

Beau Bassin, Mauritius,
December 31, 2014

Fighting Poverty: Challenges for the Post-2015 Agenda

At the moment when, around the globe, we are preparing to welcome in the new year — some in joy and others in sorrow, insecurity, or indifference — we have a special thought for all those whose daily life is a fierce and constant struggle for their own survival and that of their families: people with unstable jobs and insufficient income, others looking for employment, or others with disabilities who cannot lead an active life and must somehow survive thanks to social benefits or the generosity of others. Numerous are the people living on the margins and who are ostracized by society. Many developing countries are unable to establish a social protection system for all their citizens and the most vulnerable live only through daily acts of solidarity among friends, relatives or neighbors.

Today, throughout the world, millions of children do not get enough to eat and others die for lack of proper health care. Yet the world is full of food — Frantz Fanon, a 20th century politician and essayist from Martinique, said that the garbage cans of the West were full of food while the children of the Third World were dying of hunger — and there is enough medicine to treat and cure those suffering, but they are only accessible to those who can afford them. Those in poverty, meanwhile, must continue to live in hope!

In 2000, with the Millennium Declaration, world leaders made a commitment to eliminate “the abject and dehumanizing conditions” of poverty and, as a start, to cut in half within 15 years the number of people whose income was less than a dollar a day, that is to say, those living in extreme poverty. That target was the beacon, dare I say, of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). We are now on the eve of the deadline, and we are compelled to note the relative success of the MDGs which have left aside many of those who face the greatest difficulties due to poverty. The participatory action research involving more than 2,000 people from 22 countries, undertaken by ATD Fourth World from 2011 to 2013 to assess the MDGs, clearly showed that very often, development projects are inadequate and turn against people living in extreme poverty. The Report of the High Level Panel appointed by the Secretary General of the United Nations and responsible for promoting the post-2015 development agenda also recognizes that the MDGs failed to reach the poorest and most excluded in society. We must ensure then that the sustainable development goals, which will follow on from the MDGs, will be more inclusive and truly leave no one behind.

To break the vicious circle of poverty, the focus is often, rightly, on the importance of quality education which will allow young people to optimize their talents and to have adequate and appropriate training for entering the world of work. However, children from a background of poverty, and thus at a disadvantage, have a hard time taking advantage of education and training provided in schools and other educational institutions even when the courses are free. It is essential that children from families who are living in poverty be supported very early, through access to nurseries and kindergartens, in order to enter primary school under the best possible conditions. A child whose family is facing extreme poverty will fail to attend class and concentrate on his studies if he is hungry and is worried about his family's survival. Therefore, it is vital to set up policies focusing on access to fundamental rights for all, as outlined in the Guidelines on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights adopted by United Nations member States in 2012. Many initiatives are possible in this area. In India, for example, the State is required to provide a free hot meal daily to every student in public elementary school, which

allows at the same time an element of food security for children and progress towards the right to education for all.

As global policy makers will return this year to the United Nations headquarters to discuss the follow-up to the MDGs, we can hope that they will not be content to rest on generalities, but will give themselves the means to carry out specific and targeted programs to eliminate poverty. In this context, we dare to propose the creation of an international solidarity fund for setting up national social protection floors giving priority to those countries whose resources are not sufficient. Social protection includes the security of a basic income and access to essential services such as education and health care. The organizations of civil society and people living in poverty should be involved in the design, implementation and monitoring of national social protection floors, so that no one is left behind. These measures will be the concrete expression of the political will of world leaders to combat poverty by providing equal opportunities for all children and families.

For a more just and caring world — a world of peace!
Best wishes to all,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cassam Uteem', with a horizontal line underneath.

Cassam Uteem GCSK
President