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## Participation of the poor in civil society

UNESCO and ISSC's CROP organized a Round Table on 'Poverty and Participation in Civil Society' on 7 March 1995, in Copenhagen, during the World Summit. Attended by more than 300 participants, the meeting listened to the presentations made by Dr Francine Fournier, UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Social and Human Sciences; Professor Robert Chambers of the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, England; Professor Elisabeth Jelin of the Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina; Dr Sadig Rasheed of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; and Mr Patricio Aylwin, former President of Chile. Below is given a summary of the discussion at the round table by Professor Else Øyen, Chair of CROP, who also presided the meeting.

**W**ith increasing recognition of the role of civil society in promoting social development, there is emerging consensus on the necessity to enhance the participation of the poor in civil society. A round table to discuss the prospect of such a strategy in various regions of the world was organized on 7 March 1995 during the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen.

Initiating the discussion, Robert Chambers of the University of Sussex argued against the dominant unidimensional stereotype of the poor, and emphasized that the poor live in a world of multiple realities. The poor cannot be treated as a uniform group. Their poverty takes many different forms. The poor are equipped with different resources, because they live in different environments and have to cope with different challenges, and because they use their insights and opportunities to create different survival strategies. In order to make themselves and their families survive under cruel conditions, they have to develop more creative skills than most other people. Many of their survival strategies do not conform with the expectations of the majority society that stamps

the activities of the poor as immoral, unnatural and the like. It is not understood by bureaucrats and policy makers that the accepted strategies for 'survival' in the world of the non-poor are neither useful nor available in the world of the poor. 'The fox has many ideas but the hedgehog has but one big idea.' The poor have to struggle with several survival strategies at the same time, change strategy immediately if new opportunities arise or gateways close, and involve all the members of the household in seeking and finding food, fuel, animal fodder, cash and support in different ways, in different places, at different times of the year. The activities unfold under a high degree of uncertainty.

Had the same dynamic activities been applied in the majority society, they could have been compared to the management of a small firm on the brink of bankruptcy. But these skills of versatility are invisible to the world of the non-poor, and consequently neither put to use, nor appreciated.

The realities of the poor are so different from the realities of the non-poor that time has come to make a choice between the two, said

Chambers. Up to now the realities of the world of the non-poor and their unidimensional images of the poor have dominated thinking and policy-making for the alleviation of poverty. The results have been discouraging. The complex realities of the poor must take precedence if we were really to alleviate poverty. Those realities can only be tapped through direct interaction between poor people and those representatives of the world of the non-poor who are responsible for aid programmes and interventions. Those detached professionals who are moulded by the centre, and trained to look for simple and uniform criteria for distribution of aid, will have to move from the centre to the periphery, from the simple to the complex, and from the uniform to the diverse, and into direct interaction with poor people, if they were to succeed. Only by breaking their own dominance over poor people's lives, and by absorbing the uncertainty of the complex and diversified realities of poor

people, can a new paradigm of understanding develop.

Sadig Rasheed of the Economic Commission for Africa presented a very realistic account of the poverty scene on the African continent. Whatever poverty measurement is applied, they all bear witness to widespread, intense and continued poverty, in particular in sub-Saharan countries. Although foreign aid has been pouring in for many years, both through national and international agencies and through non-governmental organizations, yet poverty has increased. The question can well be raised if the effect of the enormous economic investments had been proportional to the amount of money transferred, if the resources have been sufficient, and if they have been allocated in the most optimal way.

Much of the aid has been given as food supplies. The short term goal has been to remedy direct hunger and famine. But the long



term results of such aid have been detrimental to rural production and subsistence farming.

At the same time, structural adjustment programmes intended to have long term positive effects on the national economy, have had short term negative effects for the rural poor and poverty alleviation programmes, demonstrating the conflict of goals between the interests of the non-poor and the poor. Devaluation, price increases and liberalization of trade and imports have adversely affected the poor. The social programmes introduced to mitigate the impact of the structural adjustment programme have mainly been cosmetic.

But if restructuring of the economy is aimed to alleviate poverty, then the poor – who form the majority of the population – should be empowered to participate in the decisions. Democratic institutions have to be developed in a political landscape which, for a long time, has been authoritarian and repressive. Although the responsibilities do not lie with the foreign aid agencies only, foreign aid should be tailored to the well-functioning of democratic institutions. But foreign aid agencies have a moral responsibility for educating the poor about their democratic rights, convince them of the value and benefits of exercising these rights, and assist them in practising these rights.

An example to bring the non-poor in close contact with the poor is provided by Chile. Despite strong economic growth experienced by that country in recent years, poverty has not declined; the poor could not reap the benefits of economic success. To correct the situation, the Chilean government initiated a project. The first part of the project was to identify the most deprived communities and make them the target for a national concerted effort to reverse the undesirable development. The next step was to form local committees in each of the communities, consisting of top people from

business, politics, voluntary agencies, labour unions, the Church, along with the representatives for the poor. The communities are required to give a complete picture of the intensity and forms of poverty in their area of responsibility, to propose and implement measures and to report to a municipal committee whose members are drawn from the same spheres, but at the municipal level. The municipal committees have the power to initiate measures at their level, survey measures at the lower levels, and to report to a national committee which, aided by a group of independent experts, has the responsibility for proposing measures at the national level.

