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POVERTY AND RACISM

Many people who live in extreme poverty are often also victims of discrimination on grounds such as birth, property, national and social origin, race, color and religion. Poverty is both a cause and a product of human rights violations. In 2001 the World Conference against Racism in Durban emphasized that poverty, underdevelopment, marginalization, social exclusion and economic disparities are closely associated with racism, and contribute to the persistence of racist attitudes and practices which in turn generate more poverty.

The UN often refers to poverty as a 'vicious circle', made up of a wide range of factors which are interlinked and hard to overcome. Deprivation of resources, capability and opportunities makes it impossible for anyone to satisfy the most basic human needs or to enjoy human rights.

In many societies, people are prevented from enjoying their rights not just because they cannot afford to do so, but simply because of who they are. Discrimination is often a barrier to essential services for certain groups of people, for example, migrants, ethnic and racial minorities, refugees and internally displaced persons, women, persons living with HIV/AIDS, stateless persons and persons with disabilities. Discriminatory laws, policies and practices may mean that these groups are also denied the right to work, the right to adequate housing and the right to a high standard of health. Racial discrimination and other types of discrimination can have a multiplier effect, compounding social exclusion and, in the worst cases, fuelling violent conflict.



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A mother, in an internally displaced camp, in NORTH KIVU, Democratic Republic of Congo

UN action

In the early 1990's the UN General Assembly resolved that extreme poverty and exclusion from society constituted a violation of human dignity. The years that followed saw a number of initiatives adopted which developed further the idea of the nexus between the rights of individuals and extreme poverty.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has as one of its fundamental tenets that no social phenomenon is as comprehensive in its assault on human rights as poverty. The Human Rights Commission, now the Council, acted early to appoint an independent expert on human rights and extreme poverty, charged with evaluating the relationship between the enjoyment of human rights and extreme poverty.

The historic United Nations conference and summits held in the 1990s generated an unprecedented global consensus on a shared vision of development, which culminated in the Millennium Declaration adopted at the Millennium Summit in 2000. This vision is based upon the premise that the human rights framework, including the right to development, provides the crucial foundation for the realization of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which placed eradication of extreme poverty and hunger as first of its eight goals.



However, at the halfway point in the achievement of the MDGs by 2015, progress towards achieving poverty reduction target was reported as uneven. Some regions have experienced poverty reduction, in others, poverty worsened especially among women and children. The countries that have made progress have done so because they have adopted long-term strategies that reflect the multidimensional nature of poverty and the diversity of the poor while taking into consideration particular national, economic, social and cultural situations.

A comprehensive human rights approach calls attention to the responsibility of States to protect their populations from poverty and discrimination and to create an environment conducive to public welfare. Participation, non-discrimination and transparency are principles that enable the poor and those suffering discrimination a role in the shaping of policies that guarantee their rights, and avenues to seek redress for abuses.

The Durban Declaration and Programme of Action urges States to adopt and implement social development policies with a view to closing significantly the existing gaps in living conditions faced by victims of racism. In this context, it is clear that measures to eliminate poverty and all forms of discrimination must be understood as mutually reinforcing and complementary.

ABOUT OHCHR

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), a part of the United Nations Secretariat, has been given a unique mandate to promote and protect all human rights. Headquartered in Geneva, the Office is also present in some 40 countries. Headed by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, a position established by the General Assembly in 1993 to spearhead the United Nations' human rights efforts, OHCHR takes action based on the unique mandate given it by the international community to guard and advocate for international human rights law. For more information please visit www.ohchr.org