12th session of the Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development

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Item 5 : Implementation of the Mandate and Programme of Work –Focused Thematic Discussions and Interactive Dialogues

PANEL: The role of civil society organizations in realizing the right to development at the grassroots level

Speech by Dr. Maria Mercedes Rossi (APG23)

Good morning! At the outset, let me thank the Expert Mechanism for giving me the opportunity to present the experience of APG23, my Association, in this important panel.

Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII (APG23) is a Catholic-Inspired organization of Pontifical right accredited to ECOSOC in Special Consultative Status whose members share directly the life with the poorest and most marginalised people in 42 countries on the five continents, being also committed to removing the causes of poverty and injustices through a non-violent action.

In the framework of our global commitment to promote integral development and the full implementation of the Right to Development, we are involved in a wide range of social activities and development initiatives at grass-roots level in both developing and developed countries.
Our projects throughout the world follow guiding principles on development that are inspired by the direct sharing of life with the people living in poverty and marginalisation, by the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church and the principles affirmed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Charter and the Declaration on the Right to Development**.**

I will give just few examples on how we contribute to the realization of the right to development at grass-roots level:

In Zambia, Tanzania and Kenya APG23 has promoted and developed a network of community-based responses to face the social consequences of AIDS, named **Rainbow Project**, a large-scale model of care for orphans and vulnerable children. The model aims to preserve the local culture, and return to people, especially women, the opportunity to have a prominent role in their own development. The different local organizations of the network are directly involved in a range of programs such as educational support, shelters for street kids, nutritional centres to fight against child malnutrition, awareness raising, microfinances, empowerment and capacity building initiatives.

Among the different programmes, I want to emphasise the Rainbow Project Nutrition Programme and the Microcredit Program. Both programmes - almost entirely handled by women engaged as long-term volunteers from local communities - are focused on the central role of women, as main actors, both as community operators and volunteers and as people empowered through the programs. By constructively engaging themselves - even if affected by heavy burdens of inequalities, marginalisation and vulnerable conditions - all these women have taken the chance to overcome those barriers and play their role as game changers in their lives and in their families' future, and as active leaders in the development processes of their communities.

In Zambia, we also run the Cicetekelo (=Hope) Youth Project that aims to enabling youth (boys and girls) who were living on the street and/or are vulnerable to become self-reliant. It offers education, skills training, job opportunites, spiritual formation and recreational activities (especially sports).

In Italy, since the1990s we have one of the most innovative and large-scale experiences realized by APG23, a network of social cooperatives aiming at integrating disadvantaged people and persons with disabilities into society and employment.
Our cooperatives are based on a people-centred approach and on the primacy of cooperation, solidarity and equity principles (compared to self-interest and profit ones) both in the social as well as in the economic sphere.
We run 82 centres located in 10 (out of 20) Italian regions that provide welfare services to almost one thousand persons who are disadvantaged and/or with disabilities and currently regularly employ 135 persons with disabilities. Some of these centres provide welfare services and educational activities for the social inclusion of the disadvantaged and of persons with disabilities; others centres run economic activities (as gardening, mechanical assembly, public spaces maintenance, handicraft, agriculture) with an organizational model that allows the persons with disabilities to be empowered and employed, being able to operate in a market environment and realize economic earnings.

In Chile, our APG23 members and volunteers of Operazione Colomba (OC), our Nonviolent Peace Corps, live with and accompany the Mapuche people, the most disadvantaged and vulnerable minority in Chile subject to multiple forms of discrimination that result in concrete and grave restrictions of their fundamental rights to land, work and access to justice as well as the right to development.

In Colombia, since 2009 the volunteers of Operazione Colomba have been standing by the Peace Community of San José de Apartadó (CdP) - located in a mountainous and rural area in Antioquia-Cordoba departments, a humanitarian and neutral zone established in 1997 to respond by nonviolence to the armed conflict and threats from armed groups. OC's presence has been required by the CdP to guarantee a nonviolent protection for its members. OC's volunteers permanently live in the community's villages, sharing daily risks with the local population, contributing to reduce violence accompanying previously displaced people in their way back to their lands, protecting members coming from humanitarian areas thus enabling them to carry on their daily activities and to meet other Colombian Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) who share the same nonviolent strategies.
The Peace Community of San José de Apartadó is a shining example of implementation of the right to development and the right to self-determination. We are honored today to have among us in this EMRTD session José Roviro Lopez Rivera, a member of the Community of Peace's internal Council, as well as a campesino leader and defender of human rights and the environment.

Moreover, since 2004, Operazione Colomba has been present in At-Tuwani, a Palestinian village located in a rural area in the South Hebron Hills, in the West Bank, that is occupied and totally controlled by Israel and where several illegal outposts and settlements are placed. The local inhabitants have chosen to remain there and to resist in a nonviolent way.
OC supports such a choice by accompanying farmers and shepherds on their lands, which are more exposed to settlers attacks and army harassment. In addition, OC's volunteers monitor the Israeli military escort that should protect Palestinian children on their way to school, documenting human rights violations and abuses.

I can speak also about other experiences, such as our involvement with migrants and refugees in Italy, Greece, Lebanon or our programmes with the victims of human trafficking but there is no time left.
I must also admit that persons and peoples at grass root level, especially the most vulnerable, often don't have a clue about the great potential of the right to development, its link with other human rights and its justiciability. They are not prepared yet to claim their RTD. However, local communities know very well what is good for their own development; it is a matter of offering opportunities to

express themselves and be empowered. In this regard, Member States and civil society, including our organization, should engage more on education on human rights and on right to development with the local communities!

The APG23 advocacy at the UN on the right to development springs out from these experiences of person/people-centred development at grass-root level that I mentioned above, experiences based not on charity but on justice where active and meaningful participation of people is key to successful programmes.

The right to development, that is relevant now days for both developing and developed countries, shifts the paradigm of international cooperation and assistance from a vision of mere charity and moral obligation, to an affirmation of solidarity rights and social justice and its implementation represents an important and necessary move to meet the present and future challenges faced by humanity today, challenges, which no country will be able to face alone.

For this reason, we urge the Member States to leave behind the divisive political and cultural arguments surmounting the debate on the right to development and to adopt promptly at the General Assembly the draft International Covenant on the right to development.

Finally, I would like to conclude with a quote from the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Leo XIV*: "We must continue, then, to denounce the "dictatorship of an economy that kills," and to recognize that "while the earnings of a minority are growing exponentially, so too is the gap separating the majority from the prosperity enjoyed by those happy few. This imbalance is the result of ideologies that defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation. Consequently, they reject the right of states, charged with vigilance for the common good, to exercise any form of control. A new tyranny is being born, invisible and often virtual, which unilaterally and relentlessly imposes its own laws and rules… Nevertheless, the dignity of every human person must be respected today, not tomorrow, and the extreme poverty of all those to whom this dignity is denied should constantly weigh upon our consciences.".*

Thank You!