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and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace
for the twenty-first century”**

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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

Preparing women to lead in community initiatives is one of the most strategic policies to promoting the sustainable development of communities, particularly in regions that are more socially vulnerable. This is what we in the Legion of Good Will have proved while carrying out our work in more than 150 cities across seven countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, Portugal, the United States, and Uruguay).

Over the last five years, we have provided more than 60 million services and benefits for people living in poverty in Brazil. Education and re-education — structured on the basis of ethical, all-encompassing ecumenical, and spiritual values — are pivotal aspects of our social transformation work. In general, the communities assisted lack opportunities in the labour market and have basic public services, specifically in the areas of sanitation, education, and health. These locations have registered high rates of violence and informal employment.

Many of the families are single-parent families headed by women, who have to work twice as hard to guarantee support for their home and also look after their children. With little schooling and low salaries, they spend hours on commute every day, while their children spend long periods of time not being looked after or supervised by adults. In Brazil, these families also suffer from prejudice and racism, since the majority of the women are black, in a country that is still marked by the heritage of more than three centuries of slavery.

All these difficulties pile up and are aggravated in moments of economic crisis. They also increase the number of people who, being deprived of a meaning for their own lives, abandon their homes to live on the streets, become addicted to alcohol and other drugs, and fall victims to depression and other psychological and/or physical illnesses. Our President, the journalist, radio broadcaster, and writer, José de Paiva Netto, has dealt with the topic since the 1980s in the Brazilian media with messages that have had a great repercussion. Among them, the articles “Apartheid there and Apartheid here” and “Roots and memories,” where he states:

“One of the basic reasons for the existence of the Legion of Good Will is its devotion to educating, teaching, and spiritualizing, showing that life does not end in the grave, a truly sad destination. A country whose people are not educated is weak; and a weak country is one that is easily dominated. The more ignorant the people, the greater their bondage. As I have said so many times, Princess Isabel signed the controversial Golden Law [in 1888, which abolished slavery in Brazil], but the spirit of slavery still harms our people, making them, for example, hostages of violence, which roams freely everywhere. We have to grow in teaching, education, and spirituality. Valuing ourselves means keeping people’s self-esteem at the very peak.”

In fact, opposing “people’s self-esteem” with the “spirit of slavery” is one of the nubs of today’s social agenda. It is not all thorns in the slums and “excluded” communities. Social leadership and the existing relationships of solidarity and belonging, plus technological innovation, have consolidated identities and new ways of popular organization and of vocalizing demands for greater citizenship rights. Added to this is the discovery by economic agents of innovative approaches of driving the huge latent potential of these regions.

Legion of Good Will's Solidary Society Network Program

In addition to the macro strategies already mentioned, promoting the progress of vulnerable communities requires effective, short, and medium-term measures, like those provided for in our Solidary Society Network program. It consists, mainly, in identifying and providing technical and administrative advice for community leaders and social organizations in the metropolitan regions, where our social and educational units are located.

Our professionals provide guidance on the country's social development policies and train community leaders in how to mobilize public and private resources on behalf of the communities themselves. Sixty six per cent of the presidents of the entities that take part are women. This percentage rises to 71 per cent when we consider the whole universe of those to whom advice is provided. What these movements mainly demand is access to housing, high-quality education, social protection, and a healthy environment.

Among the most significant results achieved by the program so far are:

- Strengthening and qualifying entities for providing organizational planning, for fundraising, and for the management, monitoring, assessment, supply and execution of social services
- Expanding the general public's knowledge of public policies
- Facilitating access to content, resources, and methodologies related to increasing social participation and strengthening leadership for demanding citizenship rights
- Identifying local potential and mobilizing and organizing groups of leaders by means of creating an articulation between them and public policies

Strengthening community organizations is no substitute for possible affirmative policies aimed at increasing the participation of women in political decision-making processes, but it may help when it comes to implementing such policies to the extent that it empowers the “organic” leaders of these communities. However, these are still considered parallel efforts, as we conclude from the research carried out by Dr. Teresa Sacchet, a researcher at the University of São Paulo, in Brazil, and visiting professor at the University of California in Berkeley, United States, the results of which were published in the paper *Capital social, gênero e representação política no Brasil* [Social capital, gender and political representation in Brazil] (2009):

“... women tend to invest their resources in a more collective way: spending on the family (education, health, and welfare of its members) instead of on themselves. Official government and multilateral development agency programs mainly benefit women and have them as their partners in the implementation of social projects. Without ignoring the strategic importance of these initiatives for women themselves, including for their economic empowerment, it is necessary to ask what is implicit in this discourse and practice. ... Therefore, it is also necessary to implement effective measures to include them in the decision-making processes when social projects are being devised and articulated.”

