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**IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MANDATE CONTAINED IN
SUB-COMMISSION RESOLUTION 2004/8**

Poverty and economic growth: challenges to human rights

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

Introduction

1. At its fifty-sixth session the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights adopted resolution 2004/8 in which it decided that the theme for the Social Forum 2005 will be “Poverty and economic growth: challenges to human rights”. This background note presents this theme and the programme for the 2005 session of the Social Forum.

2. The Social Forum is an initiative of the Sub-Commission. There have been two sessions of the Social Forum, one in 2002 and another in 2004, preceded by a preliminary meeting in 2001. It has now become an annual event. The 2005 Social Forum will be held on 21 and 22 July 2005 in Geneva,¹ immediately preceding the start of the fifty-seventh session of the Sub-Commission on 26 July.

Theme of the 2005 Social Forum

3. Poverty is widely recognized as a situation that deprives individuals of the capability to enjoy human rights. While improving the pace of economic growth is often seen as the main response to poverty, it has also been increasingly recognized that only growth categorized as “pro-poor” can directly contribute to poverty reduction. It goes without saying that the nature and content of such growth is context-sensitive and specific. However, some general elements seem to be relevant in the design and implementation of appropriate policies everywhere.

4. To be “pro-poor”, economic growth has to successfully address the inequalities in the personal situations of people, in particular the vulnerable and marginalized segments of the population, and to create opportunities for these groups to participate in and benefit from economic development. It has also been widely acknowledged that growth without equity could eventually increase poverty.

5. Human rights provide a universally accepted set of standards and principles that can help to identify and assess economic growth policies in terms of whether they will lead to an equitable and sustainable reduction of poverty. They provide a framework for policies that contribute to making poverty reduction strategies more effective and, at the same time, identify the responsibility of the different actors for the content and implementation of such strategies.

6. It is universally understood that States bear the primary responsibility for the implementation of human rights. This general principle must be applied in the various fields of human activity. In the case of poverty reduction, it is incumbent upon the State to follow human rights principles and norms, including equality and non-discrimination, participation and

¹ Pursuant to resolution 2004/8 of the Sub-Commission. See also Sub-Commission resolutions 2002/12 and 2003/14, endorsed by decision 2003/107 of the Commission on Human Rights and decisions 2003/264 and 2004/217 of the Economic and Social Council.

accountability, in designing and implementing poverty reduction strategies. More specifically, the State is required to (a) identify and ensure the participation of those who are the targets of such strategies - the rights holders; and (b) hold accountable those directly responsible for the adoption and implementation of the strategies - the duty bearers.

7. The 2005 Social Forum would focus on the principle of accountability, its role in and implications for the relationship between economic growth, poverty and human rights. In implementing this principle a mechanism must be established to make duty bearers answerable for their acts or omissions and to provide rights holders with the opportunity to assess whether the duty bearers have succeeded or failed in discharging their tasks. This may imply some form of remedy, including reparation for individuals whose rights are infringed as a result.

8. Although accountability mechanisms can take many forms, they should at a minimum be accessible, transparent and effective. Such mechanisms include political processes and mechanisms in which national parliaments and other elected bodies play a pivotal role; judicial and quasi-judicial mechanisms that determine whether policies and actions are consistent with the law and sanction those responsible for violations; and mechanisms and procedures that ensure that those whose rights have been violated can seek redress through judicial or non-judicial means.

9. In addition, methods and instruments commonly used to evaluate policies and their implementation, such as monitoring systems, impact assessments and indicators, are increasingly also being used to gather information useful in establishing the respective accountability of the different actors responsible for combating poverty. These methods have to be participatory and take into account the views of all, including the poorest. They need to be applied at a sufficiently disaggregated level to expose the impact of poverty reduction measures on the situation of different groups, in particular those most vulnerable and voiceless. Monitoring and assessment are indispensable components of effective accountability schemes.

Organization of the Social Forum

10. The two days of debate will be divided into four themes, focusing on (a) the perspective of the poor; (b) growth with accountability; (c) methods and instruments of accountability; and (d) conclusions and recommendations.

11. In resolution 2004/8 the Sub-Commission requested Mr. Alfredsson, Mr. Bengoa and Ms. Motoc each to prepare working papers to be discussed in the Social Forum. The 2005 Social Forum will also benefit from the deliberations and preliminary conclusions of the Sub-Commission's ad hoc working group on extreme poverty (resolution 2004/7), whose members are invited to participate in the Social Forum and who will also benefit from the discussions.

