

Practitioners' Forum on Human Rights in Development

(Thematic Working Group on Human Rights and Development)

United Nations Conference Centre, Tuesday, 11 March 2003

Integrating Human Rights into Poverty Reduction Strategies

Meeting Report

The UN Thematic Working Group on Human Rights and Development, also known as the Practitioners' Forum on Human Rights in Development, meets quarterly and brings together development practitioners from UN agencies, NGOs and development cooperation agencies.

The Forum explores the relationship between development and human rights, examines the meaning of a rights-based approach and provides space for exchanges of practical experiences on integrating human rights into development programmes.

On 11 March 2003 the Forum focused on the integration of human rights into poverty reduction strategies. The first presentation, by Marie Clare Droz from ATD 4th World, explored the linkages between extreme poverty and human rights and the reality of the living in extreme poverty. The second presentation, by Kristina Hedlund Thulin Regional Human Rights Adviser, Sida, considered a human rights analysis of poverty reduction strategies using Vietnam's Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy as a case study. These presentations were followed by discussion.

Convened by

**United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
Regional Representative for Asia-Pacific**



A. Summary of presentations

1. Human Rights: A Starting Point for Poverty Eradication¹, Marie Clare Droz, Regional Director ATD 4th World

- ATD Fourth World's founder raised the issue of human rights and poverty reduction during the Commission on Human Rights in 1987. This was followed by the appointment of a Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty.
- It is important to look at human rights as the starting point for poverty eradication not just poverty reduction.
- Extreme poverty eliminates all human rights.
- Poverty continues to be viewed primarily as an economic phenomenon.
- A new application of human rights could be achieved by taking the very poor as our partners – as experts in the field of extreme poverty.
- The aim of ATD Fourth World is to enable the very poor to meet the larger society on equal ground.

2. Integrating Human Rights into Poverty Reduction Strategies, Kristina Hedlund Thulin, First Secretary Swedish Embassy and Regional Advisor on Democracy and Human Rights, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency

Human rights are a means to an end as well as an end in themselves. Sida therefore needs to carefully consider how to integrate human rights into poverty reduction. Helpful guides exist: such as OHCHR's draft guidelines on a human rights approach to poverty reduction, Sida's guidelines and those of UNICEF.

In Vietnam, one of Sida's focuses is on human rights and democracy, as a means to achieving the main goal of poverty reduction. Sida has undertaken a human rights analysis of **Vietnam's Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS)** in order to better understand how the government sees its own role of poverty reduction in relation to human rights. This will form the basis of Sweden's own country strategy. Sida asked:

- What does the poverty reduction strategy tell about the country's perception of human rights?
- How are the country's obligations in accordance with human rights reflected in the poverty reduction strategy?
- Is there a political will to respect and implement human rights?

The **process** of developing the CPRGS involved a wide variety of people in Vietnam including the government, and also INGOs and donor governments which can be seen to reflect the serious way in which the Vietnamese government views poverty reduction. Over the past decade Vietnam has had impressive pro-poor growth and indicators show poverty has halved since 1990. The political environment in Vietnam has however remained largely stagnant which begs the question – are civil and political rights really an essential element of poverty reduction?

In relation to **obligations** Vietnam's CPRGS clearly expresses the government's understanding of its responsibility to decrease poverty in Vietnam but it does not go so far as to recognize its legal obligations in regard to the promotion and protection of the human rights that will be essential in ensuring poverty is decreased equally for all.

In analysing the content of a poverty reduction strategy, which **rights** have been mentioned directly or are reflected in the document? There is strong, clear language in

¹ For full text of presentation see Annex I.

the CPRGS on economic, social and cultural rights (education, health, housing). Civil and political rights, and concepts such as empowerment and participation are much less clear. The strategy identifies the need to involve people in grassroots democracy, to provide people with access to the law and to ensure full participation but only at the local level. Rights to information, to association, to assembly and so on, are not included. The implications of rule of law are not discussed.

Non-discrimination is, of course, an essential element of a good poverty reduction strategy. In the case of the CPRGS non-discrimination is discussed in regard to ethnic minorities, women and children, but it does not include equal treatment of many marginalized groups such as the disabled. A human rights approach would have firstly, identified these excluded groups and secondly, presented avenues through which to ensure their empowerment and participation in their own development.

