

Commission for Social Development

Fifty-second session

11-21 February 2014

Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:

Priority theme: Promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all

Statement submitted by the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

Statement:

‘Empowerment’ is a concept utilizing multidimensional approaches towards its promotion. Achieving poverty eradication, social integration, full employment and decent work point to persons and communities having attained some degree of empowerment. Duncan Green in his background paper prepared for the Expert Group Meeting 10-11 September 2013 on ‘The Role of the State in Empowering Poor and Excluded Groups and Individuals’ used a definition of empowerment based on Eyben (2011) “Empowerment happens when individuals and organized groups are able to imagine their world differently and to realize that vision by changing the relations of power that have kept them in poverty, restricted their voice and deprived them of their autonomy.” The reason Duncan Green chooses this definition is that it places the issue of empowerment squarely in the minds and hearts of persons and communities living in poverty, seeking a proper balance between enhancing their own sense of agency and making the structural changes to institution and policies that are needed for emancipation. The definition stresses the centrality of “power” to empowerment.

Situation

This statement presents a good practice in empowerment. Good Shepherd Sisters in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) work in a project site adjacent to Kolwezi. The site is situated in the copper belt containing world class resources of copper, cobalt, zinc and uranium. The communities in the area developed as a result of economic migration in response to labour demand from the mines and were never part of an urban planning system. These people lack much needed services and infrastructure. Poverty, social unrest and lack of opportunities for decent work characterize the life of these communities. People are victims of human rights abuses, forced displacement, ill-treatment, harassment, extortion and violence as mining concession are awarded to international companies. Extreme poverty, hunger and competition lead to conflict and tensions in the communities which are further fueled by alcohol and drug abuse. The multi-ethnic composition of the communities also plays a part in exacerbating division and social disintegration.

The most vulnerable groups are women, girls and children. Gender inequalities are rooted in traditional attitudes and practices as well as stemming from policies and legislation that reinforce gender discrimination. This vulnerability is compounded by discriminatory clauses in legislation which uphold marital subjugation and traditions such as early marriage and polygamy. Women are also less likely to participate in the labour force than men because they must have male spouse permission to do so. Furthermore, girls are less likely than boys to be enrolled in school at all ages.

There is overwhelming acceptance of violence against women by both women and men in the community. Even adolescent girls agreed that there are times when a woman deserves to be beaten. The forms of violence experienced in intimate partnerships include psychological and physical violence as well as forced sexual intercourse. Concomitant to an overall tolerance of violence is a general lack of disclosure or discussion about violence in the community. The culture of economic dependence on men and lack of ownership rights leave women and girls vulnerable to sexual and gender based violence. Many are forced to engage in survival tactics that include sex work, which opens them to the risk of HIV and AIDS.

Research

The Sisters of the Good Shepherd conducted research using two complementary methodological tools: a participatory approach that involved public administration, civil society, private sector operators and the community in Kolewzi and a community based participatory research component, interviewing women, girls, and child victims of violence and abuse. The research also took account of the Government Poverty Reduction Growth Strategic Proposal, the Country Assistance Framework of DRC's development partners and the programmes of local partners in and around Kolwezi.

Initial Outcomes:

Undertaking the initial project assessment served as a catalyst for collective community dialogue and the beginnings of 'empowerment' as individuals and communities began to imagine their world differently. 'Power within', the first of a 'three powers' model presented by Duncan Green in his paper began to be experienced. Using the methodological tools – focus group discussion, life history interviews through home visits, key informants interviews, participatory rural appraisal, mapping exercises, structured interviews and interviews with key stakeholders including government - released the emergence of 'power within'. A sense of right, dignity and voice emerged through the sensitive and ethical way in which the assessment was undertaken and the interpersonal skills of the interviewers. The World Health Organization's (WHO) Ethical and Safety Guidelines for Researching Domestic Violence against Women was used as guiding principles.

How do poor and excluded groups and individuals acquire power and the ability to exercise it? Duncan Green in his article writes “power is best seen as an invisible force linking individuals and actors, in a state of constant flux and renegotiation. Empowerment of excluded groups and individuals involves linkages and the redistribution of that power, so that it accumulates in the hands of women and men, girls and boys living in poverty.”

The community has begun the process of moving from power within to ‘power to’ which is the second of the ‘three powers’ model. The experience of ‘power within’ has ignited hope and capacity to imagine differently. This is evidenced in the actions already taking place in the community. Up to 600 children are presenting for informal education, talking about child rights and self-reporting on issues of child protection. The communities are discussing alternative livelihood in agriculture and animal husbandry to ensure food security. Women and girls’ groups are breaking the silence around gender based discrimination and violence including sexual violence. People in the communities are coming together and opening up the possibilities of joint actions towards poverty eradication, social inclusion and decent work. The experience of a sense of personhood, dignity and respect is affirming people’s desire and capacity to act creatively together.

Moving from ‘power to’ to ‘power with’ the third of the ‘three powers’ model presents a formidable challenge as it requires government and mining companies, together with the community, to find common ground among different interests and build collective strength. Discussing, negotiating and implementing ways forward to fulfill all human rights, address poverty eradication and decent work is central to the agenda. The process is initiating. It promises to be a holistic process addressing the multidimensional aspects of poverty simultaneously in dialogues of mutual listening and respect. The tiny beginnings of ‘power with’ released in the research process are continuing to develop. Discussions are taking place as to how to influence the mine operators and government for implementation of already existing laws. The project outputs include ‘decreasing gender discrimination through social, political and economic empowerment of women and girls and strengthening cohesive citizenship in order to engage government for equitable distribution of resources and accountability of mining companies.’

Recommendations:

We call on Governments to

Ensure legal empowerment of person living in poverty A/C.2/64/L.4/Rev.2

Use the Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights adopted by the Human Rights Council A/HRC/21/39 in September 2012 and the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights endorsed by the Human Right Council in its resolution A/HCR17/4 of 16 June 2011.

Implement National Floors of Social Protection - International Labour Organization (ILO) Recommendation 202

Regulate the powers of international mining companies through legally binding mechanisms such that human rights, dignity, safety and decent work are provided to citizens.

Complete the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 as committed to in the Outcome Document adopted by Member States on September 25, 2013

Implement Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) recommendation on gender equality.

Allocate resources towards making the change.

Any one of the recommendations seriously adopted by national governments in moving forward can create a ripple effect pioneering good practice and bringing about significant advancement in empowering persons and communities living in poverty. Have governments the political will and determination to enter into the dialogue with citizens in 'power with' and 'power to' making the structural changes to institutions and policies that promote empowerment of people?

Endorsed by:

Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul; Congregation of Our Lady of Mount Carmel/ Carmelite NGO; Dominican Leadership Conference; International Federation on Ageing; International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary; Passionists International; Salesian Missions, Inc.; Salvation Army, The; The International Confederation of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul; The Sisters of Charity Federation; UNANIMA International; VIVAT International.

