



BRAHMA KUMARIS WORLD SPIRITUAL UNIVERSITY

A Better Quality of Life for all People

Statement for the

International Year for the Eradication of Poverty, 1996

It is estimated that over 1.5 billion persons or one quarter of the world's population live in extreme poverty, deprived of the means of fulfilling their material needs of food, clothes, and housing. There is a growing gap between the haves and the have-nots. During the past six years the U.N. has convened a number of specially focused global conferences on poverty and related issues. A consensus has emerged that economic development, social development and environmental protection are an interdependent and mutually reinforcing and together constitute the frame-work of all efforts needed to achieve a higher quality of life for all people. At the core of the consensus is the recognition that the human person is the central subject of development and that people must be at the centre of our actions towards and concerns for sustainable development.

WORLD'S INCREASING POVERTY

The following statements published by the U.N. Department of Public Information defines the extent of the world's increasing poverty:

- 1.5 billion people of the world are desperately poor and the number is increasing by approximately 25 million a year.
- In 1960 the ratio of the 20% of the world's richest to the 20% poorest was 30:1. In 1991 this ratio has increased to 61:1.
- Twenty five percent of the world's population survive on a daily income of less than US\$1.
- In developing countries over 95 million children under the age of 15 work to help their poverty-plagued families while an equal number are homeless, destitute "street children".
- Over 120 million people are officially unemployed and many more are under-employed.
- In developing countries more than a third of the population lives below the poverty threshold.
- The world's poorest 50 countries comprise 20% of the world's population, yet they account for less than 2% of the world's income.
- Despite economic progress in many countries, poverty continues to be a matter of considerable concern, as the trickle-down effects of growth are very slow.

FACES AND FORMS OF POVERTY

Poverty affects individuals and families in every part of the world. It is said that "the faces of poverty are many". The majority of them are the faces of women. In addition, there are faces of children, youth, the disabled and elderly. Poverty also appears in many forms: as endemic mass poverty in the poorest and least developed countries; as sudden impoverishment due to natural or man-made disasters; and temporary poverty due to job lay-offs; or as the persistent long-term poverty of the marginalised, performing menial work for little or no pay.

POVERTY A MULTIDIMENSIONAL PHENOMENON

Poverty is multi-dimensional phenomenon resulting from deeply imbedded structural imbalance in all realms of human existence - the state, the economy, society, culture and the environment. Poverty entails more than the lack of income to cover subsistence needs. People in poverty are deprived of equitable access to markets and institutions and suffer from marginalisation and social exclusion. A power gap keeps people living in poverty, isolated, vulnerable and, unable to escape from their situation.

ERADICATION OF POVERTY

The eradication of poverty requires attacking the various interrelated forces conspiring to keep them in a state of deprivation. It requires among others the following:

People's access to:

- Participation in decision-making and to knowledge.
- Training.
- Markets and Services.
- Resources for income generation such as land, technology, credit and information.

The focus should be on activities that link relief to development, seeking to improve people's capacity for self-reliance by expanding their access to the issues above mentioned and resolutely pursuing the challenges of the eradication of poverty, greater equity in income distribution and human resources development. At the World Summit for Social Development held in Copenhagen in 1995, leaders of 117 nations pledged that their countries would eradicate poverty, promote full employment and foster stable, safe and just societies. The U.N has declared 1996 as the **International Year for the Eradication of Poverty**. At the end of this year the General Assembly will evaluate the progress made by Governments in meeting their commitments. In the meanwhile the Poverty Clock, created by UNDP to illustrate how quickly poverty grows, stands as a stark reminder that deprivation and suffering continue with the number of people living in absolute poverty increasing by nearly 25 million a year.

PROGRAMME OF ACTION AND FOLLOW-UP

The programme of action mainly concerns governments. However, NGOs can collaborate with governments and give invaluable assistance in keeping with their particular specialties towards the success of their programmes. Most governments are faced with over dimensional problems at the present time. Thus the part which can be played by NGOs is a significant factor in the process of the elimination of poverty.

The following areas are some of those in which NGOs can participate:

1. Human Dignity of each person:

- Changing society's perception of the poor.
- Emphasizing and identifying the fact that the poor are also bearers of rich inner resources.
- Promoting self-reliance and self empowerment.

2. A more Just Society:

- Educating everyone towards the consciousness that they must get involved in the search for a more just society.
- Establishing bridges between the rich and poor.

3. Education and Formation:

- Eradicating Discrimination against Women.
- Promoting Education on Values, Rights and Responsibilities.
- Re-building Tradition and Culture.
- Strengthening Human Relations, Family and Unity.
- Showing how Poverty and Greed are 2 sides of the same coin.

4. Creating a Climate and Culture of Peace.

5. Developing a Sense of Belonging.

SPIRITUAL RESPONSE TO POVERTY ERADICATION

The root causes of poverty go beyond material considerations. They become entrenched in issues of attitudes, intellectual development, the recognition of innate qualities of the individual and the means of empowering the community to cope with various problems.

Attitudes are formed by a number of influences, including family background, traditions, religious belief, upbringing, education, environment, job satisfaction and prospects, relationships, health, lifestyle, dietary habits and hobbies. Other factors that determine attitudes are habits, addictions, dependencies, pressures, likes and dislikes, pride and prejudices, . Attitudes determine people's behavior, conduct apprehensions, fears, anxieties, concerns and outlook for the future.

Attitudinal changes are taking place in us all the time through our actions, inter-actions and reactions. Such changes may not however, necessarily be for the better. Forests grow spontaneously but gardens have to be developed. Weeds grow naturally but crops have to be cultivated. Likewise the right type of attitudes have to be consciously cultivated and developed both in the rich and poor towards the eradication of poverty. Attitudes should not be rigid or based on generalisation since there is always scope for change.

The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University is undertaking the following spiritual response to create changes which will be a catalyst in the drive towards the eradication of poverty:

- Positive Thinking Programmes.

- Developing and Sharing Values.
- Inculcation of Abilities and Responsibilities.
- Self-Reliance and Empowerment of the self and community.
- Intellectual Development, Inner Strength and Understanding.

These programmes are conducted in schools, at work places, in prisons, hospitals and other institutions, in family groups and at specially organised seminars, dialogues and conferences. It is too early to make any statement on sweeping changes as these programmes and activities are designed to lay the seeds for long-term changes in attitudes, behaviour and lifestyles. In this regard, they have been shown to help develop an awareness of the inherent worth of all individuals, and, on the basis of this, a vision of brotherhood and the consciousness that all humanity is ultimately one family. This constitutes the foundation for a more equitable sharing of the planets resources, eradicating poverty and ensuring a better quality of life for all people.

Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University

The BKWSU is a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and in consultative status with UNICEF.
The University was founded in India in 1937 and has branches in over 100 countries worldwide.
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