How does the CPRGS **define** what is poverty, who are the poor, what are the root causes of poverty and the role of the poor in poverty reduction? Participation and empowerment of the poor are both considered in the CPRGS but only at a local level. The gaps between rich and poor are raised but the power relationships that exist are not really discussed.

A poverty reduction strategy should deal with **accountability**, particularly in regard to remedies for the poor if the strategy is not implemented or unfairly implemented. In Vietnam's CPRGS many of the essential elements of a sound poverty reduction strategy are present, however the CPRGS does not provide any avenues of recourse to the poor in regard to failed implementation. It is weak on ensuring there is no corruption, impunity or abuse of power.

We need to develop better arguments to convince governments why there is an essential link between poverty reduction and human rights. And we need to be able to respond to the question, are political freedoms really necessary for poverty reduction?

B. Main points of Discussion

1. Added value of a rights-based approach to poverty reduction

- **Locating the marginalised**

A rights based-approach to development helps us to locate and see the extreme poor who have been marginalized from mainstream development for a number of reasons – eg perceptions of ethnicity, disabilities, HIV/AIDs. It therefore assists in ensuring poverty reduction reaches all groups in society, not just the majority.

- **Empowerment**

A rights-based approach is not only about outsiders insisting that governments fulfil their obligations. Especially for NGOs, the rights-based approach is about empowering the poor to demand their rights. A human rights approach to poverty reduction naturally leads to developing **partnerships** with the poor once they are identified.

- **Participation at a local level and beyond**

The strong emphasis of the Vietnam CPRGS on local level participation is potentially positive, even if it does not tackle participation at the national level. Surveys elsewhere have shown that the poor sometimes identify the denial of access to local justice as one of the most serious impacts of poverty, even over and above access to education or health. Local level participation gives the poor some control over the micro decisions that affect their lives. This may then develop to the national level.

- **Sustainability**

If the marginalized poor are left out of poverty reduction strategies and poverty reduction proceeds along an unequal path, the results of poverty reduction in a country will not be sustainable.

One participant, Ryratana Suwanraks (UNDP), described the added value of a rights-based approach in the following way:

Without human rights in poverty reduction strategies we tend to lose some groups of victims. If we do not have a human rights perspective of poverty reduction strategies then we will have a narrower understanding of poverty itself. It is important that we define what poverty is, what is it that we want to reduce, eradicate?

- *If we think of poverty in terms of economic growth only then we do not capture the aspect of income distribution. In Thailand there are villages where we cannot find the extreme poor because they are the people who do not attend community activities. Therefore we need a framework of poverty that helps us locate them.*
- *Structural poverty, such as lack of land rights, people's non-access to health, is causing people to become even poorer. Without a human rights approach sustainable poverty reduction will not develop.*
- *A human rights culture is essential for linking national human rights legislation with the implementation of poverty reduction strategies. Without a human rights culture human rights will never leave the level of rhetoric.*

2. The relationship between civil and political rights and poverty reduction

While the relationship between economic, social and cultural rights is largely accepted within the development community, the role of civil and political rights in poverty reduction is less clear. Can you have sustained poverty reduction without respect for civil and political rights, without a pluralist democracy, if people are not able to participate fully? (The draft OHCHR guidelines need to give more prominence to civil and political rights.)

In one way the question puts the shoe on the wrong foot. There is a danger of focusing exclusively on poverty reduction or eradication. What we should focus on is human development. Poverty is not just income poverty, it is human poverty. Human development includes full control over one's environment, the opportunity to participate in decisions that affect one's life, at all levels, and this cannot be separated from democratic elections at the national and local level. If you look at human development it is indissolubly linked to civil and political rights. However, in the real world it is often a question of sequencing and prioritisation.

3. Are the MDGs enough?

While some human rights and gender dimensions are included in the MDGs and in other development indicators do these indicators go far enough in regard to rights? Groups such as ethnic minorities or the disabled are often excluded from development indicators. How then can we ensure that the elements missing from the MDGs are included in poverty reduction strategies?

4. Clash of rights?: poverty reduction & population controls

Poverty reduction in Vietnam has been associated with a reduction in fertility. The potential inclusion of a one-two child limit in Vietnam's population ordinance is viewed as potentially enhancing poverty reduction. But is this in direct conflict with the right to freely found a family and make choices about the number of children you have?

5. Synergies between rights

The use of a rights based approach to poverty reduction dictates that all four categories of rights, civil, political, economic and social, should be tackled at the same time in order to generate a synergy between rights. This means that you cannot improve on one right whilst impinging on other rights.