It is too early to say anything about how this experiment is going to work for the alleviation of poverty and promotion of participation in civil society. A couple of laws have already been proposed concerning the establishment of small businesses. However, an important spin-off of the experiment is that the élite are exposed to poverty and the conditions of the poor. The realities of the poor are being made visible to the non-poor.

In the paper entitled 'Towards a Culture of Participation and Citizenship', Elizabeth Jelin raised basic issues related to the participation of the poor in civil society. 'The sense of belonging and the possibility of interaction lie at the core of humanity. In other words, human society exists when there exists "the other" and a public sphere of interaction.' What does it take to transform a biological being into a human being? Is it enough to provide food and shelter to a person, or is it necessary also to provide a social context where a biological being can be turned into a human being through interaction, participation and development of social and political skills? Can a 'threshold of humanity' be observed when the resourceful refuse the less resourceful access to participation on arenas

The panelists of the UNESCO/CROP Round Table



where such skills are developed and decisions of profound significance for the poor are being made?

The problems of poverty alleviation are, thus, part of a broad moral discourse, tying both the absence of basic guarantees for survival and the denial of citizenship to deprivation of human rights. Maintenance of human rights concerns us all. Those non-poor who refuse human rights to other human beings are violating central norms which democratic societies have to defend if they consider themselves democratic.

Different strategies are employed by those who are excluded from the central arenas to survive in the context of poverty. One strategy is to withdraw into passivity and apathy. Another strategy is to find alternative social spaces and gain a sense of dignity with like-minded people. Another strategy may be the open rejection of the norms of the powerful through violence. Making use of democracy is a much more complicated strategy which implies, among other

things, a sense of social responsibility from people who are excluded from those very social and economic spheres which a social responsibility is supposed to embrace.

The actors in the world of the non-poor have changed. Until the 1970s, the state was at the centre, and political parties, elections and revolutionary wars were the vehicles for change. Now we are witnessing a growth of parallel activities, collective protest movements and international networks, the so-called third sector, composed of non-profit and non-governmental organizations which are ready to intervene on behalf of the poor. Such organizations are becoming spokespersons for the poor and intermediaries between the state and the dispossessed.

The discussion at the round table focused mainly on participation of the poor and touched the concept of civil society only marginally. Several definitions of civil society are available. One of the definitions makes civil society

synonymous with the grassroots, the grassroots being poor people or ordinary people, deprived people represented through NGOs, or people manifesting themselves through social movements. Another definition contrasts civil society from a military society. A third defines it as a society that extends certain social rights to all its members. A fourth regards civil society as that part of a society which runs parallel to the state and state-initiated activities. A fifth considers this provider of public spaces for discussion and dialogue. All these definitions reflect an uncertainty about the role of the state. On the one hand, the state is seen as the best guarantor of poverty alleviation, equity and a fair distribution of resources. On the other hand, the state is mistrusted; neither is it considered to be fair, nor a promoter of better conditions for the poor. Therefore, a need is felt to develop a parallel non-state sector forcing the state to change its course. The state, however, continues to be the most powerful instrument for redistribution in favour of the dispossessed. The foreign aid agencies are called upon to help achieve this goal. The 20:20 proposal at the Social Summit was another attempt to lean on national governments to change their course towards a more humane policy. If the proposal had been accepted it would have had a sizeable impact both on the role of the state in developing countries and on poverty alleviation.

What does participation of the poor mean in concrete terms? On which arenas shall the poor be allowed to participate? With their limited skills and knowledge of the larger society, shall they be allowed to only participate at the micro level of their own local arena? Or shall they be

educated to the norms of the dominant society before they are allowed to participate? In most countries, poor people are formally allowed to vote, but so far it is considered an uninteresting arena, for many reasons. How many resources should be transferred to the poor before they are considered equal partners in decision-making? Do we simply have to acknowledge the fact that within the present social and political system poor people are let into the arenas of the non-poor, only as a token? How far can intermediaries go when speaking on behalf of the poor? Is it enough that non-poor people understand the realities of the poor people and react accordingly? Is a middle course feasible, such as that put forward on the construction of public spaces for dialogue where respect for others is the rule? And how can such public spaces be at the same time incorporated and free of the dominant political system?

Participation of the poor in the important arenas of civil society is a powerful strategy. But it is likely to meet resistance, giving rise to a counter strategy. Therefore, a study of the participation of poor people in civil society should also include a study of the counter-strategies of the non-poor. Poverty research now needs to focus more strongly on the role of the non-poor and their part in creating and sustaining poverty, including that of barring the poor from participating and forming the future civil society.

If the poor are to participate in the world of the non-poor the challenge is to build bridges between the two worlds and to secure a two-way traffic across the bridge.