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The United Nations' New Approach to Human Development and Poverty

"Poverty means waking up without perspective. Poverty robs you of your aspirations for the future"

—*Representative of Trinidad and Tobago's Association of NGOs*¹

In 1997, the United Nations Development Program's ("UNDP") *Human Development Report 1997* presented the public with a new perspective on the issue of poverty.² The report introduced and defined the concept of "human poverty" as, the lack of "choices and opportunities most basic to human development — to lead a long, healthy, creative life and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem and the respect of others."³ Traditionally, "income poverty" has always been primarily concerned with notions of consumption and economics. The United Nations ("UN") now recognizes that poverty is not the denial of a single human right, but a wall behind which a number of basic human rights are encased. Some of these basic rights are as obvious as the right to adequate living conditions and education, yet others, which are equally important, represent social, political and cultural concerns.⁴

Opportunities that are essential for human development include basic rights such as political freedom, personal security, and the opportunity to take part in social progress. Consequently, the UNDP has modified its approach to poverty. By recognizing that poverty is one of the many strands in a web of human rights that are often lacking in developing countries, the UN is attacking issues

¹ See UNDP, *Poverty Overview*, available at <http://www.undp.org/poverty/overview> (statement by Representative of Trinidad and Tobago's Association of NGOs).

² See UNDP, *Human Development Report 1997* (1997) [hereinafter *1997 Report*].

³ See UNDP, *Human Development Report: Glossary of Selected Terms*, available at <http://www.undp.org/hdro/hd.htm>. See also Glossary, available at <http://www.undp.org/hdr2000/english/preskil/glossary.pdf>.

⁴ *Id.*

such as poverty with the broader goal of “sustainable human development” in mind.⁵

The UNDP’s main goal is to “achiev[e] sustainable progress [by] recognizing the interdependence between respect for human rights, sustainable development, and democracy.”⁶ The United Nations views “sustainable human development” as the keystone of its plan to promote and maintain worldwide peace and security. Generally, sustainable human development is “development of the people for the people by the people.”⁷ This type of development allows individuals the chance to have an “active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits resulting therefrom.”⁸ Without this, a society cannot experience “universal enjoyment of human rights.”⁹ In order to effectuate their plan, the United Nations parted with the traditional approach to human rights. This approach limited concerns to civil and political issues. Instead, the UN has shifted its perspective to a more holistic approach of the issues, which recognizes social, economic, and cultural rights in addition to those rights encased in the traditional scheme. Consequently, the idea of human rights as an essential part of development was highlighted in the *Human Development Report 2000*.¹⁰

In the year 2000, the United Nations certainly made its presence and its new perspective known in both the Millennium Summit and the Fifty-fifth Millennium Assembly. Each gathering provided an opportunity to evaluate the progress of the various human rights commitments of preceding years. The results were disappointing, at best. The divide between rich and poor is greater now than it has ever been. In fact, “some 40 less developed countries are economically worse off [now] than a decade ago.”¹¹ De-

⁵ *Id.* at 98

⁶ *Integrating Human Rights with sustainable human development*, available at <http://magnet.undp.org/Docs/Policy5.html> [hereinafter “*Integrating Human Rights*”].

⁷ UNDP, *Human Development Report 1993* (1993).

⁸ *Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, U.N. GAOR, 55th Sess., Supp. (No. 36), U.N. Doc. A/55/36 (2000).

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ See UNDP, *Human Development Report 2000* (2000), available at <http://www.undp.org/hdr2000/english/HDR2000.html> [hereinafter *2000 Report*].

¹¹ Warner P. Woodworth, *Third World Economic Empowerment in the New Millennium: Microenterprise, Microentrepreneurship, and Microfinance*, 65 SAM ADVANCED MGMT. J. 1928 (2000). See also James D. Wolfensohn, Building an

spite the depressing conclusions drawn at some of the assemblies, world leaders made a significant amount of progress with regards to recognizing new perspectives from which they could attack the persistent problems that affecting the developing nations.

One important step is recognizing and confronting the effects of globalization on human development around the world. There is no question that within the past few years, globalization and progress have become permanent bedfellows. According to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, the benefits of globalization include, but are not limited to, "faster economic growth, higher living standards, accelerated innovation and diffusion of technology and management skills, [and] new economic opportunities for individuals and countries alike."¹² There is also no doubt that such an occurrence has had fantastic effects on the science, technology, and economies of some nations. Unfortunately, "some" is the operative word.

Despite its advantages, globalization has a vast potential for further marginalizing already weak nations within the context of the international community.¹³ Many of the benefits of the global community are concentrated on a small number of already developed countries. As the words "international" and "domestic" begin to blend together, the poorer nations suffer from increased vulnerability, more severe interdependence among themselves and other nations, economic and social instability, and even challenges to traditional cultural standards and values.¹⁴

In order to mitigate the negative impact of globalization is on poverty-stricken nations, the UNDP has proposed four main focus areas of sustainable human development programming with poverty at the top of the list. Reports have consistently argued that the best way to eradicate poverty is to work to empower the poor and otherwise marginalized elements of society. Through empowerment, the poor can provide for their own basic needs and values.¹⁵

Equitable World, Address to the Board of Governors of the World Bank Group (26 September 2000), available at <http://www.worldbank.org/html/extdr/am00/jdwsp/jdwsp-en.htm>.