In relation to people living with disabilities it has often been the case that economic, social and cultural rights have been addressed – their needs have been met by being institutionalised – whilst their civil and political rights have been ignored. Therefore the simultaneous attainment of rights is important.

6. “Progressive realisation” of rights

Although achieving all rights is necessary for sustainable poverty reduction, governments do not have to do it all at once. They can legitimately prioritise because of resources. However, under human rights law first, governments cannot justify denying one right because they are providing another, secondly, governments must respect the minimum core content of each rights, as defined by UN human rights bodies thirdly, governments cannot implement rights in a discriminatory way and fourthly, they cannot go backwards on the progress they have made.

7. Gradual changes in government attitudes to rights-based approaches

It would be useful to look historically at the current level of acceptance of human rights in the Vietnam CPRGs. What organizations have been advocating a rights-based approach and what successes have they had in getting this accepted and in improving poverty reduction?

8. Importance of rule of law

Without a well functioning legal system, including an independent judiciary, human rights cannot be instituted.

9. Accountability

Poverty reduction strategies frequently fail to include mechanisms of redress in case benchmarks are not met. Accountability of the government to the poor should be an element of every poverty reduction strategy. Accountability means access to legal remedies through the courts, but also accountability through political, representative bodies, through administrative complaints procedures and through the media.

10. Human rights and cultural context

When working with the poor it is essential to recognise the cultural context in which we are working and the local attitudes toward human rights

Human rights celebrates cultural diversity and indeed protects the rights of groups to practice their own cultural traditions. It only seeks to change some traditional practices that are seen as incompatible with basic human rights, such as female genital mutilation and honour killings.

11. Obligations

For every right we have as an individual we also have an obligation to provide that right for our fellow human beings.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the subsequent conventions already set out the obligations of individuals as well as their rights. This was always built into human rights standards by the governments that drafted them. First, we all have civic obligations such as paying taxes. Secondly, some rights such as the rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression are not absolute and can be temporarily suspended in very limited circumstances if they clash with other rights.

But remember that states often use the argument of the individuals obligations to deny respecting people’s human rights.

C. Role of the Practitioners' Forum & future initiatives

1. Future Practitioners' Forum meetings

A consensus appears to be emerging that future gatherings of the Forum should look in more detail at actual projects/programmes that have tried to implement a rights-based approach and draw more generic lessons from such analysis. The Forum will bring practitioners to make presentations from different perspectives on the same theme (eg health, education) and on the same country. This bottom-up approach will be practical and will help to inform the higher policy level. Participants were invited to give OHCHR-Bangkok ideas about subjects for future Fora.

2. RBA Resource Database

OHCHR-Bangkok is developing a database of training and other resources on rights-based approaches. The database, which currently contains approximately 50 resources, primarily contains resources to assist the practical implementation of a rights-based approach in the Asia-Pacific region, including training manuals, programming materials, situation analysis guides, assessment methodologies, and papers on lessons learned. The database also includes some relevant theoretical and policy documents with a global coverage or focus on other regions. Please forward the details of any documents you would like included to Susan Appleyard (appleyard@un.org).

3. E-conferencing

OHCHR-Bangkok is exploring the feasibility of holding e-conferences on specific subjects in-between Forum meetings. This would enable the Forum to involve practitioners that are not based in Bangkok and would help to prepare the physical gatherings. Practitioners were invited to give OHCHR feedback on this proposal.

4. Training

In June 2003 OHCHR will offer a two-day introductory course for ESCAP staff on human rights and the rights-based approach to development. It will be offered to other UN agencies later in the year and is also being offered to UN country teams in the region.

5. Poverty Reduction Draft Guidelines

OHCHR is asking for feedback from ESCAP, UN agencies, NGOs and development cooperation agencies on *OHCHR's draft guidelines: A Human Rights Approach to Poverty Reduction Strategies* (www.unhchr.ch/development/povertyfinal.html). The feedback will help OHCHR-Geneva to amend and refine the guidelines.

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Contribution of ATD Fourth World
 International Movement
 Marie-Claire Droz

International Movement ATD Fourth World

ATD = Aide à Toute Détresse or All Together for Dignity

Founded in 1957 by Fr. Joseph Wresinski a man born into poverty himself, the organization began in an emergency housing camp on the outskirts of Paris by replacing soup kitchens with libraries, dependency by dignity.

