



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
1 December 2015

Original: English

Commission for Social Development

Fifty-fourth session

3-12 February 2016

Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: rethinking and strengthening social development in the contemporary world

Statement submitted by International Movement ATD Fourth World, 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Rethinking and strengthening social development: A perspective from people living in poverty

Introduction

Rethinking and strengthening social development requires a new transformative approach, and the key element to this transformation is that people living in poverty and those most marginalized and excluded participate in the redefinition of social development. For centuries, people living in poverty have been told what their needs are, what their deprivation looks like, what their problems are, and what the solutions are. But they have never been included in thinking about approaches to development. This statement to the 54th Session of the Commission for Social Development has been written based on a dialogue between people living in poverty in New York and different regions of the world. The dialogue addresses issues such as development, sustainability, poverty, dignity, knowledge, and participation and it takes into account contributions made by heads of states at the Post-2015 Summit. Finally, people reflected about the theme of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty: Building a Sustainable Future: Ending Poverty and Discrimination, a theme that puts sustainability at the core of social development.

To build a sustainable future, our struggle must be recognized.

A man in Latin America explained, “We are making a better planet because we take tons of rubbish out of the dump. For most people, those things are worthless. But for us, as well as making an income, we are doing something for our families and children, for those coming after us. We’re leaving a better planet.”

The group in New York commented: “As people living in poverty clean up the planet for us, they are not only building their future, they are building our future. But this contribution is hardly ever recognized.”

An Irish mother said, “Persistent poverty is the world we were born into. It’s a hard feeling not to be able to climb up the ladder little by little. It’s hard to feel trapped and dependent.”

A mother in New York added, “Everybody who wakes up in the morning has to hustle for a dollar. We just have to hustle more. We are the last ones to get any hand-outs. We got to fight for every dime.” Another shares her experience, “When you are poor, your life, your kids’ life, your family life is not your choice.”

To build a sustainable future, our experience and knowledge must be taken into account.

A group of people in the Republic of Mauritius reminded us how development often works against people living in extreme poverty, not for them: “There is this non-profit that decided to offer us training. It is a good idea, but the point is, ‘Is this training a priority for us just now?’ They would not be able to answer this question because before they wrote the project and raised funds to see it through, they did not come to consult us about it. This project was a good project to start with — it was meant to help us overcome our difficulties — but it became a project that divides

our community and pushes us to do something that we cannot do at the present time; above all, it has belittled our dignity.”

Maladapted social development projects not only fail to help communities, but also actually harm them. Investments frequently fail to reach impoverished people or to provide them with quality healthcare, social protection, housing, or sanitation.

For those rethinking social development at the UN, the group in New York spoke about their personal experience of poverty: “We want to say that we are not poor, we are rich every day even if we are poor every minute, because our mind is thinking: ‘How am I going to feed my family today?’”

The Pope’s message at the Post-2015 Summit resonated with the aspirations of those experiencing poverty: “Absolute minimum has three names: lodging, labour, and land”. As a mother from New York said, “To have a key to a house in our hand means we can start again. There’s sustainability because there is a sense of ownership; when we can go home, we feel good.” In Latin America, a woman said, “If the Government really wanted to help, they could offer a piece of land that is affordable and has basic services, and we would pay instalments on it according to what we can afford.” In New York a mother reacted, “It is like the American Dream. You want to own a home, but it is not affordable, especially for poor people — even if we work hard all our life.”

To build a sustainable future, our rights must be recognized.

In a video from Latin America, a woman said, “I have my dignity. I don’t wait for other people’s crumbs, when as a human being, I can provide for myself, for my home, for my family.” At the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit 2015, during the Interactive Dialogue: Ending Poverty and Hunger, the Head of State of Mali said, “When people give you their crumbs, they don’t acknowledge your dignity.” This message resonated with the experience of a father in New York, “It seems as though the crumbs are not really to insult you, but to subliminally put you in your place. This is what you’re worth. It holds you down.”

The group in New York commented, “People struggling to feed their families don’t wait around to be given what they are entitled to. But if they are cleaning junk, they are identified with junk — even if they are doing what they can to make a better living. None of us lets poverty eat at us. We are all trying to make our way out of it. We don’t accept pity because we are bigger and better than that. We don’t wait for charity. We have heard so many things, but people have to keep their promises. Most of the time, it’s like telling someone who’s homeless. ‘I’ll go get you food,’ and then you leave and you don’t come back. So we rely on each other to build things up from the ground with sweat equity.”

For those who will define poverty, who will plan coverage for basic services and social protection, the words of this man should resonate: “I will not settle for less because I am not less. I will work hard for what I want and I will not take what is decided for me. I will earn what I deserve.”

To build a sustainable future, our voice will have to be heard.

A woman from Guatemala said, “We have to demand that our poverty is not used to manipulate us. We are not only people to give charity to, but people whose opinion has to be sought.”

In New York, the group reacted: “Nobody ever wants to feel like they’re being used, and you never want someone to think that you’re using them. It’s a big thing when people think that poor people are using the system. But people really need help. What we all need for a sustainable environment is not to feel guilty when we need help and always for there to be someone who is willing to help us, whether it is in the community or the government or your best friend. We’re asking because we need it, not because we want to take it from you. A sustainable future, it’s a give and take. A sustainable life is us, giving and receiving. We also believe that if you are on your own, you don’t really have that many chances. The first thing that hurts us is being divided. Everybody is separating, but everybody has to play a part to come together. If we respect one another, if we can see that we’re all human beings, that we’re the same species, that black and white is not a different set of species — that’s why it’s called the human race; we are all one. If we respect one another, we could come to terms with all our problems and fix them. But there’s always this separation: ‘I’m better than you,’ or ‘I make more money than you.’ A sustainable future is all about breaking barriers.”

To conclude, a mother from Ireland said, “What keeps me going day after day? I suppose it’s what is inside, really: it’s self-pride, it’s inner strength, it’s knowing that one day our voice will have to be heard.”
