

*** HUMAN RIGHTS AND EXTREME POVERTY

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Statement to the United Nations Sub-Commission on the Prevention of
Discrimination and Protection of Minorities

Geneva, Switzerland

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The increasing disparity between the rich and the poor is a major de-stabilizing influence in the world. It produces or exacerbates regional and national conflicts, environmental degradation, crime and violence, and the use of illicit drugs. These consequences of extreme poverty increasingly force themselves on our attention. As the United Nations Secretary-General states in his Agenda for Development, "The effects of deprivation, disease and strife in one part of the globe are felt everywhere." Increasingly we are becoming aware that as members of a single human family, we are all touched in some way by the suffering of every human being. Until that suffering is alleviated, no member of the family can be fully happy or at ease. The Special Rapporteur, Mr. Leandro Despouy, argues persuasively in his report (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1994/19) that "at this juncture the fight against poverty concerns all of humanity."

The Baha'i approach to the problem of extreme poverty is based on the application of spiritual principles. The economic relationships of a society reflect the values of its members. Therefore, to transform those relationships man's character must be transformed. Until justice is valued over greed, the gap between the rich and the poor will continue to widen, and the dream of sustainable economic growth, peace and prosperity will elude our grasp. Sensitizing mankind to the vital role of spiritual values in solving economic problems will, we are convinced, create a new impetus for change.

In his Agenda for Development Mr. Boutros Ghali calls for development with a human face. "Development" he points out, "has to be oriented towards each person in the world" and must recognize a "human community." Indeed, a new economic order can be founded only on a vision of community that is world embracing and on an unshakable conviction of the oneness of mankind. When discussions aimed at solving problems related to extreme poverty are based on the premise that we are one human family, they rapidly expand beyond current economic constructs. They demand a wider context, one which anticipates the emergence of a global system of relationships resting on the principles of equity and justice.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims that everyone is entitled to a standard of living adequate to provide for the health and well-being of

oneself and one's family. Baha'is believe a reordering of economic relationships can make an adequate standard of living universally attainable. The economic system anticipated in the Baha'i Writings, although it will no doubt resemble the present system in many ways, will have significant points of distinction.

Let us take as an example the Baha'i view of income distribution, which allows for differences but would eliminate both extreme wealth and extreme poverty. The accumulation of excessive fortunes by a small number of individuals while the masses are in need is, according to Baha'i teachings, an intolerable injustice. Moderation should, therefore, be established by means of laws and regulations that would limit personal wealth and provide everyone with access to the means for living a dignified life.

The Baha'i writings anticipate the development of communities in which the well-being of every member is the concern of the community as a whole. The center of such a community would include social service institutions which afford relief to the suffering, sustenance to the poor, shelter to the wayfarer, solace to the bereaved, and education to the ignorant. Citing the philosophy of the UNCTAD Permanent Commission to Alleviate Poverty, Mr. Despouy asserts in his report that the "fight against poverty... is in the interest of all, poor and rich, givers and beneficiaries, at a national or an international stage."

Both the responsibility and the right to work are sacred. Idleness and begging have no place in a well-functioning society, while work performed in the spirit of service is elevated to the station of worship. The Special Rapporteur states that "the poorest, in general, in their capacity as citizens, are neither associated to the decision making process nor are they allowed to exercise responsibilities within the community. "This situation is unacceptable, given that a fundamental purpose of life is to contribute to the advancement of civilization. Thus the right to work takes on a spiritual dimension, and the responsibility to be productive applies to everyone.

The belief in the sacredness of work and service profoundly influences the Baha'i approach to social and economic development. Communities are encouraged to identify their own needs and initiate their own projects. These locally initiated projects, many of which focus on alleviating poverty, are based in moral values and encourage service to the community as a whole.

In India, for example, the Vocational Institute for Rural Women in Indore, established by Baha'is in the state of Madhya Pradesh and supported by the national Baha'i community, offers free literacy and vocational training for underprivileged young women in the region. Reaching out to impoverished villages in a wide area, the Institute emphasizes training in locally useful and marketable skills. It has been observed that when the young women return to their villages, they affect their entire community, largely as a result of the moral education they have received at the institute. The acquisition of virtues not only helps them become positive influences on their families and friends,

it makes them better business people. Such moral principles as honesty and trustworthiness are quite practical, in that they are essential for the success of cooperative enterprises.

In Bolivia a project in the Chaco region strives to uplift and empower a long-ignored population of impoverished farmers through an integrated program of technical training, community organization, and spiritual ideas. The goal is to cultivate self-sufficiency through community awareness in order to reduce dependency on outside aid and advice. The Baha'i International Community believes that fostering grass-roots initiative is essential to the elimination of poverty. The concept of uplifting and empowering individuals and communities has both moral and educational implications which demand profound study.

The Baha'i International Community would like to take this opportunity to thank the Special Rapporteur, Mr. Leandro Despouy, for his interim report on human rights and extreme poverty. We hope to contribute to his future studies.

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