

CIVIL SOCIETY DECLARATION 2015

NGO Committee on Social Development

Introduction

The NGO Committee for Social Development and the NGO Committee on Financing for Development, along with our member organizations representing vast international constituencies, recognize and appreciate the 20th Anniversary of the World Summit for Social Development, held 6 – 12 March, 1995. Drawing on materials and agreements from numerous High Level United Nations Conferences preceding the Summit, the outcome document of that gathering sought to “represent a new consensus on the need to put people at the centre of development.”¹ Yet, twenty years later, the high aspirations and ambitious commitments have yet to be fully realized. We, therefore, welcome the theme of this year’s Commission on Social Development – “Rethinking and Strengthening Social Development in the Contemporary World.”

This Civil Society Declaration highlights a few of the areas of greatest import to Civil Society – namely inequalities and poverty, human rights, accountability, and means of implementation. In order for development plans to be effective for all in a rapidly changing world, Member States, Civil Society and the UN are rethinking relationships between these critical aspects of development, while continuing to promote decent work and social integration as put forward in Copenhagen.

Rethinking Social Development

The introduction to the Proposal of the Open Working Group for Sustainable Development Goals asserts that “Poverty eradication is the greatest global challenge facing the world today.”² Rethinking social development therefore requires a conception of poverty more flexible and holistic than the current \$1.25 per day metric. The concept of poverty must be capable of supporting the creative participation of persons at all levels in the planning and construction of humanity’s collective future. Efforts to alleviate poverty would, therefore, need to address not only conditions that inhibit people and communities from enjoying the benefits of society’s progress, but also conditions that hinder people from contributing their capacities toward the ongoing advance of social development.

Inequality and Poverty

Inequalities and poverty are the most formidable obstacles to global advancement and well-being. As the 2014 Human Development Report warns, “The world has experienced progress in human development for some time. But increasingly this progress seems threatened by uncertainty and by persistent inequality...” Significantly, the report notes that policies that “promote the extension of the benefits of prosperity to all and build broader societal resilience”

¹ World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen 1995

² Open Working Group Document

are “the outcomes of vigorous collective action, equitable and effective institutional responses and far-sighted leadership.”³

Deprivations in health, education, nutrition, safety, representation and many other areas derive in great part from a lack of financial resources. Economic justice must therefore be a central priority of the post-2015 development agenda.

Poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon, as UNDP explains, “it is not simply a lack of adequate income; it is a cruel mix of human deprivation in knowledge, health, dignity and rights, obstacles to participation and lack of voice.” Similarly, inequalities assume numerous and intersecting forms such as inequalities of access to basic services, of voice, of agency and of access to the tools of trade and entrepreneurship. Critical as economic justice will be to sustainable progress, those formulating the global development agenda must never forget that human lives well lived are the ultimate objective and yardstick of social development. **The tendency of revenue, capital, wealth, and debt to exert undue influence over development discussions must be firmly resisted.**

Human Rights

Poverty - in any and all of its dimensions - is an affront to the dignity of those who experience it and is a hindrance to development of any kind. Moreover, deprivation of these kinds is a violation of human rights. Strategies that address the root causes of poverty necessarily adhere to the protection and promotion of human rights. Therefore, an unequivocal recognition of human rights as enumerated and defined by the United Nations itself is central as development is rethought for this and future generations.

The Human Rights Declaration is a foundational document of the United Nations. The integration of the principles articulated therein with the broader development project has been reflected in recent documents such as the Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights.⁴ Although much debate continues about the practical application and even the constitutive elements of a **human rights based approach to development**, without applying this approach, no development project can be considered truly people centered.

Human rights are inseparable from development. The development enterprise relies and strengthens the rights to water, food, housing, participation, education, employment and beyond. To divide the UN into silos - development, human rights, and peace and security - is to reject the reality of our holistic existence. No one of these areas can truly succeed unless all are recognized as interrelated and mutually reinforcing. At this moment in history, understanding and re-imagining these relationships is critical.

³ United Nations Development Program. (2014). *Human development report 2014: Sustaining Human Progress: Reducing Vulnerabilities and Building Resilience*. Retrieved from <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/human-development-report-2014>, pp 17.

