

# **Address to the International Forum on the Eradication of Poverty**

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It is always a great pleasure to make an address at this very epicenter of multi-lateralism. Obviously, in the spirit of our shared and continued desire to face the problems and challenges of our civilizations as issues and matters of common plight.

I came here straight from New Delhi, India where I was making the keynote address to the opening plenary of the India Social Forum among other activities.

Looking back at the diversity, multi-culturalism and vibrancy that were manifest in New Delhi, one gets a sense that actually the world is not all a gloomy picture of despair, poverty, penury and destruction as is all too often presented. But that there is an ongoing resurgence in terms of fashioning new alternatives and a counter planning from below that continues to prevent the fabric of whole societies and communities from coming off at the seams.

The reflections of this experience and my life long commitment to global social justice inform my thinking today.

At the close of the First United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997 – 2006), it is just and prudent for us to look back and make an audit of what has it meant for us. What are the gains, challenges, lessons and new paths that we intend to chart.

The reasons are multiple but the overriding one being that even a cursory look will show that poverty has not abated but continues to be a critical challenge for us all.

The theme of the First United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006) was founded on, “eradicating poverty is an ethical, social, political and economic imperative of humankind.” As we take stock today, we must always bear in mind these core pillars of the mission.

Even if poverty maybe lessening for the world as a whole, it continues to be an enormous problem. One third of deaths – some 18 million people a year or 50,000 per day – are due to poverty related causes. That is 270 million people since 1990, the majority women (like me and my sisters in this sitting) and children (like my own four or worse my two beautiful grand

daughters). That's roughly equal to the population of the US on whose ground we stand.

Every year nearly 11 million children die before their fifth birthday. 1.1 billion people had consumption levels below \$1 a day and 2.7 billion lived on less than \$2 a day (remember we are a global population of around 6 billion). 800 million people go to bed hungry everyday (that's around the total population of Africa).

I am not banding these figures to present anything new. Neither am I making this a statistical presentation. My humble reason is to point out that this we all know. From the World Bank, the UN, our Governments, International Agencies, etc, these kinds of data freely abounds. The million-dollar question then is what do we do with such a grim representation?

Nelson Mandela opined in February 2005 that, "massive poverty and obscene inequality is the scourge of our time!" We must continuously aspire to have such words mirror our efforts both in word and deed. We must not only say that we are working to eradicate poverty, but we must be seen to be doing so even in the simplest manner and especially by those whom poverty is a daily reality.

I have continuously argued and especially when I worked as the Ecumenical Millennium Development Goals Coordinator for the All Africa Conference of Churches that the Millennium Development Goals are not an end in themselves. What they are is that they embody the first global realization that poverty is a challenge for humankind and that we have a responsibility to address it. In short, we have no capacity to pass judgment over who dies and who lives. But if we can reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day, if we can reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger, if we can increase the amount of food for those who suffer from hunger, then our job is half done and it no longer looks insurmountable. Then we can move on to address the other bit or even better those who come after us have a better inheritance. Actually it's all very true that we are the first generation that can end poverty!

The NGOs and civil society play an important and significant role in development. They have equally played a role in the ongoing realization of the Millennium Development Goals. But to ensure that the Millennium Development Goals and especially that the goal to eradicate poverty is met,

NGOs and civil society too need to realize that they cannot achieve this singularly. They have to develop partnerships with governments who bear a greater responsibility. They must also forge direct linkages with communities and the people, what Canadian philosopher John McMurtry calls the “civil commons.” These are the people who live and experience poverty first hand. For them, staying alive is a daily job and they equally have alternatives and solutions to their plight. Their wisdom, experience and reality must not be ignored and sacrificed at the alter of poverty models developed by poverty experts and technocrats.

It is people’s experiences that must inform the alternatives and models that we embrace. Developing real partnerships that are founded on justice, equality and dignity is fundamental to the new discourse. The more the reason why Goal 8 of the Millennium Development Goals, developing a global partnership for development, must be embraced as a fundamental pillar of the paradigm shift that we are all talking about. And this partnership must be founded on *Justice* not *Charity*!

We must be able to have new dreams. To envision new futures. To develop new cosmologies, new metaphors that are devoid of violence and exploitation. We must be able to embrace marginalized groups.

We must found non-violence and peace building. We must assert the democratization of people’s access to resources. We must of essence reconstruct ethics and spirituality.

We must promote gender equality, economic and social rights. We must of essence rehabilitate and reconstruct politics. We must liberate the world from the domination of multi-national and financial institutions.

We must ensure dignity; defend diversity and guarantee expression eliminating all forms of discrimination. By guaranteeing the rights to food, healthcare, education, housing and work we will be building a world order based on sovereignty, self-determination and rights of peoples.

If we can manage to walk this path, then we will trail blaze a future for our children and their children. Appreciating our world as a shared common wealth we must refuse to make poverty a fashionable debate. We must be repulsed by its ascendancy to a multi-billion dollar industry characterized by parachute development.

We must face poverty and eyeball it as a human construct, not a naturally occurring phenomena. Poverty must be acknowledged to be created scarcity and hence the solutions lie within our scope and us.

This is the road that the paradigm that delivers the Millennium Development Goals must tread.

Ivan Illich succinctly captures anything short of it in his classic, “To hell with good intentions!”