

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Launching the World Day of Social Justice – 10 February 2009



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10 February 2009

Achieving Social Justice for All

President of the General Assembly d'Escoto Brockmann, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

I appreciate the opportunity to speak here today. It is gratifying to help launch the first UN World Day of Social Justice. The last time I visited UN headquarters was on December 10th when we marked the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Indeed there are many links between human rights and social justice. Both highlight the importance of equality, democracy, participation, transparency, accountability and inclusion. And both place the concept of “justice” front and center in efforts to forge a more stable and equitable world.

We might ask: What will yet another global day of awareness really contribute to today’s enormous challenges? How should we best use this moment to catalyze concrete actions that will have tangible impacts on how things are done every other day of the year?

Of course, a central aim of this day for Social Justice is to help re-focus the attention of governments and people everywhere on important commitments which remain unfulfilled. Looking back now, we know the commitments agreed in Copenhagen in 1995 have been sidetracked in the years since.

We should thus use this day in part to highlight the alternatives to the neo-liberal economic approach that has been dominant in many of our institutions of global governance.

Perhaps this day should also serve to remind us that there are many opportunities now for those working in human rights, labor rights, women’s rights and broader social justice movements to join forces, to work in more strategic ways to advance our shared agendas. The truth is we haven’t always done so effectively. But in times like these it is critical that we redouble our efforts to implement labor standards and strengthen realization of human rights more broadly. That requires us to work smarter and harder – but also to work together.

As others have mentioned, the genesis of this day draws on many sources – the World Summit for Social Development in 1995, the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, and the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs, especially its emphasis on developing and implementing strategies that give young people everywhere a real chance to find productive and decent work. It echoes the aspirations of those who

founded the ILO ninety years ago. It also draws on the recommendations of initiatives like the World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization and the Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor, on which I served.

Today we are looking at three core areas identified by the Copenhagen Declaration, namely decent work, social integration and poverty eradication. The World Day of Social Justice gives us an opportunity to mark the importance and the convergence of these concepts, and to take stock of how we can work together at the national and global levels on policy and programs in these areas.

This is needed now more than ever. We find ourselves in the worst financial and economic turmoil since the Great Depression. If there was anyone still doubting, we know now how truly intertwined our economies, our societies and our fates are. We see how quickly a financial crisis can spread and turn into a global jobs crisis, which in turn can pose threats to security and peace. We recognize that the current emergency is set against the seemingly intractable problems of chronic poverty, increasing income inequalities, precarious employment, and environmental degradation.

And we know as well that the economic crisis is layered over the existing food crisis and climate crisis. At the time of the Copenhagen Summit, few were focused on the negative impacts of climate change on development in the poorest countries. But now there is a growing movement around the idea of climate justice - how to address the reality that global warming is being caused by the chosen lifestyles in the developed world, which are undermining the opportunities of the most vulnerable and the poorest. Such an approach provides new framing to bring together those working on environment, development and human rights. Such a justice approach is more respectful and empowering than aid alone, and may finally be coming of age.

I don't want to sound alarmist, but rather am suggesting that this new day of Global Social Justice should be seized to galvanize action and fresh approaches to address our shared responsibilities and solve our shared problems.

I know that other panellists will be speaking from their own personal experience of eradicating poverty through a social justice approach, so let me make some brief comments on the other two themes.

First - the objective of social integration. This was defined at the World Summit for Social Development as the creation of 'a society for all' where all individuals can fully exercise their rights and responsibilities, and contribute to society, on an equal basis with others. This broad aim of including people in decision-making processes and improving access to opportunities for all requires far more efforts at creating solidarity across divides of wealth, ethnicity, gender and so on, and more forceful targets for disadvantaged groups. Advancing a socially inclusive agenda requires better leadership as well, not only by governments, but also by the private sector and civil society. As the Secretary General noted in his report of November 2008, the persistence of social exclusion impedes poverty reduction, economic growth and social development and overall social and economic progress.

My colleagues and I within the Commission on the Legal Empowerment of the Poor saw this firsthand. In some countries up to 85% of the population are completely outside the rule of law, without access to justice, and know very little about their fundamental rights. They live and work in the informal sector where they lack secure land tenure, and in situations where children are not registered at birth - in some LDCs up to 70 per cent of children are without documentary proof of their existence. Just think of the multiple exclusions and risks of exploitation they face as a result. Consider how their lack of legal status can limit access to health care and education and participation in their societies overall. Our Commission's report *Making the Law Work for Everyone* argues that full recognition of legal identity, assured access to the courts, basic

labour protection, the right to own property, and the rule of law to prevent exploitation by the powerful are all vital tools to enable the poor to realize their full potential.

