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**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and
to the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:
priority theme: strategies for the eradication of poverty to
achieve sustainable development for all**

Statement submitted by Sulabh International, 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

“Strategies for the eradication of poverty to achieve sustainable development for all”

Sulabh International Social Service Organisation is a non-governmental organisation founded by sociologist and social reformer Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak. Sulabh has been instrumental in undertaking diverse activities and interventions over the last five decades which have indirectly and directly contributed to the reduction of poverty in India. The fact that India accounts for nearly a seventh of the World’s population and had nearly two-thirds of the population in abject poverty at the time of independence in 1947, strategies to eradicate poverty in India will go a long way to tackle the poverty situation in the world. In absolute terms, Planning Commission of India had in an affidavit in India’s Supreme Court stated in 2011 that nearly 407 million people lived in poverty in India. This was the situation when, India had one of the fastest growing economies in the world with an annual growth rate of nearly 8%. World Bank’s Global Monitoring report stated that nearly 140 million people were lifted out of poverty between 2008 and 2011. Therefore eradication of poverty is a serious challenge in India.

The Government of India has been active with a slew of policy and implementation initiatives to first bring down and then eliminate poverty. From improvement of agriculture, development of industries, legislation to enforce humane working conditions and minimum wages and other social welfare measures to providing for free education and healthcare, the Government has been at the forefront of devising and implementing strategies to reduce poverty. Yet, the challenge is too onerous only for the government to tackle. Governmental Organisation like ours and civil rights groups and philanthropists can play a vital role.

Over the last 46 years our organisation has worked in different areas including the pioneering of two pit pour flush ecological compost toilet technology, construction of schools for underprivileged children, domestic and public toilets, propagation of biogas technology, Sulabh effluent treatment technology, set up Sulabh public school, manufacturing eco-friendly and economic sanitary napkins, vocational training centres, water ATM, Sulabh Purified Drinking Water projects at West Bengal and working with destitute widows of Vrindavan and Varanasi.

While undertaking these activities especially with social groups at the margins of the society, we have seen that a multi-dimensional approach is required to eradicate poverty. Just like the eradication of a dreaded disease such as Tuberculosis or Small Pox, a systemic understanding of the causes of poverty becomes important. Poverty alleviation is not something which can be handled by distributing handouts or government grants. It requires empathy and understanding of the socio-economic situation of the targeted community. Sulabh started to work amongst communities that for centuries we social excluded from the rest of society, perceived as “untouchables”. Being a significant portion of the population, their poverty and pathetic condition became an overall challenge for the fledgling republic. Their condition had exercised the minds of several leaders including Mahatma Gandhi who once said in 1934 “the people of India are ready to face bullets of the British, but are afraid to share food with the untouchables because of the fear of the

Brahmins”. The entrenched prejudices were difficult to remove even after the Constitution abolished untouchability and statutory provisions were made to punish offences of untouchability.

As a volunteer for Bihar Gandhi Centenary Committee in the year 1968, Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak, was entrusted with the task of alleviating the poverty of untouchables, to restore their human rights, dignity and to bring them in the mainstream of society, which was one of the dreams of Mahatma Gandhi. After analysing the situation and undertaking research, he realised that while the condition of the untouchables who functioned as manual scavengers was horrific, they fulfilled a much needed sanitary function in the society. The toilets had to be cleaned and as sewerage was not developed in most cities manual scavengers were employed to empty the excreta and remove it. Dr. Pathak concluded that first an alternative toilet arrangement had to be provided and at the same time alternate work had to be found for the manual scavengers who were not treated with dignity and literally had their petty wages flung to them from afar. These scavengers were paid around three to four dollars a month and were not treated properly. Dr. Pathak’s invention of two pit pour flush ecological compost toilet became an ideal way to replace the old dry latrines. It needed only two litres of water to flush and over time the human waste converted into compost. Popularising it took time but when people realised that open defecation and dry latrines lead to a host of contagious disease and the dreaded cholera wiped out thousands of people, they came forward to switch over to this technology. Our volunteers were involved in explaining the benefits to them. They realised that a healthy life not only kept them productive over time, they also saved money spent on medical treatment. These toilets came to be known as “Sulabh Shauchalaya” or easy to use toilets.

