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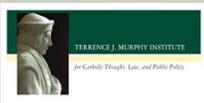
EXPERTISE: URBAN POOR

TALKING POINTS ON FINAL STUDY OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THE PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS OF THE URBAN POOR: STRATEGIES AND BEST PRACTICES

Human Rights Council, UN, Geneva

Policy Reports

To support the Holy See in its work at the United Nations, the [Caritas in Veritate Foundation](#), in Geneva, Switzerland and the [Center for Catholic Studies](#) at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, collaborated in preparing policy reports on current issues discussed at the United Nations. [The Terrence J. Murphy Institute for Catholic Thought, Law, and Public Policy](#), which is a joint venture between the Center of Catholic Studies and the School of Law at the University of St. Thomas, supports this collaboration financially, helps to identify appropriate experts to draft these reports and, with the author's permission, makes them available on its website as a resource for others.



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Urban poverty presents serious challenges that are different from rural poverty. As with past mass migrations, the current movement of people from rural to urban areas is outpacing the necessary social and political responses, thus governments and all agencies attempting to provide help and assistance are typically chasing behind the problems rather than anticipating the mostly expected difficulties. The Holy See encourages a more proactive policy stance by local and national governments, global institutions and especially the already developed countries that have already lived through the urbanization process and are in the best position to partner with the poorer countries in addressing these challenges.

The Holy See strongly supports viewing the challenges of urban poverty through the lens of human rights, recognizing that human dignity is that basis of all rights and duties and that the human person is “the source, the focus and the aim of all economic and social life.”¹ A human rights perspective, grounded in human dignity, will ensure that not only will the voices of the urban poor be heard, but more importantly, that they will be allowed to be the main protagonist in their own stories, and play an active role in shaping the reality in which they live.

The Holy See would like to note that one of the benefits of using a human rights lens, grounded in the inherent dignity of each and every person, is that it forces us to see development and the problems of the urban poor as multidimensional, just as each person is multidimensional. The problem of development can never be reduced to being merely a technical or economic issue, but must take an integrated approach that is grounded in a “people-centered ethics.”

The purpose and goal of all economic and social policy must be authentic human development for all and this is particularly the case with current urban poverty. History has shown, and current experience confirms, that during periods of great economic and social transformations the poor are forced to pay most of the costs (economic, social, environmental) and receive the smallest share of the benefits [alternative wording: “...transformations, the

poor are forced to pay the tab, while the poor, “like Lazarus, are not permitted to take their place at the rich man's table.”²

The Holy See would like to emphasize many of the findings of this report, especially those that highlight the special challenges the urban poor currently face. While the urban poor face the difficult issues associated with mass poverty, they also have the added difficulties associated with extensive social dislocation, thus the problem of material insufficiency is coupled with an absence of social and family support networks. This is also often exasperated by the stigma and discrimination of being “the other,” of being an unwelcomed migrant in a new city or country. “Every migrant is a human person who, as such, possesses fundamental, inalienable rights that must be respected by everyone and in every circumstance.”³

Along with the report, the Holy See would like to emphasize the problem of participation for the urban poor. Participation in the economic, social, cultural and political life of the community one lives in is a fundamental human right, flowing from the necessity of such participation in authentic human development. Here, as in many other areas, the progress of the individual and the community are comprehensively connected. “Man’s social nature makes it evident that the progress of the human person and the advance of society itself hinge on each other.”⁴ All the evidence suggests that societies and individuals best flourish when there are inclusive economic and political institutions. Inclusive institutions are not just institutions that lack artificial exclusive barriers, but also provide pathways for inclusion to facilitate the participation of all, especially those who need extra assistance.

The Holy See supports pro-poor budgeting and other efforts to include the urban poor in local governance. Pro-poor budgeting is a method of allowing the poor to have a voice in shaping city budgets. The urban poor, as the report makes clear, often do not have full citizenship rights, or legal claims to the land they are living on, and often work in the informal economy, thus have few if any political rights or social protection. Extra efforts are needed to bring them into the political process. While this includes the right to vote, it has to go beyond mere voting.

It is a violation of the humanity of the urban poor to exclude them from the political life of their communities. Furthermore, excluding the poor also greatly limits the progress such cities and countries can make. Even rich countries aren’t so rich that they can afford to exclude the contributions the poor can make to their societies. Excluding the urban poor might benefit the few who benefit from exclusive institutions (wealth and politically connected) but it also ensures permanent poverty for the country.

A particularly serious problem for the urban poor is food and nutritional security. Disconnected from the food production processes, the urban poor must purchase all the food they need, thus their ability to eat is greatly affected by world food and commodity prices. The rise of food commodities as an investment asset for financial speculators in the past decade has led to more volatile food prices, as well as periodic bubbles in food prices, which causes massive increases in hunger and declines in living standards for the urban poor. Often it causes the urban poor to switch to less expensive food with significantly less nutritional value. The Holy See encourages the International community to seek ways to protect the urban poor from global price swings in food and fuel.

As the world's population becomes more urbanized, the need for policies to combat unemployment and underemployment, and to extend worker's rights to the informal economy is a priority to ensure the respect the human right to work and "just and favorable conditions of work." Similarly, as the main mode of participation in the economic life of the community is through paid employment, the right to education increasingly becomes a main pathway to ensure economic security and an ability to compete in the global economy.

The Holy See recognizes that the rise in urbanization provides opportunities as well as challenges, as it can increase the poor's access to work, education, health care and other beneficial social services. Yet proximity to these services does not insure participation, and the state and civil society need to work hard to promote access and to dismantle barriers, official and unofficial, to the urban poor participating in such social services. The urban poor are often close to schools and medical facilities, yet they cannot afford to purchase these services. Even when the services have no charge, the indirect costs of transportation or school uniforms and books can be too much for many families. City planners need to use public funds to develop infrastructure that benefits all citizens and not just connected property developers.

Disconnected from their traditional social support systems, the urban poor women and children can be especially vulnerable to violence, sexual abuse and trafficking. Special effort needs to be expended to protect the human rights of these most at risk populations.

The Holy See is encouraged by the reports examples of good practices that have extended social protection to the urban poor, as well as partnerships that have improved water access and sanitation. The Holy See would like to emphasize that policies grounded in a human rights approach that seek to promote economic and political inclusion are most beneficial in that both their means and their ends achieve the goal of authentic human development. We should also be leery of the promise of short term policies that are based on exclusive economic and political institutions, based on the idea that if the state helps selected elites in the short run that this will eventually spread to all citizens.

The Holy See would like to emphasize that addressing these serious challenges is the responsibility of all, governments, business and civil society, that each has an important role, and that each should look to the others a partners. Human flourishing comes when humans are empowered, when they are included in the economic, social, political and cultural life of the communities they live in. Governments, business and civil society exist to facilitate this participation, to support human flourishing, and thus all need to work together as partners and not fight each other as adversaries.

¹ Vatican Council II, "Gaudium et Spes," 63.

² Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 27.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 62.

⁴ Vatican Council II, "Gaudium et Spes," 25.