Another approach is taken by the Club of Madrid, an organization of former Heads of State and Government, whose Shared Societies Project calls on leaders to ensure that no-one is excluded from opportunity or left behind in the journey to Participation, Progress and Prosperity. We note that there is no other option – no plan B – if we are to avoid a world continually wracked by identity-based tensions, inter-community divisions, inequality, and injustice. At a time when global financial, food, and energy crises will exacerbate the tendency to seek scapegoats among those different from us, this work is more important than ever.

Let me turn now to the subject of Decent Work. This is a theme my organization Realizing Rights has been working on for some time. It was first put forward by the ILO and since embraced by the UN as a whole. Let's recall that this year is the ILO's 90th anniversary – 90 years of working for social justice. Decent Work takes forward not only the founding aims of the ILO – but also of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in particular Article 23 that guarantees the right to work under "just and favorable conditions", and to "just and favorable remuneration", and the right to form and to join trade unions.

The notion of decent work refines this a bit further by focusing on four integrated themes:

- the importance of governments' adopting economic policies, including fiscal and trade policies, that put employment creation as a central objective
- respect for human rights related to work, including of course the ILO core labor standards
- social protection for all, through, among other things, health insurance and unemployment measures
- and the importance of social dialogue between government, employers, workers and broader civil society.

These aspects of decent work must be expanded for all workers, including those in the informal economy. If the idea of decent work is to have meaning for the majority of the poor, it must include not only salaried and waged workers but all workers and their organizations.

The economic crisis facing us now makes it critical that we emphasize work-related rights, for it is those who are most vulnerable who will be hit hardest. The ILO estimates that unemployment will rise by at least 20 million during the slowdown, and this is on top of the 1.3 billion people who already earn less than US\$2 a day.

The UN has endorsed the objective of "full productive employment and decent work for all" as a basis to shape a fairer globalization. The Decent Work agenda, drawing on the commitments made in Copenhagen, provides a way to take forward economic and social rights at the policy and the company level. Clearly, this approach will inevitably challenge the prevailing global financial and trade architecture whose faults have become so obvious in recent months. But as we've said, now is the time for fresh ideas and for new approaches.

I was glad to have the opportunity of seeing a practical decent work project in Liberia last September, when Realizing Rights and the ILO had joined with the Government of Liberia to host a workshop on decent work. We saw how necessary road construction can embody decent work principles. The basic pay was the same for women and men; health and safety were taken care of; and the training provided maintenance skills which would ensure sustainable employment when the decent work project itself was completed. Talking to some of the women and men it became clear that having this work had given them confidence. "I intend to train to be a nurse," one woman told me.

Organizations like the Self Employed Women's Association of India and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, whose efforts we will be hearing about, work tirelessly to create decent work opportunities that bring their constituents out of poverty and increase their social protection. We need governments to engage more proactively with civil society and with the private sector to achieve success on these fronts.

It is also worth noting that we don't need to invent a social justice approach – we have this already. The challenge is one of reorienting policies and priorities and ensuring effective implementation. We would be wise to look back, for example, at the recommendations of the Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization and the Commission on the Legal Empowerment of the Poor which urged social partners and governments to cooperate on:

- ensuring effective enforcement of a minimum package of labor rights for workers and enterprises in the informal economy that upholds and goes beyond the Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at work;
- improving the quality of labor market institutions to create synergy between the protection and productivity of the poor;
- guaranteeing basic business rights for the poor, including the right to vend, have a workspace, and have access to infrastructure and services;
- promoting inclusive financial services that afford access to much needed capital for all income groups;
- and doing all of these in ways that strengthen gender equality.

Let me also refer briefly to a number of points that were put forward at the Financing for Development meeting in Doha in December during a side event on Decent Work. We identified several factors that can help slow down the impact of the financial crisis on the real economy, and in particular support poor workers: making sure the flow of credit is maintained; preserving minimum wage rates; ensuring that social protection systems are working and extended for unemployment benefits; ensuring that training opportunities are offered and include women and workers at the bottom of the ladder; and starting emergency employment schemes.

Clearly, the challenges are significant and harder still given that many still hold the view that reducing labor rights makes good financial sense. A recent opinion article making this claim in the New York Times has been roundly criticized by none other than The World Bank, whose IFC-funded Better Work programs have proved just the opposite – that countries that respect rights are building up more sustainable growth, development and exports, and that “beggar-thy-neighbour” policies only feed the crisis further.

I would like to sum up by saying that the decent work agenda – and the social justice agenda more broadly – ultimately is not only about achieving a more equitable future, but equally about how best to generate increased productivity and demand. Decent work objectives should be an integral part of any new multilateral framework to reform global economic governance.

I'll conclude here, and look forward to hearing from two individuals who represent some of the best efforts to promote social justice around the world.