⁴ Human Rights Council 9/27/12, resolution 21/11

Social integration, a concept stressed in the Copenhagen Declaration, has been noticeably absent from recent discourses on development. Nevertheless, the “quest for humane, stable, safe, tolerant and just societies” must not be abandoned and the goal of attaining an inclusive society must be central to a strong development agenda. An inclusive society based on respect for all human rights in the context of the rule of law is an environment in which social development can occur and in which the human spirit can flourish with freedom of expression, freedom of belief, freedom from want and freedom from fear.

Accountability

More than a tool to assess compliance, accountability that relies on meaningful participation can be instrumental to the progress of a community. For example, to fully grasp the many dimensions of poverty, particularly social exclusion and lack of participation, those living in poverty must be engaged in research. Such participation not only brings forth critical hidden knowledge, it also counteracts the social exclusion experienced by people living in poverty.⁵ Participatory methods have been promoted by a variety of NGOs, agencies and institutions such as UN DESA.⁶ Accordingly, civil society supports **participatory-research methods that include people living in poverty to determine the most nationally appropriate indicators for SDG monitoring and accountability.**

In order to improve monitoring processes, member states should consider new methods for attributing success under the post-2015 agenda. Currently states use national averages when considering whether a goal or target has been met, yet attributing success in such a manner usually ignores the realities of the most excluded populations.⁷ For example, UNICEF has suggested that much of the success attributed under the MDGs was actually concentrated in the upper income quintiles and urban populations. It also noted that one in three children has no legal identity, keeping them “hidden from the progress of their nations.”⁸ Therefore, it is important that **disaggregated data** be used to monitor progress of development programs. **Development goals should strive to reduce the disparity between the performance of the poorest quintile and aggregate performance.**

Means of Implementation

In order to strengthen social development in the way herein conceptualized, means of implementation must be secured in a synergistic fashion. Means of implementation must be particularly oriented towards the most vulnerable populations in an effort to include them in development while furnishing the support they need to properly engage.

⁵ International Movement ATD Fourth World, *Towards Sustainable Development that Leaves No One Behind: The Challenge of the Post-2015 Agenda* (Working Paper: 2012), 21

⁶ UN DESA, *Analyzing and Measuring Social Inclusion in a Global Context*. p. 25-28 (2010)
<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/publications/measuring-social-inclusion.pdf>

⁷ UNICEF, *Progress for Children Achieving the MDGs with Equity*. (2010);

⁸ UN News Centre, *One in Three Children Do Not Officially Exist*. (2013).

<<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=46713&Cr=unicef&Cr1=#.UrG3GvRDsrl>>

Tax justice, progressive tax systems and debt cancellation should be the primary policies used to generate revenues for social programmes. Additional revenues from improved taxation should be used to avoid user fees for the most vulnerable communities and, to support peoples' cooperatives, small and medium farmers, and other small and medium enterprises. This support can be further enhanced through other incentives for the promotion of entrepreneurship among communities of low income.

As recommended by the Intergovernmental Committee of Expert on Sustainable Development Financing, civil society encourages member states to close tax havens and curb illicit financial flows. **In this regard, the use of an international financial transaction tax can help finance a global fund for social protection.**⁹

Civil society recognizes the importance of engaging the private sector in the implementation of social policy. To this end, it is of utmost importance that governments hold the private sector accountable to its concurrent responsibilities to create conditions conducive to human development, including more equitable systems of trade, aid, finance and debt relief.¹⁰

Means of implementation is about more than financing. Without the full participation of the most vulnerable as implementing partners, no development program will be sustainable. Therefore, a more holistic conception of means of implementation should be articulated.

Conclusion

As representatives of civil society worldwide, we believe that our recommendations and their appropriate means of implementation are integral to a development agenda that secures a "Life of Dignity for All." A sustainable development agenda that does not seek to achieve this goal, but rather focuses on narrow economic outcomes risks exacerbating the inequalities and deprivations that lead to conflict and instability.

It is the job of governments, civil society and other stakeholders that focus on social development to ensure that the development agenda takes into account these aspects of human development which are so difficult to quantify and therefore often cast aside. Without this orientation, the development agenda post 2015 will continue to systematically exclude and disempower the most vulnerable populations. Only when the international community prioritizes the participation, empowerment, and full involvement of these populations will development be sustainable.

⁹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Underwriting the Poor: A Global Fund for Social Protection*, 2012

¹⁰ Center for Economic and Social Rights, *Who Will Be Accountable?*, 2013