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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all

Statement submitted by VIVAT International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

The entrenched marginalization and exclusion of certain social groups or classes is one of the greatest hindrances to eradicating poverty, encouraging holistic social inclusion and providing full employment and decent work for all. Social stigmatization — discrimination and exclusion on the basis of such characteristics as gender, age, health, and social class — can take many forms and can be caused by many factors; the resulting social isolation is often damaging on a multitude of levels. The note by the Secretariat entitled “World social situation 2013: inequality matters” (A/68/215), containing an overview of the *Report on the World Social Situation 2013*, highlighted the concern arising from growing inequality and increasing disparities in opportunity between various social groups. In addressing the goal of eradicating poverty through empowerment and social inclusion beyond 2015, the international community must address this concern, focusing particular attention and resources on the most stigmatized in society.

Who are the stigmatized?

Our grass-roots members in India and Indonesia, two countries that have seen alarming growth in social and economic disparities in recent years, work in their day-to-day capacities to help alleviate the suffering and exclusion of stigmatized groups of people in their communities, who are often denied access to formalized social benefits and security. In their experience, our members have found that social groups are often marginalized because of their gender, minority status, health or age.

Women are most commonly cited by our members as the most marginalized group in their local communities. The United Nations has long since recognized the especially vulnerable position of women in the world, drawing particular attention to the need to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women in the Millennium Development Goals adopted nearly 15 years ago. A particularly vulnerable and isolated subset of women with whom many of our members work closely are victims of trafficking and forced migration. These women, some of whom have been sexually as well as physically abused, are often shunned by society because of traditional taboos. The stigma surrounding victims of trafficking, especially sex trafficking, leaves women with few options and bleak futures. The marginalization that results from this stigma shuts victims out of programmes and services, and the resulting spiral into poverty can further reinforce their social exclusion.

Many of our members also work in rural communities that are divided along ethnic and communal lines, where indigenous populations often suffer from deep-seated discrimination and exclusion. The economic, social and political vulnerability of indigenous populations has gained international attention over the past few decades. The current Special Rapporteur of the Human Rights Council on the rights of indigenous peoples, James Anaya, has, for example, documented instances of indigenous people lacking political and social voices in communities affected by the activities of extractive industries. Our members work to address the lack of voice and lack of choice that contribute significantly to the enduring poverty and social exclusion of many indigenous communities.

Health and age are also cited by our members as reasons for social exclusion. Often, people suffering from stigmatized diseases such as HIV/AIDS and leprosy

are ostracized by their own families as well as society at large, leaving them especially vulnerable to poverty, homelessness and joblessness. Our members also cite the growing population of elderly as a group vulnerable to social exclusion owing to their lack of financial means or family ties. The severance of connection to society caused by illness or ageing can severely limit access to social services and opportunities for a more promising future.

Finally, a commonly overlooked subgroup of all these stigmatized individuals — and arguably one of the most vulnerable groups of socially marginalized people — are the children born to members of any socially excluded or stigmatized group. Our members note that children born to indigenous families, to victims of trafficking, or to patients with stigmatized diseases are less likely to have access to the nurturing environments that provide good schooling, health and nutrition, and often have fewer job prospects later in life owing to the lingering stigma by association. Social exclusion, therefore, has a pronounced negative effect on the opportunities of future generations, a serious problem that must be addressed by changing norms, behaviours and attitudes.

Empowering victims of stigmatization

Stigmatization as described above leads to exclusion from society and, consequently, exclusion from State-sponsored benefits and services meant to address chronic poverty. In the State of Odisha, India, for example, people suffering from leprosy are categorically ostracized by society and denied entrance to public hospitals and shelters, severely limiting their access to much-needed basic health care and rehabilitation. A VIVAT International member in Odisha has established a care centre for those living with this stigmatized disease, as well as for their family members who are marginalized by association. The care centre provides immediate care, rehabilitation, shelter, food and schooling for these excluded individuals. With the provision of these basic services, previously ostracized members of the community are empowered to further their education, seek employment and become engaged members of their society.

Similarly, another VIVAT International member in the Raigad district of Maharashtra, India, works closely with the marginalized indigenous population in the district who are denied the right to own land, and are therefore forced to migrate seasonally in search of work and opportunity. Working in partnership with local authorities, members help to provide identity cards and government papers to migrants who would otherwise be excluded from government benefits and services. With an official identity, the indigenous people are able to attend school, seek jobs and begin to integrate into the community.

As demonstrated by our members' work, empowerment and social inclusion to eradicate poverty starts at the grass roots. Local programmes can address the immediate needs of socially excluded groups who are unable to break the cycle of poverty because of circumstance. To ensure that social programmes meant to eradicate poverty are making a maximum impact on all impoverished members of society, States and organizations must work to foster the social inclusion of marginalized groups. Enabling the empowerment of these groups has challenges, particularly in rural and remote regions. Our members' work at the grass roots provides examples of the successes that can be achieved as part of the larger social

development programmes that are needed in the fight to eradicate poverty worldwide.

Recommendations

We urge the international community to focus on the elimination of social exclusion that results from stigmatization in order to empower people to eradicate poverty through social inclusion and decent work for all. Achieving this overarching goal will require immediate, medium-term and long-term efforts.

The immediate goal is to address the critical human rights needs of the socially excluded. Immediate initiatives need to focus on providing basic human services to socially marginalized groups who currently lack access to food, shelter and work. Organizations such as VIVAT International and thousands of other grass-roots non-governmental organizations (NGOs) around the world that are achieving successful results are valuable partners in reaching this goal.

The medium-term goal is to introduce more inclusive social systems around the world. Medium-term initiatives should scale up successful local programmes and prioritize education, access to health services and respect for land rights in order to provide opportunities to marginalized communities by increasing access to State resources.

The long-term goal is to eliminate the stigmatization that leads to the social exclusion of marginalized social groups and classes. Success in this sense can only be achieved by changing social perceptions and norms, encouraging fundamental social integration and acceptance, and raising awareness and understanding among social groups with deeply entrenched attitudes.

Social inclusion can be achieved by eliminating stigmatization and promoting the empowerment of marginalized groups,. Cooperation between State agencies and NGOs in this work, at the local and national levels, can accelerate the ending of poverty.

Note: The statement is endorsed by the following non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Council: Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries, International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd.