



## Widening the Circle of God's Compassion, Justice and Inclusive Love Inclusion of the Poor in Society

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# Introduction

Being messengers of the good news in today's rapidly changing, complex world is both an opportunity and a challenge. It is an opportunity because it makes us constantly aware that we are the feminine face of God and a challenge, because we realize our own limitedness to address the magnitude of issues we are confronted with.

Our reflection on the theme, "Inclusion of the poor" in our specific context and perspective deals with two complex themes: inclusion and poverty. Inclusion recognizes the inherent worth and dignity of people. It makes persons feel valued for what they are, irrespective of their condition, status and background. It promotes a sense of belonging and a belief that people are the subjects and not mere recipients.

Poverty is a multifaceted concept which is more than the lack of income and resources to ensure a sustainable livelihood. While poverty is interpreted differently in different contexts, here we reflect from the perspective of those on the margins, who are forced to live in dehumanized situations. Its manifestations include hunger and malnutrition, limited access to education and other basic services, social discrimination and exclusion, as well as the lack of participation in decision-making.

Inclusion of the poor is central to ending extreme poverty and fostering shared prosperity. It is both an outcome and a process of improving the terms on which people take part in society. Such inclusion aims to empower the poor and marginalized to take advantage of escalating global opportunities. It ensures that people have a voice in decisions which affect their lives and that they enjoy equal access to markets, services and political, social and physical spaces. It focuses on creating conditions for equal opportunities and equal access for all. It underlies the concept of full participation in all.



## PERSONAL AND COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE OF POVERTY AND INCLUSION

How do I understand poverty? What my perspective of the poor is, depends much on our world view. It comes from what moves us and how we let the poor define us and our doing. Perspectives are many, coupled with our own religious, spiritual understanding and personal experience.

My mother laid the foundation of my perspective of poverty and inclusion at an early age as I see it now. Of the many examples, one situation in particular that left a lasting impression on me is the way my mother sheltered a woman who, fearing for her life, escaped from her marital home with two daughters who were of my age at the time. They stayed with us for over six months and we lived like a family. For my mother such decisions were instinctive. As a middle class family, materially we did not have plenty but she shared so naturally that it helped the woman rebuild her life. The message was loud and clear: share from what you have...which is an extension of what you are.

Inclusion is an empowering experience to the giver and the receiver. It has to be the case, when we speak of inclusion of the poor in society, that persons feel they are valued, that they are capable of changing their situation, and their confidence to deal with and transform their life situation is enhanced.

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*For reflection and sharing*

- *How do I define the poor? How do the poor define themselves? Who are the poor in my ministry? What is our definition of the inclusion of the poor in our given mission and surroundings?*
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Poverty affects every aspect of life. According to the estimates of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) about 795 million people of the 7.3 billion people in the world, or 1 in 9, were suffering from chronic undernourishment in 2014-2016.

Almost all the people suffering hunger, 780 million, live in developing countries, representing 12.9 percent, or 1 in 8, of the population of developing countries. There are 11 million undernourished people in developed countries (FAO 2015). About 1 in 5 persons in developing regions lives on less than \$1.25 per day. The overwhelming majority of people living on less than \$1.25 a day belong to Southern Asia and sub-Saharan African regions. Poverty is gendered. Women and girls are most affected in such situations. According to recent UNICEF data, every year, worldwide, 303,000 women die during pregnancy and childbirth, 2.7 million babies die during the first 28 days of life and 2.6 million babies are stillborn.

An estimated 2.4 billion people have no access to improved sanitation, 1.1 billion people have no access to electricity and 880 million people live in urban slums. Opportunities continue to remain scarce for the world's most vulnerable people – 59 million children of primary school age are out of school and the youth unemployment rate is 15 per cent, more than three times the rate of adults. In developing countries, every second pregnant woman and about 40% of preschool children are estimated to be anemic. A vast majority of the global poor live in rural areas and are poorly educated, mostly employed in the agricultural sector, and over half are under 18 years of age (UN data 2015). Behind these numbers there are faces.

