

TWELVE COMMITMENTS ON POVERTY

Introduction

During the 1990s, the system of the United Nations, with the encouragement of the Economic and Social Council, undertook to examine through a number of **World Summits** the full spectrum of priority issues concerning the survival and development of the human race.

This undertaking—which was unprecedented in terms of size, depth and extent of the issues dealt with and the number of subjects involved—engendered a gradual **convergence** of the various points of view held by international organisations, governments, public administrations, NGOs and civil society and, more generally, public opinion as to the nature and characteristics of the problems affecting the planet and the most suitable global strategies for dealing with them.

In all spheres of political intervention taken into consideration during the summit—from protection of the environment to protecting human rights, from fostering women's advancement to social development—**poverty invariably emerged as a central issue**. It emerged as a factor that has a decisive impact on the success of every sectorial action because, with a world population of over 6 billion, it manifests itself in new ways that make it more difficult to comprehend and deal with.

Hence the need, first off, to **summarise the various positions on poverty and social exclusion** that have emerged in the decade that is coming to a close. This paper is meant to be a first step in that process.

Yet, at the same time, we see the need to recognise the leap forward made during these years with regard to understanding the phenomenon of poverty. Thanks to the complex political and institutional process undertaken by the United Nations, we have overcome the once predominant view that the eradication of poverty is a by-product of development. Now the terms of the equation have been inverted, that is, the reduction of poverty is seen as a necessary condition for development.

This "paradigm shift" has led to a healthy shift of the attention of experts and decision-makers from economic and structural dynamics to the **human factor**, giving due weight to the ways in which social actors and individuals organise themselves to deal with poverty and to control the risk of social exclusion.

The political status on the war on poverty has therefore changed. While in the past poverty was seen as a phenomenon that concerned only the poor, it is now recognised as a **threat to society as a whole**, capable of upsetting the structure of communities, countries and the whole world.

This is why we now recognise the need for a true **Pact on Poverty**, for a "New Deal" that will allow us to deal adequately with the issue by placing it in the only context, that, today, appears to be appropriate, to wit, the global context. The twelve commitments set out below should be viewed in this perspective, that is, as an attempt to identify the basic elements on which such a Pact can be founded.

Legend

- AsDB, 1998 = Asian Development Bank, *Annual Report, 1998*.
- BID, 1998 = Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, *The Path out of Poverty*, Washington DC, 1998.
- BIT, 1995 = BIT, *La exclusión social en América Latina*, Lima, 1995.
- DFID, 1997 = Department for International Development, *Eliminating World Poverty: A Challenge for the 21st Century*, London, 1997.
- FAO-FS, 1996 = FAO, *Report of the World Summit, Plan of Action*, Rome, 13-17 November 1996, Rome, 1996.
- ICWD, 1995 = Final Declaration of the International Conference on Women and Development, Beijing, 1995.
- ICPD, 1994 = Final Declaration of the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, 1994.
- HA, 1996 = Habitat Agenda – Final Declaration of the City Summit in Istanbul, 1996.
- WHO, 1992 = World Health Organization, *Réaliser une meilleure santé en Afrique*, Brazzaville, 1992.

- SA, 1995 = Social Agenda – Final Declaration of the Social Summit of Copenhagen, 1995.
- UN, 1996 = UN, Commission for Social Development, *Strategies and Actions for the Eradication of Poverty*, Report of the Secretary-General, 14 May 1996
- UNCSD, 1995 = Commission on Sustainable Development of the United Nations Unite, *Poverty Eradication and Sustainable Development*, Report of the Secretary-General, 20 March 1995.
- UNDP, 1995 = UNDP, *Report on Human Development 6*; Rosenberg & Sellier, June 1995.
- UNDP, 1997 = UNDP, *Report on Human Development 8: Eradication of Poverty*, Rosenberg & Sellier, June 1997.
- UNDP, 1999 = UNDP, *Fighting Poverty*, New York, 1999.
- UNESCO, 1996 = UNESCO, *World Educational Report*, Paris, 1996.
- UNICEF, 1995 = UNICEF, *Report on the Condition of Children in the World*, New York, 1995.
- Vienna 1993 = United Nations, *Vienna Declaration*, Vienna 1993.
- WB, 1993 = World Bank, *The World Bank and the Promotion of Human Rights*, Washington CD, 1993.
- WB, 1996 = World Bank, *Poverty Reduction and the World Bank*, Washington DC, 1996.
- WB, 1997 = World Bank, *Poverty Reduction and the World Bank*, Washington DC, 1997.
- WB, 1997/2 = World Bank, *Business Partners for development*, Washington DC, 1997.
- WB, 1998 = World Bank, *Projet de développement, santé et nutrition (PDSN)*, Aide-mémoire de la mission de supervision 15-27 mars 1998.

