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Statement submitted by Casa Generalizia della Societa' del Sacro Cuore and Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries, non-governmental organizations 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Children as Agents of Social Transformation for a Sustainable Future

Introduction

Casa Generalizia della Societa' del Sacro Cuore (also known as Society of the Sacred Heart) and Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries (also known as Medical Mission Sisters), welcome the priority theme "Rethinking and strengthening social development in the contemporary world." Members of Casa Generalizia della Societa' del Sacro Cuore in Latin America have been carrying out our educational mission for over 160 years through formal education and popular education, focusing in general on those on the margins of society, those who are desperately poor and those who are excluded from participation in society. Children living in poverty have our special attention.

Strengthening the Social Pillar of Sustainable Development through Popular Education

The preamble to *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* affirms the dignity and worth of each human person when it states: "We are determined to end poverty and hunger, in all their forms and dimensions, and to ensure that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment" (Preamble). Moreover, it articulates a vision to foster "a world with equitable and universal access to quality education at all levels" (paragraph 7); and to "strive to provide children and youth with a nurturing environment for the full realization of their rights and capabilities" and to promote full participation in society (paragraph 25). Therein, we reaffirm the centrality of education in the work of sustainable development at all levels of society. Yet, there continue to be challenges to sustainable development and to the education of children mainly due to poverty, denial of life of dignity and the ever-increasing disparity in opportunities, wealth and power. The dialectic methodology of Popular Education provides an expansive, inclusive approach to the education of children with proven effectiveness across diverse settings — rural and urban settings as well as formal school settings and informal educational settings. It has helped people climb out of poverty by addressing the root causes of their misery. It is an effective way to strengthen social development.

Children are our present and our future and at the same time represent one of the most vulnerable populations of our world today. They suffer from malnutrition, labour and sexual exploitation, early school departure, illiteracy, drug addiction, discrimination and violence in all its forms. Popular Education strengthens the social dimension of sustainable development by not only viewing children as our future, but rather as proactive agents of social transformation today for the purpose of building a sustainable future which recognizes the contributions, rights and dignity of each person irrespective of gender, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or any other status.

Children's Participation in Popular Education

Through the dialectic process children reflect on their contexts in a critical and deep way to understand the underlying roots of the situation. It is a process fundamentally characterized by equity, respect, solidarity and the common good. In relationship and dialogue they do not merely acquire knowledge; they co-construct it which, in turn, leads them to generate transformative actions in their communities and in society. Education in this form achieves the following in children:

- appreciating and valuing their own cultural identity and the identities of others;
- being capable of seeing their reality through a critical lens that leads to a consciousness and action with a view toward the common good;
- being protagonists in their own learning (discovering, investigating, sharing, debating, analyzing, reflecting);
- participating in the construction of knowledge with their partners through dialogue;
- developing skills and attitudes such as creativity, critical thinking, listening, teamwork;
- enjoying and appreciating what has been discovered and known as part of the history of humankind that they may also discover their valuable heritage; and
- taking a clear and critical position in the face of challenges that present themselves in different areas of their lives.

The tendency in many educational systems is to be content-centred rather than student-centred, and focused on individual acquisition of knowledge rather than co-construction of knowledge with others. This practice may offer some insight into the ongoing challenges to realizing the fullness of human potential and dignity when social systems are issues-centred rather than truly person-centred.

The effectiveness of Popular Education can be illustrated by two examples. Through a variety of creative activities at a learning centre in Mexico, children analysed their own situations as children and created proposals about what they wanted and what they wanted to do to help them to have a happy childhood and a clean organized community. They organized such actions as cleaning the river and meeting with the mayor to ask that the trucks that pick up trash go to their neighbourhoods. The children, ages 11 to 15 years, decided to gather and organize themselves as a group to motivate others. Their objective was to implement actions on behalf of children and to hear their concerns and interests. This group of adolescents are responsible for planning, organizing, implementing and evaluating the children's summer camps, as well. They attend to more than 200 children focusing on such topics as: Care of the environment and children's rights.

In Brazil, children from some public schools visited the federal institute dedicated to innovative technological science, "Instituto Nacional Do seminário" (INSA). The children were inquisitive and asked challenging questions which they jointly formulated to the researchers of the institute. The children positioned themselves with questions about the things they wanted to know. By questioning and researching the children can recognize the possibilities for themselves to be researchers and scientists of the future.

The impact on teachers

The great challenge to implementing the dialectic method of Popular Education rests with helping teachers and all who work with children to “unlearn” the methods and roles they have been taught to assume as the primary actors and drivers in the educational process. The effectiveness of the dialectic methodology requires that one assumes the role of “facilitator” whereby:

- children are valued and respected as actors and protagonists in their own learning;
- genuine value is placed on teamwork, dialogue and respect;
- children are not empty vessels to be filled, but rather come to the learning process with contributions and experiences that can enrich others;
- contexts and surroundings are taken into account;
- all teachers and professionals commit themselves to the same values of dialogue, teamwork, respect, reflection and critical analysis of their practice for continual improvement and mutual support.

Recommendations:

We recommend Member States to:

- implement at the national and local levels the Guiding Principles on human rights and extreme poverty;
- implement at the national and local levels Sustainable Development Goal # 4: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” and the ensuing targets;
- develop and implement nationally designed social protection floors according to ILO Recommendation 202, thus ensuring a minimum standard of living for all, especially children;
- implement Popular Education in public schools and in teacher training from the perspective that through the dialectic methodology children are promoters of their own education and agents of transformation;
- encourage among community leaders a disposition that sees education as an unending process across all contexts;
- review educational policies and practices through the dialectic methodology for the purpose of amending current practices in order to achieve continued improvements in the conditions of people’s lives as well as in educational outcomes.

Conclusion

Popular Education has a track record of transforming the lives of persons living in poverty through participation, inclusiveness and dialogue. The skills children acquire develop into the dispositions they possess as adults. Thus, Popular Education is a dialectic educational methodology that evolves into a way of living and working in the family, community and world. With Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development underway, this methodology holds promise for social development so as to leave no one behind.