

***Contribution of the International Federation of Social Workers
to the
Expert Seminar on Human Rights and Extreme Poverty
22-23 March 2007***

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), wishes to thank the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty, Dr. Arun Sengupta, for convening this Expert Seminar on Extreme Poverty and asking for input from select academics, NGOs, and policy advocates. We also wish to thank Mr. Xavier Verzat, Special Representative of the International Fourth World, for eliciting input to be submitted to the Expert Seminar for creative dialogue with other members and organizations. IFSW feels that social work from its inception was a human rights profession, and looks forward to providing input into this extremely important meeting.

In response to Dr. Sengupta's emphasis on experiences and programmes that "could contribute to eradicating extreme poverty as a human rights entitlement", IFSW wishes to make some preliminary comments, followed by specific examples which it views as ways to eradicate extreme poverty. Unfortunately, such poverty still persists after the General Assembly's unanimous endorsement in 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and this despite the considerable economic and social progress witnessed during the past decades. Indeed, as the Human Development Report (2005) asserts, at present roughly 40% of the world lives on less than two dollars per day, and the ratio between the wealth of the world's richest and poorest country is roughly 1 to 103! Such realities are unacceptable and, once again, we welcome any attempts to change such a distressing scenario.

The Importance of Choosing a Human Rights Culture

In brief, despite the world's continuing inability to provide for the poorest of the poor, we feel that given the means, both financial and technical, that are at the disposal of governments, and despite the setbacks caused by diseases and armed conflicts in some regions, we can and must choose a world where human needs can be met satisfactorily. Human rights constitute the legal mandate to fulfil human needs. Whereas knowledge of human needs is imperfect, it can be said perhaps that the human condition is such that humans have *spiritual needs* to be treated with human dignity and respect as they live their lives according to meanings they have derived from fundamental religious, spiritual, and/or philosophical beliefs and systems. Humans also have *cognitive needs*, to have access to knowledge and information and to engage freely without fear of retaliation in dialogue with others about ways to create a socially just world. They also have *physical needs* for adequate food, water, and shelter, as well as *social needs* for affiliation with others in cultural and ethnic groups as well as the family, and ultimately, *self-*

actualization needs to live up to one's potential. Such needs, like human rights, are interdependent.

IFSW feels, therefore, that the aims of all poverty reduction programmes ought to be the creation of a human rights culture, which we see as a "lived awareness" of human rights principles that ultimately mirror human needs. Such awareness ought to exist not only in a cognitive sense, that is one's mind, but in literally a "heartfelt" sense where such principles are lived and dragged into one's everyday life. Research repeatedly asserts that only chosen values endure. One cannot force such a culture on anyone. It must make sense to the entire global community and be chosen on its own merits.

Thus, using the Universal Declaration as the authoritative definition of human rights standards, a document fortunately and increasingly referred to as *customary international law*, such a culture would acknowledge the interdependence, indivisibility, and equality of all human rights. Roughly, the Universal Declaration stresses five crucial notions: (1) human dignity (Art. 1); (2) non-discrimination, based on race, property, religion or other status (Art. 2.); (3) civil and political rights like freedoms of speech, the press, and peaceful assembly (Art. 2-21); (4) economic, social, and cultural rights, like food, medical care, adequate shelter, meaningful or acceptable work, and security in old age (Art. 22-27); and (5) solidarity rights, such as the right to a just social and international order, which scholars have argued to include, for example, rights to peace, development, and humanitarian disaster relief, and international distributive justice, that is, the right of the poorest of the poor to the wealthiest of the richest nations (Art. 28-30). Freedom of speech, for instance, is meaningless and hardly dignified if a person lacks adequate shelter, is hungry, and lives in a world at war.

IFSW views the primary challenge in the eradication of extreme poverty, therefore, as moving the global community towards an acceptance of values and interrelationships among rights, that reflect human needs, found in the Universal Declaration, as well as, its "long train of declarations and covenants," as stated by the late Pope John Paul II. The Chairperson of the drafting committee of the Universal Declaration, moreover, Eleanor Roosevelt, had a dream that every school child would know about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, much as students learn about their own country constitutions. In order for such values to endure, learning must begin at an early age. Furthermore, after the laying of such a foundation, human rights, ought to continue to serve as "guiding principles" for socially just policies.

The Need for a Multi-Pronged Approach

With these comments in mind, IFSW would like to offer the following comments in a spirit of creative dialogue with other members of this group with the aim to free humanity from the scourge of extreme poverty. We have chosen to adopt a public health medical and advanced generalist social work model, calling for multi-pronged interventions, with human rights serving as guiding principles. Thus, we need strategies that may be effective with "whole populations" (also referred to as "macro" approaches); "at risk populations" ("mezzo" approaches) and "direct practice" ("micro") levels of

intervention. To be sure, distinctions among levels are blurred, yet, they may provide the necessary contours to assess, and then act upon strategies to eliminate extreme poverty. Briefly, then, homelessness, could be dealt with by perhaps adding a “Right to adequate shelter” in a state constitution (a macro approach, getting its sustenance primarily from Article 25 of the Universal Declaration); organizing workers to engage in collective bargaining to assist in the prevention of job loss or, if that is not feasible, to be assisted to acquire further skills for other jobs (a mezzo approach, with sustenance from Article 23); and setting up a homeless shelter and soup kitchen, if previous measures had failed (a micro approach directly dealing with symptoms when other measures have failed).

As the above example demonstrates, programmes such as the setting up of homeless shelters are certainly necessary, but are only one aspect of a need for a multi-pronged approach to dealing with extreme poverty, that also takes into account the interdependency of rights. Thus, while obviously it is important to help the poor through programmes, the poor must also “stop coming” so to speak. Ultimately, there should be no poor to help. The homeless, moreover, need to have equal access to education, medical care, and meaningful work at reasonable wages so they can live becomingly and with human dignity. With these levels in mind, additional suggestions to deal with extreme poverty are offered below.

Additional Strategies with Commentary

Interventions ought to impact not only everyone in a particular country, but throughout the world. What is needed is a major spiritual transformation, broadly defined, that will place human need before profit with human dignity at its core.

A major macro strategy thus is to add rights found in human rights documents to national constitutions worldwide. The word “constitution” is from the Latin, *constitare* meaning “to choose.” As such, they represent societal choices, and the values they represent, in regard to enhancing the quality of life. In the U.S. A., for example, with estimates of three million homeless, there is no right to adequate shelter in its federal or any of its state constitutions. In fact, the only economic, and social, right asserted in the majority of state constitutions is the right to education.

But, in order to have these rights in the constitutions, which must be chosen, it is necessary to acknowledge that socialization processes play a major role. Thus, IFSW concurs with the World Decade for Human Rights Education (2005-2015) and encourages education about human rights documents not only in the post secondary levels, but the primary and secondary as well. Furthermore, recognizing that education must go beyond formalized institutions, IFSW encourages the media to inform others about human rights documents. In that regard, we recall an “MTV like” skit where in France actors and actresses would dance to music as they recited Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights calling, among other things, for human dignity and a spirit of brotherhood among all the peoples of the world. We also note that in select Scandinavian countries at times a right from a human rights document like the Rights of the Child, asserting for example that no child shall be physically or emotionally abused,

is flashed on a children's show followed by discussion. Such practices are necessary in order for values ultimately to be chosen, then later reflected in constitutions, and, therefore implemented. Ultimately, if children learn about doing duties to others, anywhere where they live in the world, they may at a later point come to a realization that the richer countries of the world have abnegated their responsibilities to those in extreme poverty, but who may also live in their same countries.

Such practices in Europe appear totally different than in the U.S.A. where advertising on children's television encourages children into consumerism, rather than, a spirit of fraternity and sorority, paving the way for a society to value profit instead of human need, thereby, leading ultimately to extremes in wealth. Fortunately, movements have evolved that commemorate international days, such as October 17, the International Day to Eradicate Extreme Poverty, and the International Day to Eradicate Racism.

In the U.S.A. chief executive pay is roughly five hundreds times higher than the average worker's pay. Yet, in the U.S.A. there are burgeoning movements to add human rights in state constitutions, such as the Massachusetts House Bill 708, an Act Relative to Incorporating Human Rights Standards in Massachusetts Laws and Policies. Presently, 60 NGOs in the state support that bill and a similar bill was passed unanimously in the Pennsylvania Legislature. IFSW encourages bills in legislative bodies and declarations as means to educate others about human rights, which ultimately ought to move people to action.

When engaging in such macro strategies, it must be kept in mind, furthermore, that such strategies must transcend domestic sovereignty. IFSW recognizes, therefore, that the one and one half trillion dollars spent on defense to keep lines on the map intact is a questionable enterprise, as such monies could be spent on alleviating the plight of the poor, and the poorest of the poor. Consequently, we urge broad based social movements emphasizing world citizenship and allegiance to humanity in the words of the late Joseph Rotblatt, a former Nobel Prize Winner.

Finally, considering the acceptance of Guiding Principles for the Eradication of Extreme Poverty, IFSW encourages the development of an International Convention on the Eradication of Extreme Poverty, legally binding upon all Member States, taking into consideration the need for a global redistribution of the earth's wealth and resources.

For populations at risk, we also offer human rights as guiding principles to prevent job loss, and symptoms of job insecurity. Thus, IFSW urges that States encourage workers to engage in collective bargaining and the formation of trade unions to protect their interests as enunciated in such documents as the Universal Declaration and the Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Mothers and children are particularly vulnerable to poverty and IFSW encourages States to provide for paid maternity leave before and after childbirth with government sponsored day care as enunciated in the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.

Should all of the above attempts fail to halt extreme poverty, we would need to have recourse to programmes such as shelters for the homeless; distribution of food that is nutritious, easily accessible, culturally appropriate, and at a reasonable cost; provision of loans at reasonable rates; and even the handing out of at least minimal amounts of money to those in dire straits. We should also never forget that education is one of the major means to overcome poverty and extreme poverty.

Certainly, all levels of intervention have different issues and approaches. They often require vast amounts of time with scarce immediate results forthcoming. Furthermore, we need to remind ourselves that extreme poverty, at least poverty in spirit, may also exist among the affluent, as according to a recent *State of the World*, instances of alienation are highest in some of the world's richest countries.

Thank you for your consideration of our viewpoints. We look forward to listening to other approaches in the hope that together we can advance on the road towards the elimination of extreme poverty.

This paper was drafted by Joseph Wronka, PhD, Professor of Social Work, Springfield College; Researcher, Brandeis University, Heller School for Social Policy, in collaboration with Ellen Mouravieff-Apostol, the main IFSW Representative at the United Nations Office at Geneva.