



**Economic and Social
Council**

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.4/Sub.2/SF/2004/2
23 June 2004

ENGLISH
Original: ENGLISH, FRENCH
AND SPANISH

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Sub-Commission on the Promotion and
Protection of Human Rights
The Social Forum
Second session
Geneva, 22 and 23 July 2004
Item 2 of the provisional agenda

**IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MANDATE CONTAINED IN SUB-COMMISSION
RESOLUTION 2003/14**

The Social Forum: poverty, rural poverty and human rights

Background note by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

1. The Social Forum is an initiative of the United Nations Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights. It operates as a forum for:

- (a) Exchange of information about the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights and their relationship with the process of globalization;
- (b) Following up on situations of poverty throughout the world;
- (c) Proposing standards and initiatives, guidelines and other recommendations for consideration by the Commission on Human Rights and other human rights bodies; and
- (d) Following up on the commitments made at major world conferences and the Millennium Summit, as well as making recommendations to forthcoming conferences.

The 2004 Social Forum will be held on 22 and 23 July 2004 in Geneva,¹ immediately preceding the start of the fifty-sixth session of the Sub-Commission on 26 July.

2. The idea of a Social Forum has been discussed since 1997 in response to concerns about the impact of globalization on the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights. It was meant to serve as a forum within the United Nations human rights system for dialogue among relevant actors, including those that are not normally represented in United Nations forums. Thus, apart from States, Sub-Commission members, global and regional intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, participants will include grass-roots organizations, in particular those of the poorest and most marginalized groups, and the private sector. Given the role, consistently emphasized by the Commission on Human Rights, of the Sub-Commission as a “think-tank” within the United Nations human rights system, the Social Forum could serve as an “intellectual antechamber” of the Sub-Commission on matters relating to its mandate.

Theme of the 2004 Social Forum

3. In its resolution 2003/14, the Sub-Commission decided that the next session of the Social Forum will focus on the relationship between rural poverty and the rights of peasants and other rural communities. At the same time, in resolution 2003/13, the Sub-Commission requested a group of five of its members to prepare a paper on the need to develop “guiding principles on the implementation of existing human rights norms and standards in the context of the fight against extreme poverty”. As the majority of people living in poverty around the world are in rural areas, the 2004 Social Forum has been conceived by the Coordinator of the Social Forum² as a contribution to the discussion on the need for such guiding principles by focusing on the theme “Poverty, rural poverty and human rights”. The report of the group of experts will, therefore, be a background document for the Social Forum, and the final recommendations and conclusions of the Social Forum will inform the discussions of the Sub-Commission on this topic during its fifty-sixth session.

Organization of the Social Forum

4. The Social Forum will be organized around four panels, each of which will address relevant dimensions of the contribution that a human rights approach can make to poverty reduction. Speakers in the panels will include representatives from international

organizations, grass-roots organizations, NGOs and academic experts. In each panel there will be a rapporteur who will summarize and identify the main elements of the discussions to be shared at the final session.

5. The Social Forum will meet in the form of a plenary. Invitations to attend will be issued to Governments, intergovernmental organizations, representatives from the private sector and NGOs in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, as well as grass-roots organizations. Presentations by panellists will be followed by a general debate. The Chair will submit the report of the Social Forum, containing recommendations, to the upcoming session of the Sub-Commission.

Draft programme

Opening session

Panel 1 - Poverty and human rights: empowerment of people living in poverty

6. The conditions in which people in poverty are forced to live constitute a denial of their human rights, including the right to life. At a basic level, a human rights approach to poverty reduction is about the empowerment of people living in poverty, expanding their freedom of choice and action so that they may live with dignity. Human rights empower individuals by granting them entitlements that give rise to legal, social and political obligations on others. Enjoyment of human rights can help to equalize the distribution and exercise of power both within and between societies. The purpose of this panel will be to deepen understanding of the ways in which human rights empower people to overcome their poverty. It will focus on the concept and practice of empowerment as a strategy for lifting people out of poverty; it will look at the opportunities and obstacles to empowering people living in poverty through strategies aimed at enhancing their access to social services, employment, justice and assets, as well as through improved participation in political decision-making and society.

7. Panellists will include the High Commissioner for Human Rights and two keynote speakers. It will also include representatives of poor communities.

Panel 2 - Rural poverty and extreme poverty: special groups

8. Seventy-five per cent of people living in poverty worldwide live in rural areas. Among them, those living in extreme poverty (the landless, wage-earners, labourers, indigenous people and fisherfolk, specially women) face particular social, political and economic obstacles that impede the development of their capabilities and freedoms. They generally live in marginal and degraded areas with low economic potential. They are frequently deprived of their rights of access to resources because of inadequate services, geographical isolation and political exclusion or marginalization. But they also have organizational capacity and a deep sense of solidarity. The purpose of this panel will be to deepen understanding of the livelihoods of people living in poverty in rural areas and how this affects their enjoyment of human rights. The discussions will be guided by the testimonies provided by representatives of those groups.

9. Panellists will include representatives of those living in extreme poverty, international NGOs and experts

Panel 3 - The role of human rights in the development of operational strategies to address poverty

10. Poverty reduction has become the overarching development goal, and many countries are developing strategies to reduce poverty. This panel will discuss the ways through which the empowering potential of human rights could be maximized through these strategies, harnessing their impact to shape laws, policies and institutions that are truly responsive to the needs of people living in extreme poverty. Opportunities and difficulties in transforming relevant human rights standards and key human rights principles such as empowerment, participation, accountability, equality and non-discrimination into practical responses will be addressed. Panellists will be asked to reflect on the concrete implications that the application of a human rights approach to poverty reduction has in sectoral strategies to promote rural economic growth and social development, ensure equitable access to assets, foster good governance and enhance national and international solidarity. Special emphasis will be placed on measures to enhance the right to personal and economic security and the inclusion of people living in extreme poverty and of the most marginalized, such as protecting their security of tenure and protecting them from violence, guaranteeing the enjoyment of social rights and their participation in decisions that affect their lives.

11. Panellists will include representatives from international organizations, NGOs, experts, Governments and/or the private sector.

Panel 4 - Recommendations on elements for incorporating human rights into poverty reduction strategies

12. This last segment will consist of brief presentations by the rapporteurs of each of the panels, followed by discussion and comments by the participants. The rapporteurs will frame their reports as recommendations of elements to be taken into account in the design and implementation of guiding principles on the implementation of human rights in the fight against extreme poverty. The recommendations will thus constitute an input to the work of the Sub-Commission in this area.

Notes

¹ Pursuant to resolution 2002/12 and 2003/14 of the Sub-Commission, endorsed by decision 2003/107 of the Commission on Human Rights and decisions 2003/264 and 2004/217 of the Economic and Social Council.

² In accordance with the decisions of the relevant bodies, 10 members of the Sub-Commission will participate in the Social Forum, which will be coordinated by José Bengoa