Draft programme

Opening session

Panel 1 - The perspective of those living in poverty

12. The panel will focus on the participation of the poor in holding accountable those responsible for poverty reduction. This panel will present the views and experience of the poor and of those working with them with regard to their accessibility to policies and programmes, institutions and mechanisms that are seen as necessary to secure the translation of economic growth into the effective reduction of poverty.

13. In their discussions, the panellists will be guided by the following questions:

- What measures and mechanisms are necessary and have proved effective in reducing poverty?
- What are the major obstacles to the poor being informed about these policies and in accessing these mechanisms?
- What is their experience in participating in formulation and evaluation of policies for poverty reduction and the mechanisms to implement such policies?
- How do they perceive the role of development practitioners and human rights advocates as facilitators in their attempts to hold duty bearers accountable?

14. The panel will include representatives of people living in poverty as well as non-governmental organizations working with them.

Panel 2 - Growth with accountability

15. Economic growth is critical for the elimination of poverty and the realization of human rights in general. It provides the necessary resources for implementing the relevant measures to address these goals. However, resources do not automatically translate into improvements in the situation of the chronically disadvantaged and marginalized. Too often the distribution of resources and the opportunities that they support is confined to or concentrated in some groups and areas and does not reach the poor and needy. Such situations usually require better utilization and distribution of the existing resources, rather than additional ones.

16. This panel will discuss how the formulation and implementation of economic growth policies can be reinforced in order to secure pro-human rights growth. The panel will share experiences of both successful and failed attempts to insert accountability mechanisms in processes of policy formulation and implementation. It will analyse the role played by existing mechanisms in ensuring accountability of those responsible for economic growth policies while respecting human rights standards, ensuring that all are treated without discrimination. In their discussions, the panellists will be guided by the following questions:

- What are the basic characteristics of pro-poor economic growth that contributes to the realization of human rights?

- What kinds of processes and mechanisms have contributed to the formulation of policies that have resulted in sustained improvement in the living conditions of the poor?
- What means can be used to improve the accountability of those responsible for the formulation and implementation of policies for addressing poverty reduction and human rights? What kinds of strategies have been successful, for instance, in addressing corruption in the implementation of policies for poverty reduction?
- What policies address violations of human rights committed in the implementation of poverty reduction strategies? For instance, do poverty reduction strategies include policies to provide redress to those whose rights have been affected in the context of development programmes or activities?

17. The panel will comprise experts on economic development policies from United Nations regional economic commissions, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, as well as from national human rights institutions.

Panel 3 - Methods and instruments of accountability

18. This panel will focus on the potential role of human rights monitoring and accountability mechanisms in contributing to economic growth policies that are also pro-human rights. Such mechanisms include parliamentary committees and commissions; national human rights commissions and/or ombudspersons; national courts and tribunals; and the international human rights monitoring mechanisms. Civil society organizations also play a key role in ensuring the human rights accountability of States. New tools are being developed to monitor the impact of policies and programmes on the realization of human rights, such as human rights indicators, human rights impact assessments, both ex ante and ex post, budget analysis from a human rights perspective, and public hearings. This panel will discuss and analyse some of those models and tools with a view to clarifying their contribution in making economic policies more focused on the realization of the human rights of the population.

19. In their discussions, the panellists will be guided by the following questions:

- Under what conditions is political accountability effective in ensuring that economic growth policies have an appropriate impact on poverty reduction?
- What is the role of judicial and quasi-judicial mechanisms vis-à-vis economic policy implementation? What are their limits?
- What have been the successes and challenges of community participation in ensuring greater accountability of economic policy?
- What other tools (impact assessments, indicators, budget analyses, public hearings) have proved to be the most effective in ensuring accountability of economic policies towards the poor?

20. The panel will include a representative of a national parliament, Sub-Commission and civil society representatives.

Panel 4 - Conclusions and recommendations

21. The chairperson of the Social Forum will circulate draft conclusions and recommendations for the consideration of the plenary. Recommendations will focus on suggesting or proposing concrete ways to make progress towards implementing the principle of accountability in the context of poverty reduction strategies that are conducive to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. The report of the Social Forum, containing conclusions and recommendations, will be submitted to the Sub-Commission.
