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SOCIAL FORUM

Third session

21 – 22 JULY 2005



INTRODUCTORY REMARKS BY

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**PALAIS DES NATIONS
Room XVII, Thursday, 21 JULY 2005**

Dear Members of the Social Forum, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to welcome you all to the third session of the Social Forum. The Forum was established with the intention of giving an opportunity, within the human rights system, for a dialogue with representatives of the most vulnerable groups, civil society, States and intergovernmental organizations to contribute their views and experiences in response to the impact of poverty and destitution on the realization of human rights in the world.

This year's theme for the Social Forum is "Poverty and economic growth: challenges to human rights". The fact that we are having this discussion is a recognition that much more needs to be done to ensure that strategies and policies for the reduction of poverty go hand in hand with the realization of all human rights.

Poverty often results from willful neglect and discrimination. Lack of adequate economic growth or development strategies that permit exclusion and discrimination in access to and allocation of resources paves the way to increased inequality and marginalization of the poor and vulnerable. It denies them their human rights. Economic and social inequalities create differences in access to political power, access to justice and access to basic goods and services, all of which are essential for the full realization of all human rights. This is now a well-established understanding within the international community, which has repeatedly recognized that extreme poverty is a violation of human dignity and frequently represents a violation of human rights.

It is my strong belief that the only way of ensuring that economic growth and poverty reduction will benefit all and not only some sectors of the society is to ensure participation of those living in poverty in the processes of poverty reduction and to establish systems of accountability which guarantee that State institutions are held to account for their failures to secure that poverty reduction strategies result in real improvements in the standards of living of the most vulnerable and destitute.

There should be a genuine participation in the design, implementation and monitoring of poverty reduction policies and strategies. Participation at meetings is not enough. Human rights require participation to be active, free, meaningful and effective. In spite of the efforts to secure participation within poverty reduction strategy processes, inequalities in access to established institutions and resources render real participation an unattainable objective for those living in poverty. During the present forum we will listen to testimonies from those working with the poor around the world with a view to better define the actions which need to be implemented to ensure the human right to participation. At a very minimum, participation should include the right to express one's opinions freely, the right to assembly and association, to information and to access to justice.

To be effective in addressing the plight of the poor, the processes of economic growth and poverty reduction have to be anchored in enforceable human rights and the relevant political, legislative and administrative institutions to ensure that the benefits of this process will reach the poorest and the most vulnerable. There has to be an improved institutional accountability in the implementation of the policies and programmes devised to address these concerns. The possibility for people themselves

to claim their rights through legal and quasi-legal processes is essential so that human rights have a meaning for those most at the margins, a vindication of their equal worth and human dignity. Remedies for the violation of human rights in the context of poverty reduction strategies should be "timely, accessible, affordable and effective". I am looking forward to finding out from your experiences what challenges and opportunities you have faced in the pursuit of remedies for human rights violations related to poverty reduction strategies. More importantly, your views are sought on the possibility to transform these strategies into an effective accountability framework between governments and their citizens for the reduction of poverty.

Dear participants,

I am personally committed to ensuring that my Office participates more actively in the fight against poverty. As you know, in my recently issued Plan of Action to strengthen the capacity of the OHCHR to implement human rights, I have identified poverty among the key challenges that we need to address in order to be able to close the gap between the human rights rhetoric and reality. This year your contribution will be particularly timely. In September in New York, the world summit will discuss the results of the five-year implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, including the first one: halving poverty by 2015. And, there is a growing realisation that the current efforts at the national and the international levels are not enough when it comes to meeting this goal. OHCHR strongly believes that adding human rights perspective and methodology to the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals would be a building block with great potential. It

would bring the MDG process back to those people who should primarily benefit from it, building on their engagement and vigilance.

I hope this forum will provide useful guidance in developing strategies to meet the challenge that poverty represents to human rights and I encourage you to be bold in your recommendations.

(We will now proceed to the selection of the Chair of the Social Forum...)