ATD Fourth World is not affiliated with any political party or religion. The ideal that unites its members is that of ensuring that every person's human dignity is respected in equal measure. ATD Fourth World's financial resources come mostly from private sources and partly from public funding, both governmental and intergovernmental. ATD Fourth World's greatest resource is the time and creativity donated by its members.

Today, ATD Fourth World's Volunteers Corps runs projects in 26 countries in the 5 continents. It has correspondents in more than 100 countries through the "*Permanent Forum on Extreme Poverty in the World*", which is a network for sharing experiences about fighting poverty.

Human Rights: A Starting Point for Poverty Eradication

Link between human rights and poverty

Once I had read the objectives of the group, I could hardly refuse to contribute to this meeting when Susan invited me. Because the link between human rights and poverty has been a main topic in our organization for many years already and still is.

When Joseph Wresinski, founder of ATD Fourth World, made an intervention at the Commission on HR in Geneva in the year 1987, many members of the commission were struck by the link he made between poverty and HR. Some of them decided to deepen the reflection. In 1992, the Commission requested the Sub-Commission to undertake a study on the question. In 1996, Mr. Leandro Despouy, special rapporteur, presented the Commission with the final report on Human Rights and Extreme Poverty. That was the first study on extreme poverty undertaken by the United Nations from the viewpoint of human rights. ATD Fourth World has contributed a great deal to achieve the report.

One of the reasons why members of the Commission were moved by Joseph Wresinski intervention in 1987, - I think - is because he was talking about a reality, about the life of families he knew well, in a very personal way, having shared their situation for many years; he was speaking of the life of people in extremely difficult situation. They had made him aware of the interdependence of the rights and of their indivisibility.

Since then, it has become more and more common to relate poverty and HR. The poor themselves organize demonstrations to require their rights. The indivisibility and interdependence of the HR are today also widely recognized.

Talking about the poor populations around the world and knowing them

After having rapidly read through the draft guidelines of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights that we received on internet with the agenda of this meeting I thought... well, everything has been said now and well written; so what else could I add?

Then it came to my mind that when Susan called me to decide on a title for my intervention today, she suggested "*HR: starting point for poverty reduction.*" I spontaneously reacted saying not *reduction*, but *eradication*.

I will try to explain now why I think it's so important to talk of eradication and not reduction or alleviation of poverty. Writing and agreeing about the link between poverty and human rights does not yet mean we agree on the people we are talking about, nor does it give the key to implement new ways of dealing with extreme situations. Everybody knows that very well, but I still would like to give an example.

In March last year, at the International Conference on Financing for Development that took place in Monterrey, Mexico – where the primary goals of many world leaders were to address issues of globalization, poverty alleviation and sustainable development – a three meter high wall was built to separate the influential conference participants from a large shantytown that lies on the opposite side of a dried-up river facing the conference center. Ironically, it was at this conference that a key speaker spoke of an imaginary wall that separates the rich from the poor, claiming that “there is no wall. There are not two worlds, there is only one. Here at Monterrey we must rid ourselves of that wall once and for all.”

I had witnessed something very similar here in Bangkok about 10 years ago, when the World Bank and the IMF had a meeting at the Queen's Sirikit Convention Center just after its opening. The whole population of a nearby slum had been relocated in the suburb a few weeks before. And just opposite the Center a corrugated iron wall was put to hide another slum community. In solidarity with the families, some NGOs organized for the children to paint colorful drawings on the wall (I think it can still be seen today).

This kind of situation reminds me of what our founder used to say about the populations living in extreme poverty: **“they are a people deprived on the right to inhabit the earth”**. Traveling in different parts of the world, everywhere he found the same denial of the right of the poorest to inhabit the earth and to exist in the eyes of others: homeless families in major North American cities who had their identity as a family wiped out by being crowded together in welfare hotels, mothers and children on one side, and fathers on the other. Families in Latin America who had fled the countryside to cling to the edge of a ravine near the capital. In some cases, births and deaths were not even recorded, since people should not dwell in these places where no residence was allowed. When tropical rains swept a shack into the abyss, the children in it would have lived and died without ever having existed officially. No one ever heard of what had become the poorest inhabitants of sub-Saharan villages hit by river blindness. Disabled for life, they were temporarily forced into exile with their neighbors onto more arid land, which could not provide enough to feed them.