¹² Kofi A. Annan, *We the Peoples: The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century*, U.N. Doc. A/54/2000 (2000), available at <http://www.un.org/millennium/sg/report>.

¹³ See *Integrating Human Rights*, *supra* note 6.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ See *UNDP Today: Reform in Action* (April 1998), available at <http://www.undp.org/publications/undp-eng/dpferfor1.htm>.

For example, in Bangladesh, economist Muhammed Yunus has created a “microfinancing” scheme whereby impoverished Bengalis can obtain a small credit line to finance a small business.¹⁶ These “Grameen Banks” have been particularly beneficial to poor rural women who could not normally qualify for a bank loan. Instead of dispersing the loans to one woman, the banks have, instead, given the loans to groups of women who “exert pressure for repayment” on one another.¹⁷ With these loans, poor Bengalis have the once inconceivable option of starting their own businesses and, thus, taking an active role in the economic future of the country.

Because the international community has been increasingly viewing development from a “people-centered” or holistic perspective, development has become inextricably linked to human rights. The UNDP, in fact, approaches its commitment to human rights from three distinct angles.¹⁸ First, the UNDP is committed to establishing the right to development as one of the rights emanating from the numerous multilateral human rights treaty regimes. In this context, the UNDP stresses the utmost importance of poverty eradication through support of the “antipoverty capacity of governments and civil society organizations.”¹⁹ Second, human rights, according to the UNDP, are part of a human-centered sustainable human development scheme. In this regard, all governments must work to enable individuals to realize full human dignity, including human rights — economic, social, cultural, civil, and political.²⁰ Finally, the UNDP stresses the need for legislative, executive, and juridical reformation in all nations, at all levels. Such a change would foster individual participation in democracy nationally and locally and provide secure environments in which human rights are fully realized.²¹ According to the UNDP, this third prong, which is commonly referred to as “good governance,” is the essential “missing link” necessary for positive reform and poverty reduction.²²

¹⁶ See Woodworth, *supra* note 11.

¹⁷ *Id.* See also U.N. ECOSOC, 54th Sess., U.N. Doc. E/CN.17/2000/10 (2000) (discussing the potential for “micro-financing” and joint ventures).

¹⁸ See *Integrating Human Rights*, *supra* note 6 (statement of James Gustave Speth, administrator for the UNDP).

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² See Mark M. Brown, *Address to Expo 2000: Global Dialogue on Fighting Poverty* (25 July 2000), available at <http://www.undp.org/dpa/statements/adminst/2000/july/25july00.html>.

For the past 34 years, the *Group of 77* has represented developing nations in a number of capacities. Established on 15 June 1964, by seventy-seven developing countries, membership has since increased to one hundred and thirty-three countries; the organization, however, has maintained its original name for the purpose of historical influence. Today, the group has chapters in several countries throughout Europe and Africa all with the primary goal of providing a platform for the developing nations of the world from which they may voice their individual or collective economic, cultural, civil, or social concerns. The group also promotes technical cooperation among developing nations.²³

In general, the *Group of 77* has taken a positive stand on the new programs proposed by the United Nations.²⁴ Iran, Lebanon, and Cuba, for example, agree that, in theory, the United Nations is on the right track, but imply that the UN needs to be a little more realistic. All three countries mention at least two obstacles to the full realization of the right to development as outlined by the United Nations.²⁵ Cuba has voiced concerns about the failure of political will among governments, lack of political participation in decision-making at the national level, and the capacity of the states to act as economic agents for themselves due to neo-liberal restructuring of public organizations. The Islamic Republic of Iran is also concerned with the consequences of the implementation of various international economic policies.²⁶

On 5 October 2000, during the thirty-fourth meeting of the Fifty-Fifth Assembly, independent expert on the right to development, Arjun Sengupta, made a statement concerning the policies and theories behind the new reform movement taken on by the UN.²⁷ He declared that the right to development was now officially a human right. He also stated that “[t]he unique component of the [UN or UNDP] plan was that all elements of cooperation were individually tailored to each country’s specific problems, because all

²³ See *What is the Group of 77?*, available at www.g77.org/geninfo/whatis77.html.

²⁴ See *Report of the Secretary-General*, G.A. Resolution 283, U.N. GAOR, 55th Sess., U.N. Doc. A/55/283 (2001).

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ See Fifty-Fifth General Assembly, Third Committee, 34th Meeting (AM), Press Release (25 October 2000), available at <http://www.unhchr.ch/huricane/huri.../1B429DBF9A836A29C1256984002A9057?opendocumen>.

countries had different strengths and needs.” He also stressed that international cooperation was necessary for the new economic plan to succeed.²⁸ The United Nations generally supports Sengupta’s sentiments; the *Group of 77*, however, although optimistic and supportive, remains skeptical.

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²⁸ *Id.*