

Civil Society Declaration 2016

*“...we strive for a world that is just, equitable and inclusive...”
~ Rio+20 Outcome Document, The Future We Want*

Eradicating poverty has been recognized as “the greatest global challenge facing the world today.”¹ With constituencies spanning the globe, the NGO Committee for Social Development knows well the magnitude of this challenge. Yet our work with those facing hardship and exclusion on a daily basis highlights a reality that none can afford to forget: if poverty is to be alleviated in any lasting way, inequality must be addressed as well.

Once a taboo subject, inequality and its detriments are being understood with greater clarity every day. One report calculated that the world’s richest 85 individuals controlled as much wealth as the poorest half of humanity.² Another notes that low income countries have mortality rates 17 times higher than that of high income countries.³

Findings such as these clearly demonstrate that while aggregate global productive output has grown significantly over the past century⁴, the benefits of that production have not “trickled down” to large segments of humanity in any systematic or equitable manner. Not only has the gap between the wealthy and the poor widened on numerous fronts, the poor have, in many instances, become even poorer in absolute terms.

Thus it becomes clear that, in many segments of contemporary development discourse, a significant gap remains between theory and reality. A rising tide does not necessarily lift all boats, as had been fondly imagined and frequently argued. Often, it leaves many behind to drown.

The Defining Challenge of Our Time

“The defining challenge of our time,” the Secretary General declared with particular clarity and emphasis, “is to close the gap between our determination to ensure a life of dignity for all on the one hand, and the reality of persisting poverty and deepening inequality on the other.”⁵

¹ [FOR NOW – NEW DOC BY SEPTEMBER] United Nations, Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals, *Proposal of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals*, New York, 19 July 2014

² Oxfam, *Even It Up: Time to End Extreme Inequality*, 2014

³ World Bank 2010d

⁴ It should be noted that extreme poverty fell significantly over the 15 years of the MDGs.

⁵ United Nations Secretary-General, *The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming all Lives and Protecting the Planet*, 4 December 2014

The international community has taken up this challenge head-on in the Post-2015 development agenda. Goal 10 of the SDGs focuses on reducing inequality within and among countries, giving expression to a powerful sense of universalism and global interconnectedness. Its targets must become the object of committed effort and sustained action. Relevant and meaningful indicators must also be developed to guide efforts to build societies of justice and equity.

In pursuing these ambitious goals, the tools which are already at hand to address inequality must be embraced and employed without delay:

- **Participatory economics** provides a means to dramatically expand the pool of those giving input on decisions that affect their lives.
- **Financial transaction taxes** hold the promise to both reduce volatility in global financial markets and generate a stable stream of revenue to support development efforts.
- **Gender equality in decision-making** has been shown to improve outcomes in peace-building, health, education and a range of other areas.
- **Social protection floors** reduce inequality across multiple fronts and support broad-based development through increased capacity and increased social capital.
- **Long term planning and goalsetting** helps prioritize lasting objectives related to people and planet, and put in proper perspective the more transitory imperatives of financial profit.
- **Global citizenship education** provides an indispensable means for not simply rectifying the detriments of inequality, but proactively building a global culture of solidarity, universality, and equality.

A Lens for Action

Inequality is a highly multidimensional phenomenon. Its effects are seen not only in the economic and financial sphere, but in numerous aspects of daily life.

Because its effects are so wide-ranging, inequality can be understood not only as a problem in itself, but also as a context framing virtually all of humanity's most pressing challenges. In this sense, SDG 3 aims to address inequalities of mortality, morbidity, access to medical care, health facilities, and the like. SDG 2 addresses inequalities in food security, availability, and access to nutrition. SDG 16 speaks to inequalities of political representation voice, access to justice, and rule of law. Even the impact of climate change, addressed in SDG 13, varies by both location and vulnerability to shocks and risk, introducing yet another dimension of inequality.

Inequality therefore encapsulates a range of challenges, but its inverse, equality, holds the potential for a range of solutions. In this sense, the establishment of equality can be seen as a lens for framing action on a variety of fronts, bringing coherence and integration to endeavors that might otherwise seem isolated or unrelated. Increasing equitable access to and participation in the goods and services of the global community should become a central focus of development efforts of all kinds.

A Present Emphasis, a Long-standing Commitment

Concern for equality is by no means a recent phenomenon. The 1995 Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development noted that, “We are witnessing in countries throughout the world the expansion of prosperity for some, unfortunately accompanied by an expansion of unspeakable poverty for others. This glaring contradiction is unacceptable and needs to be corrected through urgent actions.”

The concrete commitments contained in that document address a range of inequalities in areas such as poverty, gender, health and education. The Commission for Social Development has been working to advance equality for decades and therefore stands as indispensable mechanism for addressing this most pressing challenge.

We call on the Commission to become a vibrant and dynamic learning community, focused on the generation, application, and diffusion of best practices about addressing inequalities of all kinds. In this way, it can become an indispensable platform supporting transformative progress and the construction of a more just and equal world.

The Primacy of Relationships

Laying the foundations for a more equitable future will require new models of development, prosperity, and economics. To be effective, these models must be shaped by a keen appreciation of the central role relationships play in sustaining human society, whether between humanity and nature, among individuals and communities, within the family, or between individuals and social institutions.

The injustices evident in the current global framework will require more than skillful methodologies and technocratic solutions. Well intentioned as they have been, such “solutions” have so far failed to alter basic inequities in the way the benefits of human endeavor have been distributed. No longer can people of good will be content with the goal of simply providing for basic needs. Only as all individuals are invited to make their contribution to the betterment of society, and only as resources are distributed in a way that permits each to do so, will progress against the age-old spectre of inequality and inequity be possible.