would ideally conclude with some concrete suggestions and recommendations in this regard.

16. The panel will include representatives of women living in poverty, as well as non-governmental organizations working with them, both from developing (e.g. Uganda, Mexico) and developed countries (e.g. Canada, countries in the European Union).

Session 2: Panel - Women, employment and empowerment through participation²

17. The panel will focus on two interrelated areas of women and employment as well as women's empowerment through participation.

1. Women and employment

18. In every society and every household, women provide important economic support to their families, whether by earning income in the informal or formal labour market, or in agriculture. For young women in particular, wage work offers, in addition to economic opportunities, a chance to learn new skills, make wider social contacts and experience more of life's variety.

19. Women's employment in formal-sector wage work is increasing, and in developing countries, women now represent more than a third - and in some Asian countries - almost a half - of the manufacturing workforce. The majority of these women, however, occupy the lowest-paid jobs, are often underpaid for their labour, work under very difficult conditions with security and health risks, and do not enjoy sufficient social security and secondary benefits, such as maternity or sick leave.

20. On the whole, where women work for pay, around the world, they work more hours and are paid less. In many developing countries, wage discrimination is severe. On average, women only earn 60 to 70 per cent of what men are paid for similar work, and in some parts of Africa and Asia, only 50 per cent.

21. Especially in the developing world, the informal economy is where a large proportion of the workforce is economically active. Informal work contributes socially useful services and a significant proportion of global income. However, growth in the informal economy is primarily a result of globalization processes that have forced many from the formal sector to seek employment in the informal sector, which is characterized by poor working conditions. In most cases, the conditions under which informal women workers function are exacerbated. Working conditions in the informal sector include: non-recognition of work and of workers; very low incomes; very long working hours; insecure employment; unsafe and hazardous work; lack of benefits, leave, holidays or social security; sexual and other harassment; and unavailability of childcare.

22. Throughout the world, women also continue to bear primary responsibility for childcare and housework. This unpaid work remains economically invisible, but creates a foundation for all other economic, political and social activities. Ergo, when all of women's work, paid and unpaid, is taken into account, their economic contribution is generally greater than that of men. Women also work longer hours than men. In developing countries, women's work hours are estimated to exceed men's by about 30 per cent.

23. Another important problem to be addressed is women's lack of sufficient productive resources to ensure a sustainable livelihood. In many cases, women do not have legal or traditional rights, formally or in practice, to land or other assets, which in turn poses an obstacle to getting loans or credit. A second aggravating factor is the lack of education and skills, as well as of information on the labour market, which results in women often being concentrated in low-return, insecure and informal occupations.

2. Empowerment of women through participation

24. Research has shown that increased participation of women in decision-making processes is a positive factor in their empowerment, and subsequently in strengthening their capacity to better their own lives and the lives of those families they support.

25. The reality in most societies, however, is that economic, financial and social policies are generally still developed without fully recognizing women's economic contributions in the unpaid and informal parts of the economy. Poor men are excluded from important policy- and decision-making processes of government because they are poor. Poor women suffer from an additional discriminatory factor, namely gender. In most societies, women continue to be underrepresented at all levels of decision-making, and no parliament has equal representation of women and men. Too often women's achievements remain invisible and unacknowledged, their voices unheard. Increased representation of women should be an objective at all levels, including in the household and the village, in order to achieve improved representation at national level.

26. International Women's Day in 2006 was devoted to the theme "women in decision-making: meeting challenges, creating change". According to the International Fund on Agricultural Development (IFAD), "women's economic empowerment changes cultural perceptions of gender roles and relations. ... Increased status and confidence lead to increased participation by women in community decision-making. ... IFAD has learned that when women play a significant role in economic and social activities, their role in household decision-making and participation in financial management decisions increases".

27. According to studies on the topic, gender equality in decision-making in the family would benefit poor families - headed by either men or women - in many ways. For example, there is evidence, from both developed and developing countries, which demonstrates that women are more altruistic than men in the way they spend household income. Improved nutritional status and family health correlates with female control of family budgets. Overall, if all family members, including women, are permitted to pool skills and knowledge to make genuinely joint decisions on livelihoods and family size, it is more likely that a family will stay together, survive poverty and move on to a better life.

28. The panel will explore the various challenges to addressing gender equality in labour and employment, in particular with regard to the informal economy and the quantification of unpaid labour. Panellists will also share best practices and discuss the value-added of a

human rights-based approach in contributing to efforts to increase participation of women in decision-making processes. The panel will present possible solutions and make concrete recommendations for consideration in the final session.

29. The panel will comprise representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working on this topic, experts from relevant international organizations (e.g. United Nations Development Fund for Women, International Labour Organization, United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank) and representatives of women workers (e.g. India).

Session 3: Plenary - Conclusions and recommendations

30. The chairperson of the Social Forum will circulate draft conclusions and recommendations for the consideration of the plenary. Recommendations will focus on suggesting or proposing concrete ways to make progress towards poverty reduction strategies that are conducive to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. The report containing conclusions and recommendations will be submitted to the Sub-Commission.

Session 4: Panel - Discussion of the draft guiding principles “Extreme poverty and human rights: the rights of the poor” prepared by the ad hoc expert group on the need to develop guiding principles on the implementation of existing human rights norms and standards in the context of the fight against extreme poverty

31. In its resolution 2005/9 of 8 August 2005, the Sub-Commission requested the ad hoc expert group, coordinated by Mr. José Bengoa, to prepare a report on the need to develop guiding principles for the implementation of human rights norms and standards in the context of the fight against extreme poverty. This session will present an opportunity to discuss the draft report with the members of the ad hoc expert group and other interested parties.

Session 5: Plenary - Review of the work of the Social Forum, and vision and recommendations for future expert advice to the Human Rights Council

32. In accordance with Human Rights Council decision 2006/102, this session will present an opportunity for members of the Social Forum and the Sub-Commission as well as organizations and non-governmental organizations that have cooperated with the Social Forum to review the work of the Social Forum and formulate their vision and recommendations for the future of the Social Forum and expert advice to the Human Rights Council in the context of this Forum.³

Notes

¹ Pursuant to resolution 2005/8 of the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights.

² The alternative panel on urban and rural poverty has been discarded, as rural poverty has been the theme of a previous Social Forum. Nonetheless, many of the relevant themes that would be discussed under the rubric of rural poverty are common to those most likely touched upon in the context of employment, such as wages, the quantification of informal work, education and training, and the multiple responsibilities borne by women in their everyday lives.

³ List of resources consulted by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in preparation of this background note is kept by the Secretariat of the Social Forum.