Urgent Measures

1.

Provide urgent relief to the most vulnerable groups (WB, 1997) by:

- **eliminating hunger and malnutrition (SA, 1995; FAO-FS, 1996);**
- **providing safe drinking water and suitable sanitation services (SA, 1995, HA, 1996);**
- **providing adequate shelter (HA, 1996).**

Poverty is manifested in a variety of ways. In the case of the most vulnerable groups (that is, the extremely poor), **urgent relief** is needed, especially as regards **primary needs**, such as food of sufficient quality and quantity to avert malnutrition (and under-nutrition) (FAO-FS, 1996; UNCSD, 1995), drinking water, easily accessible sanitation services (that is, in or near lodgings) (AsDB, 1998) and adequate shelter (HA, 1996).

If these **main pillars of relief are not in place**, the extremely poor **will continue to live in such a state of deprivation as to render any project aimed at empowerment or capacity-building pointless**. The poor only contemplate their economic and social emancipation if their basic survival needs are taken care of.

Any **delay in providing urgently needed relief would just prolong suffering that is considered unconscionable today (SA, 1995)**.

2.

Provide the poorest with access to basic healthcare services (BID, 1998; SA, 1995)

Another pillar of relief for the extremely poor is to provide them with **access to basic healthcare services** (SA, 1995). We should note here that the lack of access by the poor, and particularly the extremely poor, is not due solely to inadequate healthcare structures (primary healthcare facilities, medical centres or hospitals) or equipment, but also to the lack of healthcare workers, the inadequacy of their professional training, problems associated with reception, the inadequacy of information and communications systems, the high cost of services (consultation) and medicines, the lack of pre-payment schemes, health insurance, single and social payment schemes (in addition, obviously, to poverty itself, in the sense of lack of resources).

To make healthcare services truly accessible to the poor would therefore require a **comprehensive reform of the healthcare system** (WB, 1998), which in some cases could be a long-term proposition. In the meantime, it is important to implement **urgent measures** such as the universal provision of essential generic medicines (WHO, 1992), expanding vaccination programs (UNICEF, 1995), establishing equipped medical facilities (even mobile ones) in every city and region or province (SA, 1995).

3.

Protect poor children by:

- **providing adequate basic education** (SA, 1995; WB, 1996);
- **protecting the family** (BID, 1998);
- **protecting them against all forms of violence** (WB, 1996).

The protection of children is considered **one of the most important and urgent objectives** of the Social Agenda adopted in Copenhagen in 1996, as in most documents of the UN, the World Bank and other development banks dedicated to development and the fight against poverty.

In particular, these documents identify certain **measures to eliminate the risk that poor children suffer irreparable harm to their mental, physical and intellectual development**, which would further limit their chances of escaping poverty as adults.

Basic educational services include primary school and pre-school. UNICEF (UNICEF, 1995) emphasises early childhood development programs to **reduce the initial disadvantage of poor children** and reduce the probability of failing in school and dropping out.

Protection of the family is considered a key point in the fight against poverty by the Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, given its key role in managing and mitigating the effects of deprivation on its members.

Among the anti-poverty measures considered urgent in the case of children, the World Bank includes **programs to prevent domestic violence** (by educating parents) **and to assist the victims of violence**.

Eradication of Poverty

4.

