



INTERNATIONAL
DAY for the
ERADICATION
of POVERTY
17 OCTOBER



United Nations International Day for the Eradication of Poverty 2020

Concept Note

Theme—“Acting together to achieve social and environmental justice for all”

The theme for the Day this year addresses the challenge of achieving social and environmental justice for all. The growing recognition of the multi-dimensionality of poverty means that these two issues are inseparably intertwined, and that social justice cannot be fully realized without aggressively rectifying environmental injustices at the same time. Whereas progress has been made in addressing income poverty, there has been less success in addressing the other important dimensions of poverty, including the rapidly growing impact of the environment, within a more holistic approach.

As the global environmental situation continues to deteriorate, the lack of urgency and focus on repairing and limiting damage to our shared environment is moving humanity relentlessly towards an increasingly poisoned and damaged world. We continue to overexploit, mismanage, and pollute vital natural resources, including land, fresh water and our oceans. Such environmental damage and destruction disproportionately affect the livelihood, food security and health of people living in poverty.

We are losing crucial biodiversity from deforestation, land-use change and other human caused activities, while the inappropriate use of pesticides, heavy metals, plastics and other

substances is causing such compounds to appear in alarmingly high levels in our food supply. Plastic litter, including marine plastic litter, can be found everywhere and microplastics are present in the food we eat, in the water we drink, and in the air we breathe.

Roughly 1.4 million people die each year from preventable diseases, such as diarrhea and intestinal parasites, associated with poor sanitation and lack of access to clean drinking water. Air pollution, from smog in cities to smoke inside the home, poses a major threat to health and kills an estimated seven million people worldwide every year — 9 out of 10 people breathe air containing high levels of pollutants. Most of the disease burden, especially in developing countries, is the consequence of poverty.

Our inability to curb greenhouse gas emissions because of our appalling lack of political will and global solidarity, has steered our planet onto the dangerous path towards irreparable climate change. As global temperatures and sea levels rise in tandem, as oceans acidify and rainfall patterns change for the worse, people living in poverty will be the first and most severely impacted. Millions of people could be plunged further into poverty as climate change and worsening environmental



conditions make it more difficult for them to secure decent livelihoods.

In addition, our already rather tenuous progress towards social and environmental justice has been abruptly disrupted by the devastating coronavirus pandemic which has already infected millions and killed hundreds of thousands. The pandemic has not only changed the way we physically interact, but it has also turned the spotlight on the serious and persistent underlying social and environmental inequities that beset our societies. It has exposed our hesitant and dismal collective efforts in addressing extreme poverty, social inequities, climate change and the environment.

Since the onset of the pandemic, it has been clear that the more fortunate have had more and better opportunities and resources to shield themselves at home from the virus, observe social distancing, practice essential hygiene and enjoy access to adequate medical care. They have also been protected from the worst effects of the economic lockdown by being able to tap social safety nets, extended unemployment benefits as well as access to government handouts, bailouts, and loans.

This contrasts sharply with the situation facing the less fortunate for whom such basic protections are weak or largely absent. People who are homeless and living on the street simply cannot effectively protect themselves from the virus. Families experiencing extreme poverty are forced to live in overcrowded sub-

standard housing with inadequate access to clean water and proper sanitation. Their children lack even the most basic tools, digital access and support to continue their education during periods of lockdown.

Millions of children who no longer receive school meals are going hungry. Sadly, many people living in poverty have no choice but to continue to toil, despite knowing full well they risk exposing themselves and their families to the coronavirus. They have little or no recourse to social safety nets nor qualify for assistance to help them weather the economic hardships caused by the pandemic.

"We lose control of the season and we no longer know when to sow. I spent money to have a little piece of land ploughed. I couldn't sow because it's not raining. We choose to lose only the money spent on weeding instead of losing the seed money on top of it."

Farmer in Haiti

Our misplaced faith in economic systems that value development at any cost, have fostered unsustainable production and consumption patterns which now threaten the health and integrity of the biosphere. We must change course and implement a growth paradigm that incorporates environmental sustainability and social justice at its core. As was evident well before the onset of the global pandemic, our reckless disregard for the health of the natural environment has meant



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that countless families experiencing extreme poverty are now living, working and playing closest to the worst sources of pollution and in the most environmentally degraded and fragile areas.

People living in extreme poverty, often through sheer necessity, are the first to act decisively within their communities in response to poverty, climate change and environmental challenges. However, their efforts and experience often go unnoticed and unappreciated; their ability to contribute positively to solutions has been overlooked; they are not recognized as drivers of change, and their voices are not heard, especially in international bodies.

This must change. The participation, knowledge, contributions and experience of people living in poverty and those left behind must be valued, respected and reflected in our efforts to build an equitable and sustainable world in which there is social and environmental justice for all.

Governments must act decisively—in partnership and in solidarity with people living in poverty—to effectively address the impending global economic downturn that now threatens to erase part of the gains in reducing poverty and stall efforts to fight climate change and environmental degradation. The United Nations' measures to ensure Member States can achieve the SDGs by 2030, including its proposed socio-economic responses to the global pandemic, must be robustly pro-poor

and fully focused on establishing green pathways to recovery.



Celebrated since 1987 as the World Day for Overcoming Extreme Poverty and recognized by the United Nations in 1992, the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty promotes dialogue and understanding between people living in poverty and their communities, and society at large. *"It represents an opportunity to acknowledge the efforts and struggles of people living in poverty, a chance for them to make their concerns heard and a moment to recognize that poor people are in the forefront in the fight against poverty."* (United Nations, Report of the Secretary General, A/61/308, para. 58)

More information about initiatives, events and activities to mark October 17 around the world can be found at: UNDESA website, and overcomingpoverty.org.

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Note: The views in this document do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations or its Member States.