

**Conference on “The Role of Civil Society in Poverty Alleviation” organised by MACOSS in collaboration with the Faculty of Social Studies and Humanities of UOM on Tuesday 7 November 2017 at the University of Mauritius**

I feel it my bounden duty to partake with you in this conference on “The Role of Civil Society in Poverty Alleviation”. I must thank and congratulate the Mauritius Council of Social Service and the Faculty of Social Studies and Humanities of the UOM to join hands to discuss this important issue of poverty alleviation and the promising role of Civil Society therein.

Back in the year 2000, the United Nations came up with 8 Millenium Development Goals in an effort to improve life in developing regions of the world in a time frame of 15 years. It is quite comforting to note that by 2015 extreme poverty as measured by GDP yardstick of \$1.25 per person per day has been reduced by half. But 1 in 8 people worldwide still go hungry.

Enrolment in primary education has increased from 83 to 90%. As you know in Mauritius enrolment in primary school is practically universal. Some progress has been made in most of the other MDGs.

In 2015, 193 countries, including Mauritius adopted the 2030 agenda that sets out the Sustainable Development Goals, SDG's, 17 of them. What is a Sustainable Development Goal? It is meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The No. 1 goal among the 17 SDG's remains Poverty Alleviation – No to extreme poverty. Measuring extreme poverty by using the GDP can be quite misleading. For example the USA has the highest GDP in the world but ranks 23<sup>rd</sup> when it comes to alleviation of poverty.

The new yardstick being used now is the Social Progress Index. Using this index, Norway comes on top with a score of 88 and the Democratic Republic of Congo last with a score of 31, the global average score being 61. The goal for 2030 is to bring the average Global Score to 75.

Where does Mauritius stand in this ranking? Its present Social Progress Index is 75.18, 39<sup>th</sup> among 128 countries in the upper middle – an honourable rank and performance indeed.

But should we be satisfied with this relatively satisfactory performance on the world scale? Is there no extreme poverty in Mauritius? I wanted to find out by myself and for myself. Only a few days ago I made a visit to some areas of poverty in the Black River district in the company of one NGO – the Kolektif Riviere Noire- and a Minister and an MP. I could find with my own eyes the sorrowful state that some people are living in. The biggest problem there is that of housing, and family size. To my mind, if these two problems are tackled seriously along with the provision of education, we will be able to say, some time in the future that we have been able to eradicate or at least alleviate poverty in Mauritius. We can do it. We'll have to do it together. There are 4 partners in this venture:

1. Government
2. The Private Sector

3. The NGO's – that's civil society
4. The people in poverty themselves.

From the side of Government, we can safely say that a lot of effort has been done already although a lot remains to be done especially in housing (and education).

Government has put in place several social protection programs to bridge the gap between the poor and the well-to-do. This includes the distribution of social assistance to people in need, subsidies for basic food items, the ZEP program in schools to improve the level of education, microfinance for small and medium-sized enterprises, greater participation of women in the labor market.

Social protection, free health services, education and free bus transportation play a key role in reducing poverty. According to economists, without these social benefits poverty would have risen to more than three times its level.

The Mauritian government has drawn up a medium and long-term Marshall Plan to combat poverty and social exclusion in Mauritius and Rodrigues. This Plan recognizes the multiple dimensions of poverty and inequality and their interaction, including income security, access to quality services, opportunities in the labour market, voice and participation, community development, etc.

In an innovative approach to social protection in Africa, Mauritians living in poverty receive cash transfers with the introduction of the Negative Income Tax. From July this year, the State pays an allowance to a citizen whose monthly income does not exceed the threshold of Rs. 9,900.

The National Empowerment Fund (NEF) has been restructured in terms of communication, networking, collaboration, partnership, needs identification, program design and implementation effectiveness; and the establishment of a monitoring and evaluation framework to monitor beneficiaries' adherence to the social contract of the Marshall Plan. The NEF aims to provide the most vulnerable people with the opportunity to improve their living conditions. Its priority missions are the fight against absolute poverty and the reduction of women's unemployment. I like the word empowerment. This is what the NEF aims at achieving. Not giving fishes but teaching those in poverty how to fish so as to become independent and free.

With a lot of goodwill and know-how, we can reduce poverty. This implies the will of not only the government but also NGOs, i.e the civil society and especially the people living in poverty themselves.

In Mauritius, we can count on the support of many NGOs that help in their own way to relieve the misery of some. Let's say a big thank you to the associations, movements, NGOs, Foundations, and other corporate social responsibility bodies that complement the actions of government departments and agencies.

In order to accomplish this, the civil society must overcome three challenges: technical, financial and political. Technically, there are many policies that have been shown some success in the alleviation of poverty: micro-financing and support for women entrepreneurs and cooperatives, achieving gender equality, cash transfers both universal and conditional, support for small- and medium-sized

enterprises, provision of decent work for all, investment in education and capacity-building, etc.

All in all there is need for a change of attitude among civil society and people in poverty.

People in civil society should cultivate a mindset of togetherness – of human solidarity. We should understand that our welfare, our wellbeing can only be sustainable when everyone in society is living in comfortable human conditions. How can this be done – by simple gestures of sharing which by the way is the essential message of Christmas, Eid and Divali.

I agree with Steven Covey who believes that this world is a world of abundance and also with Gandhi, that in this world there is enough for everybody's needs but never enough for everybody's greed. We have to do away with the mindset of wanting more and more for oneself but adopt one of sharing.

That sharing should be giving of one's time to educate the poor, to empower them to become independent and free. Education is key in the process of poverty alleviation.

Fix education – Fix poverty or fix nothing.

Civil society can contribute by being members of an NGO whose objective is to help alleviate poverty – through financial contribution – although as Mandela says ***“Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the***

*protection of a fundamental human right to dignity and a decent life. While poverty persists there is no true freedom.”*

Civil society can educate the poor in the management of a family. We should drive home to them that having a child is one of the greatest feeling in life but along with it, it is the responsibility and obligation as a parent to give the child everything a human being needs to grow happily: that’s love, attention, proper nutrition and education. They must be made to understand that as parents they are the first teachers for their child or children. They must be made to understand that the success of the child is their success – their pride. I would urge the civil society to seriously think along these lines.

Let me end by reiterating my own personal conviction that, if in the years to come civil society can

1. act as intermediary between the people on one side and government and the private sector on the other to provide decent social housing in places the need arises
2. to themselves give time to be with the people to share their knowledge and life experience to bring change for the better in areas of poverty
3. bring home to the people their own responsibilities as parents and finally – (lovebridge)
4. drive home to the people that they have it in them, they have the potential to change their life for the better

We will be able together, to help the poor come out of the poverty vicious cycle and create a better Mauritius.

We can do it.

Thank you.