

Civil Society Declaration 2016

“...we strive for a world that is just, equitable and inclusive...”
~ Rio+20 Outcome Document, *The Future We Want*

Eradicating poverty has been recognized as “the greatest global challenge facing the world today.”¹ With constituencies spanning the globe, the NGO Committee for Social Development is well aware of the magnitude of this challenge. Our task is to give voice to those facing hardship. One report calculated that the world’s richest 62 individuals control as much wealth as half of humanity.² On average, each of these individuals has as much wealth as 56 million people from the ‘bottom’ 3.5 billion. Only 23 *countries* have a population that big. Additionally, low income countries have mortality rates 17 times higher than that of high income countries.³

The exclusion faced on a daily basis highlights a reality that none can afford to forget: if poverty is to be alleviated in any lasting way, inequality in all its dimensions – from education to opportunity and from discrimination to dignity – must be addressed. Once a taboo subject, inequality and its detriments, including its link to wealth accumulation and consumption, are now being highlighted in public discourse. The lottery of birth cannot remain the strongest indicator of quality of life in a global society characterized by justice, equality and a strong social fabric.

While aggregate global productive output has grown significantly over the past century,⁴ the benefits of that production have not “trickled down” to large segments of humanity in any systematic or equitable manner. Not only has the gap between the wealthy and persons living in poverty widened on numerous fronts, but the effects on those living in poverty have, in many instances, become even more pronounced in absolute terms.

Thus it becomes clear that, in many segments of contemporary development discourse, a significant gap remains between theory and reality. A rising tide does not necessarily lift all boats, as had been fondly imagined and frequently argued. Often, it leaves many behind to drown. We must, therefore, address the root causes of the inequalities we see.

The Defining Challenge of Our Time

“The defining challenge of our time,” the Secretary General declared with particular clarity and emphasis, “is to close the gap between our determination to ensure a life of dignity for all on the one hand, and the reality of persisting poverty and deepening inequality on the other.”⁵

The international community has taken up this challenge in the Agenda 2030. Goal 10 of the SDGs focuses on reducing inequality within and among countries, giving expression to a powerful sense of universalism and global interconnectedness. Its targets must become the object

¹ Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

² Oxfam, *An Economy For the 1%*, 2016

³ World Bank 2010d

⁴ It should be noted that extreme poverty fell significantly over the 15 years of the MDGs.

⁵ United Nations Secretary-General, *The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming all Lives and Protecting the Planet*, 4 December 2014

of committed effort and sustained action. Relevant and meaningful indicators must also be developed to guide efforts to build societies of justice and equity.

In pursuing these ambitious goals, the tools which are already at hand to address inequality must be embraced and employed without delay:

1. **Leave no one behind.** As Agenda 2030 emphasizes, true sustainable development cannot afford to leave any population behind, and this includes the focus populations for this Commission: the ageing, people with disabilities, youth, indigenous people, women, etc.
2. **Long term planning and goal-setting** helps prioritize lasting objectives related to people and planet, and put in proper perspective the more transitory imperatives of financial profit.
3. **Education** provides an indispensable means for not simply rectifying the detriments of inequality, but proactively building a global culture of solidarity, universality, and equality - without undermining our all-important diversity. Education is a fundamental tool for social mobility and promoting universal values and global citizenship.
4. **Gender equality in decision-making and leadership positions** has been shown to improve outcomes in peace-building, health, education and a range of other areas.
5. **Social protection floors** reduce inequality across multiple fronts and support broad-based development through increased capacity and increased social capital.
6. **Participatory economics** more than just at the level of finance, they provide a means to dramatically expand the pool of those giving input on decisions that affect their development.
7. **Financial transaction taxes** hold the promise to both reduce volatility in global financial markets and generate a stable stream of revenue to support development efforts.
8. **Goal 16** aims to promote peace and rule of law, key elements to reducing inequalities as illegal means, such as illicit financial flows and tax evasion, are leeches on the development process.

A Lens for Action

Inequality is a highly multidimensional phenomenon. Its effects are seen not only in the economic and financial sphere, but in numerous aspects of daily life.

Inequality can be understood not only as a problem in itself, but also as a context framing virtually all of humanity's most pressing challenges. For example:

- SDG 2 addresses inequalities in food security, availability, and access to nutrition.
- SDG 3 aims to address inequalities of mortality, morbidity, access to medical care, health facilities, and the like.
- Even the impact of climate change, addressed in SDG 13, varies by both location and vulnerability to shocks and risk, introducing yet another dimension of inequality.
- SDG 16 speaks to inequalities of political representation voice, access to justice, and rule of law as well as good governance and transparent administration.

Inequality therefore encapsulates a range of challenges, but its inverse, *equality*, holds the *potential for a range of solutions*. In this sense, the establishment of equality can be seen as a

lens for framing action on a variety of fronts, bringing coherence and integration to endeavors that might otherwise seem isolated or unrelated. Increasing equitable access to and participation in the goods and services of the global community should become a central focus of development efforts of all kinds.

A Present Emphasis, a Long-standing Commitment

Concern for equality is by no means a recent phenomenon. The 1995 Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development noted that, “We are witnessing in countries throughout the world the expansion of prosperity for some, unfortunately accompanied by an expansion of unspeakable poverty for others. This glaring contradiction is unacceptable and needs to be corrected through urgent actions.”

The concrete commitments contained in that document, which Civil Society will continue to call on our governments to honor, address a range of inequalities in areas such as poverty, gender, health and education. The Commission for Social Development has been working to advance equality for decades and therefore stands as indispensable mechanism for addressing this most pressing challenge.

We call on the Commission to become a vibrant and dynamic learning community, focused on the generation, application, and diffusion of best practices about addressing inequalities of all kinds. In this way, it can become an indispensable platform supporting transformative progress and the construction of a more just and equal world.

The Primacy of Relationships

Laying the foundations for a more equitable future will require new models of development, prosperity, and economics. To be effective, these models must be shaped by a keen appreciation of the central role relationships play in sustaining human society, whether between humanity and nature, among individuals and communities, within the family, or between individuals and social institutions including both the public and private sector.

The injustices evident in the current global system will require more than skillful methodologies and technocratic solutions. Well intentioned as they have been, such “solutions” have so far failed to alter basic inequities in the way the benefits of human endeavor have been distributed. No longer can people of good will be content with the goal of simply providing for basic needs. Only as all individuals are invited to make their contribution to the betterment of society, and only as resources are distributed in a way that permits each to do so, will progress against the age-old spectre of inequality and inequity be possible.