

**Commission for Social Development**

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Relevant to the Theme of the Commission

Social Integration

Submitted by the Sisters of Charity Federation, Sisters of Mercy and Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, NGO's in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council.

**Responding to climate change: Striving for inclusive societies in a divided world**

In 2008 at the Helsinki Expert Group Meeting, social integration was generally accepted by the participants as, “the process of promoting the values, relations and institutions that enable all people to participate in social, economic and political life on the basis of equality of rights, equity and dignity”<sup>1</sup>. Based on this view, approaches to achieving social inclusion have taken into account social, cultural, economic and political factors to determine what facilitates and what obstructs movement towards a socially inclusive and cohesive society. Generally unrecognized and unnamed in these approaches, however, are environmental factors, specifically the degradation brought on by human induced climate change, which provides the background for the unfolding global financial and economic crisis<sup>2</sup> and which is now a recognized threat to human security and the sustainability of the Earth community.

**Climate change and social development**

Climate change is considered the defining human development issue of our generation, a cross cutting issue with the potential to obstruct efforts to implement the Millennium Development Goals<sup>3</sup>, for example,

MDG 1 aims to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. However, climate change is:

- expected to change the path and rate of economic growth thus increasing poverty through reduced income opportunities.
- projected to alter regional food security, especially in Africa where food security is expected to worsen.

MDG Goal 2 aims to achieve universal primary education. However, due to climate change:

- loss of livelihood assets, natural disasters and displacement reduces educational opportunities.

MDGs 4, 5, 6 are health related, aiming to combat major diseases, reduce infant mortality and improve maternal health. However, climate change increases:

- heat related mortality and illness.
- the prevalence of vector-borne diseases which especially affect pregnant women and children.<sup>4</sup>

By hampering efforts to deliver on the promise of the MDGs, climate change undermines attempts to eradicate poverty. It leads to a future in which progress in social development, i.e. in health care, nutrition, education and other areas, built up over generations, will be reversed and, the poorest 40% the world's citizens consigned to even greater poverty and diminished opportunity.<sup>5</sup>

### **Climate change and human rights**

On 26 March 2008 the U.N. Human Rights Council adopted by consensus a resolution on human rights and climate change<sup>6</sup>. Co-sponsored by 69 countries, the resolution recognizes that climate change poses an immediate and far-reaching threat to people and communities around the world and has implications for the full enjoyment of human rights.

Indeed, climate change is set to undermine basic human rights on a massive scale, with the rights of vulnerable and marginalized groups particularly at risk,<sup>7</sup> for example:

- Right to Life—survival, security and health (UDHR\* Article 3)
- Right to Sources of Livelihood—food, water, energy, shelter, economic security (UDHR Article 25)
- Right to Participation— decision-making opportunities and information (UDHR Articles 21 and 27)
- Right to Capacity Development—education and income generation opportunities (UDHR Articles 23 and 26)

Thus, climate change is in direct opposition to social integration policies that promote and protect human rights.<sup>8</sup>

\*Universal Declaration of Human Rights

### **Climate change and social cohesion**

Social integration is a process that strengthens the cohesion of societies ...[and]...cohesion increases security in its comprehensive meaning.<sup>9</sup>

While social integration promotes a cohesive society through the inclusion of all, civil conflict interferes with this process, creating conditions that lead to social destabilization.

It is recognized that climate change is not the sole cause of violent conflicts, which may be due to a variety of socio-economic factors, but it does serve as a trigger in the face of scarce resources, such as water or arable land. It may also ignite conflict where resource

competition between local and resettled populations, in the case of climate induced migration, worsens pre-existing ethnic or social tensions.<sup>10</sup>

Besides destabilizing social institutions, civil conflict further degrades Earth's life support systems thus exacerbating the consequences of climate change and adding to the threats to human security brought on by violent conflict. For example, groundwater supplies upon which 1.5 million Palestinians depend for drinking and agriculture are in danger of imminent collapse as a result of protracted conflict in the area.<sup>11</sup>

While there is no consensus that climate change drives violent conflict, it is now identified by nation states as a security concern because of its direct impacts on local institutions in areas challenged by environmental degradation.<sup>12</sup>

It should also be recognized as central to policy making and implementation for socially inclusive and cohesive societies.

### **Climate change and social inclusion**

By undermining attempts to eradicate poverty, violating human rights and destabilizing societies through civil conflict, climate change is a threat to human security.

It renders persons living in poverty even more vulnerable to social, economic and environmental stresses in their societies and less resilient, i.e. less capable of dealing with these stresses and of rising out of the conditions of poverty in which they live.

In this way, climate change and its multiple manifestations exacerbate social inequalities, contributing to the maintenance of social exclusion and serving as an obstacle to the achievement of socially inclusive and cohesive societies.