Improve the understanding of poverty (WB, 1997), focusing on its different manifestations (SA, 1995) in order to aid vulnerable subjects (BID, 1998) in accordance with their real needs (UN, 1996).

The World Bank and the various agencies in the United Nations system have on many occasions underscored that while poverty is an easy phenomenon to grasp in the abstract, in fact it has a **heterogeneous and ambiguous nature** that lends itself to **vague** and somewhat arbitrary definitions. Moreover, poverty has **many definitions** (linked to lack of resources, lack of capacity, social deprivation, etc.) and just as many indices and indicators to quantify it.

This ambiguity has **negative consequences on the operational level**, in formulating policies to combat the various forms of poverty, in identifying their respective targets and in measuring the phenomenon itself.

The Social Agenda adopted in Copenhagen in 1995 (SA, 1995) thus recommends that the different manifestations of poverty be understood adequately. Thus **different situations will require different policies** (from emergency relief to capacity building) to help the various groups of poor people with **measures that are in line with their needs and potential**.

5.

Give back to the poor the ability to control their lives (UNDP, 1997) by:

- **eliminating illiteracy (SA, 1995);**
- **resuming primary and secondary school attendance (UNESCO, 1996);**
- **providing adequate adult education and vocational training programs (SA, 1995);**
- **providing access to available local material and cultural resources (SA, 1995);**
- **promoting participation at all levels (UNDP, 1999).**

Poverty profoundly impairs the ability of groups and individuals to bring about their own deliverance. Poor people encounter sometimes insurmountable obstacles even in exploiting the social and economic opportunities closest at hand. Thus, a program to **empower the poor**—through education, training and the elimination of social and cultural barriers—is a pre-condition to their assumption of an independent and active role in policies aimed at combating poverty.

International agencies (United Nations, World Bank, etc.) have worked to achieve empowerment, mainly by providing universal access to basic education (DFIT, 1997) and by providing the adult poor with specific skills.

6.

Recognise and support the role of women in the fight against poverty (ICWD, 1995)

The Social Agenda (SA, 1995) notes the increasing phenomenon of the “feminization of poverty”. Indeed, it is estimated that approximately three-quarters of the world's poor are women. On the other hand, almost everywhere, **the fight against poverty is led by women** and organised women's group, from income generation to food production, water supply and improving access to services, especially basic healthcare and educational services.

Thus, it is necessary to facilitate women's access to economic resources (including credit), education and training, as well as their access to decision-making processes.

It is also essential to adopt measures to safeguard women from all forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation (ICWD, 1995).

7.

Call public and private, national and international actors present in every country to contribute in the fight against poverty (SA, 1995). These include:

- **central governments and their agencies;**
- **local governments;**
- **NGOs and CBOs;**
- **religious organisations;**
- **enterprises;**
- **universities and research centres;**

- **the media;**
- **unions;**
- **professional associations;**
- **international organisations and bilateral co-operation agencies.**

Defeating poverty is not a task that can be delegated to public actors alone, as was once believed. Economic, technical and cognitive resources that they can marshal fall well short of needs; moreover, public actors lack the technical, organisational and strategic capabilities to deal with such a vast, pervasive and differentiated phenomenon as poverty. For this reason, during the past decade, most of the international agencies, development banks and many governments have instituted **partnership policies** aimed at progressively involving the **active subjects of society**. This strategy is still in its infancy and should therefore be nurtured, yet it has already profoundly altered the planning and implementation of anti-poverty policies.

8.

Bring to the fight against of poverty sufficient economic and financial resources (SA, 1995).

During all the international conferences of the “summit cycle” attention focused on **resources that should be invested in the fight against poverty** and the consensus was that at present they are **quantitatively inadequate** given the extent of the problem (SA, 1995).

