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and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:
priority theme: promoting empowerment of people in achieving
poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and
decent work for all

Statement submitted by Fédération européenne des centres de recherche et d'information sur le sectarisme, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

Promoting empowerment of victimized cult members

It is important to consider the historic context in which we encounter the phenomenon of cults in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Many idealistic individuals have been recruited by or joined sects, surrendering their autonomy and critical-thinking, decision-making capacities to authoritarian organizations. Cults have a long and documented history of exploitation and abuse of their members, resulting in poverty, unemployment and diminished individual capacities to pursue self-enrichment.

The Fédération européenne des centres de recherche et d'information sur le sectarisme has assisted many families who have been adversely affected by this phenomenon. When encountering a highly motivated community such as a cult, it is important to take into account the unusually talented individuals who direct such organizations. The Fédération has discovered that destructive sects often target the most intelligent and accomplished of society in order to use their potential for the power and wealth of the cult.

In our work, the Fédération assists individuals, families and other organizations in cases where victims of harmful groups need assistance because of a lack of proper education. These destructive organizations deprive their members of adequate information to make genuinely informed decisions. We have observed that totalitarian cult organizations also deprive their members of the resources they need to be truly productive members of society. The right to make informed decisions requires knowing what one's rights are, and how to access them. Our Fédération is committed to alerting individuals, public authorities and international organizations about how to defend themselves and their families from harmful sects. We hope that the Commission for Social Development can join us in our efforts.

Totalitarian cult organizations deprive or systemically deny members access to the options other groups in a free and democratic society take for granted; when informed decisions require information, cults do not provide it. The skills needed to be a productive member of society are rooted in a social structure where freedom of conscience prevails. Physically restrictive, antisocial environments are usually characterized by an isolationist mindset that interferes with the growth that is necessary for choosing a meaningful career path that leads to gainful employment. In order to reach the full potential of human development and eradicate poverty, the restrictive environments, whether physical or mental, that cults impose on their members must be eliminated and members' needs addressed by Government-funded assistance agencies.

The Fédération recommends that government resources be devoted to providing quality education. Informative publications are one of the tools that can be used to alert unsuspecting citizens. In order to be able to choose decent work it is important to recognize what options are available; however, restrictive cult environments interfere with free will and choice. The long and troubling history we have observed demonstrates that the virtual slavery and sexual abuse that take place in cults prevent young cult members from realizing their full potential and healthy social integration. Unfettered access to a quality education and training can aid those victimized by cults and provide a way out of the abject poverty that sects

impose. Sects usually have the resources to provide for the needs of their members. However, these resources are not used for the benefit of the individuals but for the organization and its privileged leaders. Many of these organizations seek tax-exempt status and numerous groups have been successful in obtaining it. These cult organizations receive donations from their members and avoid the taxes that the rest of society pays to obtain the services provided by government agencies funded by taxes.

The empowerment of young people to overcome poverty and secure meaningful employment begins with a quality education. Institutions of higher learning need academic freedom in a free and democratic society. There are groups that infiltrate these institutions and undermine these principles, and students can be vulnerable. The Fédération recommends that students be provided with accurate information to enable them to make proper decisions and exercise sound judgement. This is especially important when sects use cover names or disguise their activities in order to hide their true intentions. It has been observed for decades that students who become involved with cults undergo induced personality changes, suffer academically and financially and become alienated from their family and friends or relationships. They become cut off from support that can assist them in making important decisions. It would help if these previous relationships could be restored; it would help to have qualified, professional assistance and social service agencies with appropriate resources.

The Fédération works with families who are directly impacted by organizations that impose their wills and policies on the downtrodden. It is important to provide humanitarian assistance to those who genuinely need it, which the Fédération seeks to do. The networking capacity of the Commission for Social Development is greater than that of any single organization. It also has the capacity to address critical areas of need that the Millennium Development Goals are designed to overcome. We therefore submit these concerns to the Commission for Social Development for its consideration and the adoption of potential recommendations.

Many genuinely motivated cult members seek a better life but need the tools and resources to recover their futures. The Commission for Social Development can help by providing guidelines and support. We believe that groups that are identified to be in legal violation of local, national or international laws should be named and clearly identified and records of complaints maintained. There should be an annual report documenting complaints received and action taken.