To make community residents assisted aware of the challenges mentioned above, debates on such issues permeate the actions of our advisory program, namely:

- Training for entity managers and technicians and community and organizational leaders who represent the population being assisted
- Personal guidance for these clients
- The promotion of systematic local and regional meetings between network participants
- The production of multimedia content that socializes surveys in society and among the operators of public policies
- Equipping the entities with a database system for registering users and acts of care and benefits provided, thereby improving the quality of their actions vis-à-vis the population (next phase)
- Organizing public policy seminars

The debate about the realities experienced by community residents covered by the Solidary Society Network program is, in itself, very important, seeing that the population considers many of the social disparities that exist in Brazil today to be “natural”, because they are rooted in current social and cultural practices. Nevertheless, we also perceived the need to create alternative narratives, which is why we adopted an innovative teaching-learning model process that is based on values that are common to different cultures, among which are Love, respect, and Goodwill. This new educational proposal basically covers two segments: the Pedagogy of Affection and the Ecumenical Citizen Pedagogy, which are successfully applied in our teaching network and in the social and educational programs we carry out.

The Pedagogy of Affection is directed at children up to 10 years old. It combines feelings with the children’s cognitive development in such a way that love and affection are present in all knowledge and in the environments surrounding them, including in schools. The next step in the teaching-learning process is the Ecumenical Citizen Pedagogy, aimed at educating teenagers, young people, adults, and the elderly, equipping individuals to live the Ecumenical Citizenship, based on the full exercise of Planetary Solidarity.

We have shared the methodology and promising results of this educational method, which include zero dropout rates and violence-free environments among students, with other public and private educational institutions. This is why we place it at the disposal of organizations and governments that wish to learn more about this teaching proposal and the social and educational programs we apply. They aim to foster a new mentality, which gives rise to innovative cultural and behavioural models, such as was emphasized in 1981 by the creator of this pioneering proposal, educator Paiva Netto, in an interview with Italian journalist living in Brazil, Paulo Parisi Rappoccio, and reaffirmed in a message sent to the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit 2015, held from 25 to 27 September in the United Nations Headquarters in New York, United States:

“Solidarity has expanded itself from the luminous field of ethics presenting itself as a strategy, so that human beings may achieve and guarantee

their own survival. To combat the globalization of poverty, we counterpose the globalization of Fraternity, which spiritualizes and ennobles the Economy and disciplines it in a solidary way, as a strong instrument for reacting to the pseudofatalism of poverty;” and

“Therefore, it is essential to converge all the tools available towards Ecumenical Solidarity and to share them, so that the transition to full sustainable development can be fostered with the utmost urgency. When these instruments that aim for the common good are combined, through the authentic meaning of Fraternal Love and Justice, which distinguishes us from wild animals, we shall be able to put an end to the horrors that still persist in the world. In addition to overcoming all social ills, however long the struggle lasts, it is our duty to build together in unity a new development model that effectively preserves life on this planet.

“The Legion of Good Will, founded almost 66 years ago by Alziro Zarur (1914-1979), has been waging a daily battle against hunger and social inequality in favour of sustainability and education with Ecumenical Spirituality, never forgetting to undertake the Herculean struggle against the lack of Solidarity, Fraternity, Mercy, Generosity, Altruism, and Justice; consequently, the aridity of the Spirit and the heart. The absence of these values directly hinder the favourable outcome of any attempt at a beneficial transformation on Earth. For this reason, it is more than current time to remember the millennial rule taught to us by the philosopher, religious and social activist Jesus, when He offered us these Words of Peace: ‘Love one another as I have loved you. ... There is no greater Love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.’ (The Gospel according to John 13:34 and 15:13)”

In this historic session of the Commission on the Status of Women, which has reached the significant milestone of 60 editions, we applaud all women and men who have done, do, and will do their part in this long journey of struggles and achievements, hereby ratifying our solidary commitment to the eradication of all forms of inequality on the planet.