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*For reflection and sharing*

- *In this context, what would inclusion of the poor mean? What, as a community, are we called to do at the personal, social, political level to promote inclusion of the poor? How do we do it?*
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## REFLECTION - CALL TO INTEGRATION

In recent times we have been blessed to receive deep insights into inclusion, thanks to Pope Francis who writes, 'Each one of us is called to become an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society.' (EG 187)

In his message to the Member States at the 70th General Assembly of United Nations on 25 September 2015, the Pope stressed the need for education for change and inclusion; to enable these

real men and women to escape from extreme poverty, we must allow them to be dignified agents of their own destiny. Integral human development and the full exercise of human dignity cannot be imposed.

Paragraphs 186 through 216 of the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* come under the heading "The Inclusion of the Poor in Society." These thirty-one paragraphs look at the Scriptural basis for the Pope's concern for the poor and vulnerable members of our world. They also call us to restore

what is rightfully theirs to those who have been shut out of our economic systems. “The Church, guided by the Gospel of mercy and by love for humankind, hears the cry for justice and intends to respond to it with all her might” (153). Our faith in Christ, who became poor, and was always close to the poor and the outcast, is the basis of our concern for the integral development of society’s most neglected members. Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society (EG 186, 187). In all places and circumstances, Christians, with the help of their pastors, are called to hear the cry of the poor (191). God’s heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself “became poor” (2 Cor. 8:9 in EG 197). The entire history of our redemption is marked by the presence of the poor. Salvation came to us from the “yes” uttered by a lowly maiden from a small town on the fringes of a great empire. The Savior was born in a manger, in the midst of animals, like children of poor families; he was presented at the Temple along with two turtledoves, the offering made by those who could not afford a lamb (cf. Lk 2:24; Lev 5:7); he was raised in a home of ordinary workers and worked with his own hands to earn his bread. When he began to preach the Kingdom, crowds of the dispossessed followed him, illustrating his words: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor” (Lk 4:18).

In the spirit of solidarity and commitment to the poor, we look to VIVAT International as the platform we have at the UN level. The United Nations (UN), an international organization founded in 1945, is currently made up of 193 Member States. The mission and work of the United Nations are guided by the purposes and principles contained in its Charter which enables UN to take action on various issues confronting our world such as human rights, sustainable development, peace and security, climate change, and more.

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the UN, one of the six main organs of the United Nations established by the UN Charter in 1946, is the UN’s central platform for reflection, debate, and innovative thinking on sustainable development and engages a wide variety of stakeholders – policymakers, parliamentarians, academics, major groups, foundations, business sector representatives and 3,200+ registered non-governmental organizations – in a productive dialogue on sustainable development through a programmatic cycle of meetings and programs.

VIVAT International, as a faith-based organization in Special Accreditation with the ECOSOC of the United Nations, is a network consisting of 12 religious congregations and societies. Its presence at the United Nations is meant to make a difference to the lives of the poor and marginalized with whom the members work directly through educational, health, socio-pastoral, environmental and justice-peace ministries. VIVAT International participates actively in UN efforts to eradicate extreme poverty, improve the living standard and



human dignity of all impoverished people. VIVAT works along with its members in four focus areas as well, namely, poverty eradication, women’s empowerment, sustainable development and culture of peace. Given the magnitude of the issues, joining hands with others is imperative. VIVAT collaborates with like-minded NGOs and civil society groups advocating for influence on the Policies for promoting life, human dignity and rights. The specific groups are children, women and girls, migrants and refugees, trafficked persons, indigenous communities, and areas concerned with health, education, anti-human-trafficking, the environment such as mining and extractive industries. The approach is advocacy in accordance with UN priorities. Through the regional office in Geneva, VIVAT brings to the United Nations through reports, appeals and statements, the issues of human rights violations and recommendations for change through human rights mechanisms. Without the members at the local and national level VIVAT cannot do much. It relies heavily on the success stories and documentation from the grassroots to be a true champion of justice, peace and integrity of creation. With a membership of about 27,000 VIVAT can make a positive impact in bringing the voices of the margins to the UN.