We evolved a five-fold program to restore the human rights and dignity to the “untouchables” and to bring them to the mainstream of the society economically and socially. First, we liberated the untouchables from the work of cleaning human excreta and carrying it in buckets on their heads by converting bucket toilets into Sulabh flush toilets. Secondly, we initiated the institute of “Nai Disha” and started to teach them basic literacy skills. It is said that education is the key to human development and we taught them how to read and write and to operate their bank accounts. We provided the trainees with a cash stipend for three months. During this period we gave them vocational education and trained them in making of papadams, noodles, pickles and in trades relating to tailoring, embroidery, fashion designing, beauty-care etc. Through this training they became empowered and could earn their livelihood and not face economic problems. Their income went for three to four dollars a day to 300 a month.

The next step was to combat social ostracism and to harmoniously integrate them into the society. We helped them to perform all religious rights, visit temples and meet dignitaries like the Prime Minister and the President of the country. While this was being undertaken we set up schools for their children’s education with the next generation seamlessly moving on to various occupations.

Even amongst the manual scavengers, the plight of the women was more desperate and horrific as to them fell the task of carrying the human waste on their heads to the place where they were disposed. For us gender justice and equal opportunities became a creed. Consequently while we have led thousands of people

from drudgery to economic independence, we also have championed the cause of gender justice.

Sulabh has become synonymous with public sanitation in India. We have used sanitation as a tool to organise society into taking a hard look at how it lives. Cleanliness not only in private lives but in public lives and in social spaces helps to reduce epidemics and diseases. Consequently, the poor have more economically active lives and the expenses on medicines are reduced.

Hon'ble Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi gave a clarion call in his first Independence Day address from the ramparts of the Red Fort in 2014 to make India defecation free within five years. This was a humongous task but a lot of ground has been covered. Sulabh was at the forefront of this initiative and it is heartening to see that our concerns have merged with national concerns and programs.

Sulabh has been running Vocational Training Centres for former scavengers and also for slum children. Imparting of scholastic and vocational skills makes them cross over from poverty to a better life. Over the past few years Sulabh has been working amongst the destitute widows in Vrindavan and Varanasi after an intervention of the Supreme Court. Sulabh replicated its methods as with former scavengers. Immediate health and bare necessities were first attended and then they were vocationally trained. From destitute, they are now useful members of the society earning enough to ensure a comfortable life.

A holistic approach needs to be taken for the eradication of poverty to occur. As seen in Sulabh's experience over the year's attention needs to be first given to the circumstances around poverty. The causes have to be understood and addressed gradually. Just as Small Pox and Polio have been eradicated in India, poverty can also be eradicated. However, as with diseases, eradication takes time. Consistent efforts are required to build an entire enabling environment through a network of health, education, town and village planning and social developmental framework in which industrial and service sector can lead job creation initiatives.

On April 13, 2015, former untouchables shared food with Hon'ble Mr. Rajnath Singh, Union Minister for Home Affairs, on the birth anniversary of Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar. The day was celebrated by Sulabh International, which was really motivating as a historic day to mark the practical end of untouchability though it had ceased to exist in theory since 1950. Tears welled up in the eyes of the entire audience as they watched Mrs. Usha Chaumar, a former untouchable and now President of Sulabh International, walk up to the podium to receive the Safaigiri Award for 2015, from the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Mr. Narendra Modi. Earlier in 2015, former untouchables had tied Rakhi on the wrist of Mr. Narendra Modi. The integration of the downtrodden scavengers is now complete and they are equipped to plan and organise their own lives and fulfil their dreams.

Mahatma Gandhi who said: "I may not be born again, but if it happens I will like to be born in a family of scavengers, so that I may relieve them of the inhuman, unhealthy and hateful practice of carrying night soil", and he would have been pleased with the eradication of this hateful practice. What would have pleased him even more would be the fact that they have been given an alternative economic life.

The template of eradication of poverty could therefore be on similar lines. First, the problem areas and causes of poverty would have to be assessed and then

the entire supportive delivery mechanism would have to be built around the target groups.

As we are aware when millions of people are involved, concerted efforts of various agencies both in the government and social and development sectors will be needed a focused program approach is required. Once the causes are identified and the end result envisaged, the road map can be drawn. Sulabh's efforts so far can be used as a pilot on which the entire campaign to eradicate poverty could be modelled nationwide on a larger scale. Such an onerous task will need every citizen to rise to the challenge and help in implementation in mission mode. This will no doubt take a lot of time and effort but we can all wish with the great poet and thinker Rabindranath Tagore: "Into that heaven of freedom, my father let my country awake".