### **A moral imperative**

There are two constituencies with no political voice especially threatened by climate change, which make action to cope with it a moral imperative:

#### Persons who are living in poverty

This marginalized and excluded group, 70% of whom are women, are on the front lines of climate change, whether in Sudan, Bangladesh, U.S.A (e.g. New Orleans), or Australia. They bear the brunt of its manifestations, for which they are not mainly responsible.

#### Future generations

While persons living in poverty suffer the consequences of climate change today, in the future no one will escape. Our grandchildren, their children and grandchildren, indeed, members of all social groups will have no alternative but to try to adapt to them.

Taking climate change into account in efforts to promote an inclusive and cohesive society, therefore, is not simply a matter of adopting a more comprehensive approach in

the hope of better outcomes to achieving social inclusion, however laudable the goal. It is a matter of social justice and intergenerational equity.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **New thinking**

Climate change is different from other problems facing humanity-it challenges us to think differently at many levels.<sup>13</sup>

Given the impending threat to human security and the sustainability of our Earth community presented by climate change, if we are to move forward in developing and implementing policy for achieving an inclusive and cohesive society, it is necessary, first of all, to recognize the long term predicament which climate change presents and, then, to move beyond a way of thinking limited to socio-economic factors to one that is holistic and integrated.

Such integrated thinking would recognize that:

- we are a part of a socially and ecologically interdependent community.
- there is an interplay between the social and ecological dimensions , e.g. poverty and climate change—one leads to the other in a cyclical fashion.
- climate change has social, economic and environmental impacts , all of which must be addressed in policy making for social inclusion.
- efforts to respond to these impacts, i.e. socially sustainable development and poverty eradication, are mutually supportive goals.

### **Resilient social development**

The reduction of poverty and the eradication of core poverty are central to achieving social integration. Given that the climate crisis is a backdrop to such efforts and the fact that it will increasingly affect the poor, efforts must be made to help people living in poverty adapt to its consequences, i.e. to be less vulnerable and more resilient.

### **RECOMMENDATION 1**

Integrated thinking, as outlined above, should be an overarching principle guiding policy development and implementation by all governments.

### **RECOMMENDATION 2**

Governments should incorporate adaptation to climate change, especially as this applies to education, health services and job creation, into strategies for poverty reduction and eradication. These strategies must aim to reduce the vulnerability of people living in

poverty to current and future risks and to increase the resilience with which they respond to them.

### RECOMMENDATION 3

Governments should build into policy development and implementation an environmental assessment of the policy's impact on current and future generations to ensure resilient and sustainable social development of their peoples.

This statement was written by members of the NGO Committee on Social Development's Working Group on Poverty and Climate Change: International Peace Research Association, Sisters of Charity Federation, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "Draft Summary". Expert Group Meeting On Promoting Social Integration. Helsinki, Finland 8-10 July, 2008, 2.  
[http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/social/meetings/egm6\\_social\\_integration/documents/DRAFT\\_EGM\\_Finland\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/social/meetings/egm6_social_integration/documents/DRAFT_EGM_Finland_Summary.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> "Chairperson's Summary". Commission of Social Development's 47<sup>th</sup> session, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> "Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World". UNDP Human Development Report 2007-2008. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2007-2008/>

<sup>4</sup> "Poverty and Climate Change: Reducing the Vulnerability of the Poor through Adaptation". OECD. [www.oecd.org/dataoecd/60/27/2502872.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/60/27/2502872.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> "Fighting Climate Change...", 2007-2008.

<sup>6</sup> "Human Rights and Climate Change. Resolution 7/23". Human Rights Council 41<sup>st</sup> Meeting. 28 March, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> "Climate Wrongs and Human Rights: Putting people at the heart of climate-change policy". OXFAM Briefing Paper, 2008. [www.oxfam.org/en/policy/bp117-climate-wrongs-and-human-rights](http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/bp117-climate-wrongs-and-human-rights)

<sup>8</sup> "Chairperson's Summary", 2009.

<sup>9</sup> "Chairperson's Summary", 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Wallace, "The security dimension of climate change," in *State of the world: Into a warming world*. A Worldwatch institute report on progress towards a sustainable society. (NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 63 – 66.

<sup>11</sup> "Message of the Secretary General on the international day for preventing the exploitation of the environment in war and armed conflict". 6 November 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Wallace, "Security Dimensions of Climate Change", 63.

<sup>13</sup> Fighting Climate Change..., 2007-2008.

Statement endorsed by the following non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council:

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Baha'i International Community  
Carmelite NGO  
Congregation of Notre Dame  
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd  
Congregations of St. Joseph  
Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants  
Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul  
Dominican Leadership Conference  
International Presentation Association of the Presentation  
Loretto Community  
Salesian Missions  
School Sisters of Notre Dame  
Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries  
The Grail  
Unanima International  
Vivat International