In addition to confirming the adoption of measures such as the commitment of 0.7% of GDP for Public Development Assistance and the rescheduling, if not cancellation, of the foreign debt for the poorest countries, summarised in the 20/20 formula (that is, the commitment to devote 20% of international co-operation resources

to social development in exchange for an analogous provision in the national budgets of developing countries), **more resources are indispensable** (SA, 1995). Thus, those mechanisms that encourage citizens and enterprises to fund policies to combat poverty should be strengthened (increasing tax incentives for this purpose, as well as instituting ethical funds and/or issuing international bonds to finance such policies). It is also a good idea to promote an orientation toward social responsibility in the business world, facilitating the involvement of enterprises in policies aimed at combating poverty (World Bank, 1997/2) and, more generally, finding a way for private and collective interests to coincide.

9.

Give a moral, cultural and political foundation to the fight against poverty, treating freedom from poverty as a basic human right (Vienna, 1993).

The final documents of the Vienna World Summit (Vienna, 1993) emphasise that extreme poverty is an impediment to the full and effective enjoyment of human rights. In order to protect such rights, therefore, the international community must consider the immediate reduction and the eventual elimination of poverty as a priority.

Placing the protection of human rights at the foundation of the fight against poverty should stir the conscience of the world, so as to bring about the following:

- * greater and more incisive governmental actions on the national level on behalf of the most vulnerable;
- * the active intervention of civil societies by committing private resources to the fight against poverty;
- * building solidarity among peoples;
- a new commitment to international co-operation.

Prevention

10.

Stop the process of impoverishment by combating social exclusion (BID, 1998).

Any initiative aimed at eradicating poverty will inevitably fail if it is not accompanied by actions to **prevent poverty**. This means focusing not only on today's poor but also on those who, being exposed to serious social, economic and environment risk factors, are on the slippery slope to poverty.

Thus, what is needed is not just a commitment to fight poverty, but to focus attention on the processes of impoverishment or, according to the majority of experts (BIT, 1995; UNDP, 1995; SA, 1995; BID, 1998), on **social exclusion**, without neglecting the economically weak (wage earners, manual labourers, short-term unemployed, the middle classes, artisans and small businesspeople), the socially weak (the elderly living alone, women heads of household, territorially marginalised populations) and the physically weak (the disabled).

This will require the adoption of highly differentiated and flexible policies of a **symptomatic** nature, capable of identifying on a case by case basis the most egregious instances of social exclusion, to discover their interconnections and combat their real and potential effects by, for example, creating jobs, providing access to credit, enterprise building, improving informal habitats, and upgrading transport systems and all public services.

11.

Mitigate the impact on the lives of vulnerable groups of long-term economic, political and social phenomena, such as:

- **foreign debt (SA, 1995);**
- **political and institutional instability (SA, 1995);**
- **economic instability (WB, 1997);**
- **uncontrolled demographic movements (ICPD, 1994);**
- **armed conflicts (BID, 1998);**
- **systematic violations of human rights (Vienna, 1993) and the absence of democracy.**

Certain long-term economic, political and social processes slowly erode the resources of the populations exposed to them with especially negative effects on the vulnerable groups. These include phenomena such as long-term political and institutional instability, which undermine the ability of public institutions to implement effective social policies, and the lack of respect for human rights, which results in discrimination with respect to access to resources. According to the United Nations, phenomena of this type are at the core of the impoverishment of ever broader segments of the population and of the worsening of living conditions of those who are already poor.

12.

Protect vulnerable groups from the effects of environmental, epidemiological, economic and politico-military “shocks” (HA, 1996; BID, 1998).

The process of impoverishment can be triggered not only by long-term phenomena but also by shocks of different kinds and strength that can strike entire populations practically instantaneously, with the most devastating effects on the vulnerable groups. We can distinguish between environmental shocks (such as hurricanes, earthquakes, drought, etc.), health shocks (such as epidemics), economic and financial shocks (such as a stock market crash), and politico-military shocks (such as a coup d'état).

The need to mitigate the effects of shocks, especially as regards the poor, has been underscored by the United Nations and the development banks. It would thus be a sound idea to foster close collaboration between DESA, which is committed to combating poverty, and international institutions set up for emergency interventions, above all to create a world-wide observation network that can co-ordinate poverty policies and anti-shock policies.

CERFE

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