Not many of us really know about the life of these children here in Asia who earn their own living, beg or steal their subsistence or sometimes that of their entire family. Neither do we know enough about the daily life of the very poor families living in slums, shanty towns, under a bridge, on market places, on car parks, in a cemetery... Do we hear about their courage, their efforts, about their aspirations, the dreams they have for their children's future?

Let me read you part of a recent testimony of a Filipino couple we have known for a few years now and who lives in Manila, under a bridge with their children:

I am Leonardo Gaston and my wife is Bessie Rodelas Gaston. We have 8 children, 6 girls and 2 boys. Five are with us today while the three others are in the province of Roxas in the care of my mother and siblings. My family lives under the bridge of Quirino Avenue. In our place, houses are very small and stuck to each other. Sometimes, we can hardly breathe and the children cannot play because there is not enough space. Despite of all these difficulties, our neighborhood has a strong unity and concern for each other.

Before we got married, my wife worked as a household helper while I was an employee in a small company. Our struggle against poverty started when our house in Pandacan was demolished in 1995. As we were in the province when it happened, we were not able to get the relocation. When we came back we realized that we had lost our house. I also lost my job. Since then and until now I drive a pedicab to earn a living. Because of my meager income I cannot afford to rent a real house for my family. Under the bridge, I am renting a small space for 150 pesos a month. This is all I can afford. I also scavenge during the night to add to my daily income.

At the end of the year 2000, there was the implementation of the anti-littering law in Manila. I was scavenging one evening along the road when the policemen apprehended me and put me in jail. They said that I was littering the garbage. I stayed in jail for three weeks and during this time, my wife and my children begged along the road to get money for their food and to visit me. Thanks to the help of a neighbor and a lawyer who gave his service for free, I was able to get out of the prison.

For all of us who are living a very hard life with almost nothing but a bad shelter in a very poor area, our family is the only wealth we have. It is so important for us to be together in our family, to stay strong and to help each other. For as long as we are together, we do not complain even if we have nothing to eat. The only legacy that we can give our children is to teach them what love and respect mean. Because we do not have the means to buy many things, we show our love to our children by trying our best to send them to school, to guide them, to provide for their essential needs.

Let's face it clearly: extreme poverty cuts out all human rights because it denies the human person. The result is an unbearable waste of human intelligence, inventiveness, hope and love. Men, women and children are banned from all justice, all administration, all communities and all democracy. Behind the silence of our records and our statistics lie children mutilated in their heart and spirit, young people condemned to despair, adults driven to doubt their very humanity and human dignity.

The very poor tell us over and over again that a human being's greatest misfortune is not to be hungry or unable to read, nor even to be without work. The greatest misfortune of all is to know that you count for nothing, to the point where even your suffering is ignored. The worst blow of all is the contempt on the part of your fellow citizens. For it is that contempt which stands between a human being and his rights. It makes the world disdain what you are going through and prevents you from being recognized as worthy and capable of taking on responsibility. The greatest misfortune of extreme poverty is that for your entire existence you are like someone already dead.

Partnership with the poorest families: a huge challenge!

You have realized by now that the families our organization is concerned about and committed to are not "just poor", but extremely poor. Although many nuances have been introduced to describe poverty and extreme poverty in the past years, for the statistics, it is still perceived and described mainly as economic phenomenon. There will be no problem in the year 2015 to demonstrate that 50% of the poor have reached better conditions. But the very poor families we are committed to in different countries might have become even poorer at that time.

It's why we are convinced that a real change has to start from bottom up and not the contrary. Of course, it means a much more difficult process that will also take much longer and require from every member of the society to accept being disturbed in various ways. Yet, it will be for the benefit of all.

A new application of HR could be achieved by taking the very poor as our partners – after all, they are the best experts in the field of extreme poverty. We would then have the chance to re-focus together all our struggle for HR and to ask ourselves the real questions again. For the question is not what economic resources are available for the implementation of our declarations, but whether we believe that every person is worthy of assuming responsibilities for the good of others.

The aim and efforts of ATD Fourth World are to enable the very poor to meet the larger society on equal ground. So that it is no longer a case of the non-poor searching for solutions to extreme poverty, but the reverse, whereby the poor, who had been excluded from society, would work to find a place within it and make their contribution.

Human Rights: a starting point for poverty eradication... the title of my presentation could also read something like:

Eradication of extreme poverty: the only way for every human being to have access to all HR.