

Social Watch Philippines National Consultation

Closing Remarks

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Innotech, Quezon City

Getting Our Act Together

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Representative

Fourth Congressional District of Quezon Province

and

President

Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement

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POVERTY IS A CANCER THAT THREATENS NOT ONLY the individual but also society as a whole. It robs us of our dignity. And as it polarizes society into the haves and have-nots, it tears at the very fabric that binds society. History documents how poverty fanned the flames of unrest and rebellion.

This disease has bedeviled us for many decades now. As we struggle to free ourselves from its clutches, we find our efforts frustrated as we continue to be trapped in its suffocating embrace. The protracted war against poverty has only heightened our frustration and despair. Consider the data provided by the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) and the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS). In 1988, the poverty incidence in the Philippines stood at a high 40.2 percent. The poverty incidence continued to fluctuate but it nevertheless

followed a declining trend. The poverty index of 39.9 percent in 1991 decreased to 35.5 percent in 1994. In 1997, the figure stood at 31.5 percent.

The statistics imply that we have made strides in our poverty alleviation efforts. But if we consider the fact that two in every five Filipino families will languish in poverty, we realize that the decline is hardly impressive. This point becomes more glaring where we compare our poverty alleviation performance with that of neighbor countries. In just a decade or two, our brothers in East Asia were able to reduce absolute poverty by more than half.

As we take stock of the past, we ask ourselves, when will we win our own battle against this affliction? Will it condemn us, as a people and as a nation, to a slow and painful death? To say that poverty is inevitable is an affront to our dignity and insult to our collective intellect. Our fate depends on the choices we make today. We can choose to ignore it. But if we do so, we must heed this warning; like a crumbling heap of garbage, it can bury us alive, literally speaking. Or we may choose to act no.

The Geneva 2000 World Summit on Social Development may well serve as our starting point. The conference was a venue to reaffirm the principles, commitments, and targets agreed upon by the member countries of the United Nations and embodied in the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and Programs of Action. The Philippines was one of several countries that recognized the political, social and moral imperatives of social development and poverty reduction and renewed its commitment to these goals during the Summit. The translation of these pledges to concrete action is the challenge that lies ahead. The ball is now in our court.

Without a doubt, the overriding aspiration of majority of Filipinos remains the improvement of their living conditions. By employing this theme as a platform for political action, the Estrada administration won the mandate to govern. The Geneva conference's main goal of reducing poverty therefore runs parallel to the political commitments of the current regime. The prioritization of the poverty agenda provides a propitious environment for meaningful action. We must not let this opportunity pass. We must shape an enabling policy environment that will ameliorate the country's capacity to meet the WSSD targets.



First, legislative action must be redirected toward answering our social development needs and interest. This will involve giving highest priority to measures that address political, economic, and social inequities. But we must not stop here. We must ensure that these laws are properly implemented. Loopholes in a law heighten the possibility of circumventing it. This defeats the very essence of the law. In such instances, the necessary amendments must be introduced.

Second, the institutional capacity of government in addressing social development problems must be improved. The specific and time-bound targets of WSSD could serve as a reference in the planning and objective setting activities of relevant government line agencies. An important consideration here is the 20:20 initiative where several countries, including the Philippines, reached a consensus to earmark 20 percent of their national budgets and 20 percent of Official Development Assistance (ODA) for human development concerns. This should be institutionalized as a guide for public spending not only at the agency level but also in local government units. This should serve as a litmus test for government's sincerity in alleviating poverty. It should put its money where its mouth is.

Third, attention must be focused at enhancing the coherence and coordination of the various anti-poverty programs of the different government departments and agencies. The existence of various structures that espouse and implement their own policy choices and programs with regard to poverty sometimes only serve to confuse and hinder effective implementation. Defining a common path is difficult in a situation where a plethora of voices lead us in different directions. The immediacy of the problem requires resolute action at the highest levels of government. In light of this matter, it maybe necessary to institutionalize a coordinating body that makes policy recommendations similar to the Economic Coordinating Council (ECC) and which will serve as the organ in charge of supervising the social development and anti-poverty programs of government.

In this connection, let me just inform you that I have filed a resolution in the House of Representatives that takes into account the above-mentioned concerns. Specifically, House Resolution Number 1695 directs the Special Committee on Poverty Alleviation to determine ways and means on the implementation of the 20:20 proposal by focusing on: increasing efficiency and effectiveness of public spending on social



services; ensuring quality and accessibility of such services; and finally, designing an enabling law that will facilitate this initiative. Already, the resolution has borne fruit with the holding of the first in the series of Multi-sectoral Consultative Workshop on the Operationalization of the 20:20 Initiative last August 30, 2000 at the Sulo Hotel.

Finally, let us remember that we in civil society have a critical role to play in the battle against poverty. In this regard, it is paramount that we build bridges and strengthen existing partnerships between government and civil society. Civil society has proven track record in the provision of social goods and in the design and implementation of anti-poverty programs. Government must be able to tap the rich experience of this sector to supplement its own programs. More importantly, it should provide a venue for continuous cooperation and dialogue with civil society. It must institutionalize the representation of this sector in related policy making bodies.

As we come to the end of this occasion, let us make a pledge that we will spare our children from the virulence of poverty. It is time to get our act together.

Thank you very much.