For the next 15 years, the UN’s focus is 2030 Action agenda for achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), officially known as ‘Transforming our world: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ is a set of seventeen aspirational “Global Goals” with 169 targets between them. SDGs succeeded Millennium Development Goals (MDGs: 2000-2015). Spearheaded by the United Nations, these were arrived at through a deliberative process over a period of two years, involving its 193 Member States, as well as global civil society and adopted on 25 September 2015.

The member States resolved to end poverty and hunger everywhere; to combat inequalities within and among countries; to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies; to protect human rights and promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; and to ensure the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources and to create conditions for sustainable, inclusive and sustained economic growth, shared prosperity and decent work for all, taking into account different levels of national development and capacities so that no one is left behind.

This agenda is accepted by all countries and is applicable to all, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities. Eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty is SDG 1. Eradication of poverty is not possible without inclusion of the poor and the marginalized. However, for words to be translated into action requires collaboration and advocacy to work with the governments and to advocate for the implementation of the 2030 agenda at national levels.

*Our 14 General Chapter Directions* state: “The needs of our planet are overwhelming and ever changing. Our Charism calls us to serve those who most need to receive the good news of God’s all-inclusive love. ... [Thus,] we identify the root causes of poverty and injustice and work for systemic change”.

What is *systemic change* all about?

The Vincentian Family in their commitment to bring about love and inclusion to the poor embrace systemic change as a key instrument in their mission.

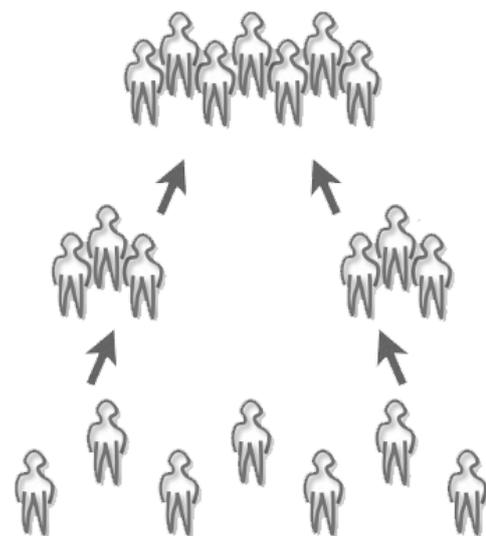
Fr. Robert P. Maloney, CM in his *Introduction to Systemic Change* says:

“Society has come to be viewed by economists and sociologists as a system. When elements that influence the lives of people within the system — family, institutions, jobs, housing, food and drink, health care, education, moral values, spiritual development, and more — function together positively, people thrive. If one or several of these elements are lacking, the whole system begins to break down.

Increasingly, the various fields of thought and discovery share a common belief in the unified nature of reality. All fields recognize that reality is complex, but at the same time all affirm that “everything is connected to everything else.”

Many who work among the poor share that conviction. They know that changing the situation of the poor requires that our focus must be broader than any particular problem. Important as it might be, for example, to supply food to the hungry, there is a big question that cannot be ignored: why are people hungry? We now know that “quick fixes” prove inadequate in the long run.

Using the example of hunger, the real problem is not how to supply food, but how to address the cause of people not having enough to eat: the socio-economic system in which they live. Addressing the cause means intervening in a way that results in the system as a whole being modified.



Such an approach is necessarily interdisciplinary. And it involves many different actors within society. Among them: the poor themselves, interested individuals,

donors, churches, governments, the private sector, leaders in business, unions, the media, international organizations and networks.

In work among the poor, systemic change has aims beyond providing food, clothing and shelter to alleviate the immediate needs of the poor. It focuses on assisting the needy to change the overall structures within which they live. It looks to their being able to develop strategies by which they can emerge from poverty.

Many good projects address urgent, immediate needs, but do not take aim at causes of a problem.

### **Here are five criteria met by projects positioned to bring about systemic change:**

1. Long-range social impact: this is the most basic characteristic of systemic change: that is, that the project helps change the overall life-situation of those who benefit from it.

2. Sustainability: the project helps create the social structures that are needed for a permanent change in the lives of the poor, such as employment, education, housing, the availability of clean water and sufficient food, and ongoing local leadership.
3. Replicability: the project can be adapted to solve similar problems in other places. The philosophy or spirituality that grounds the project, the strategies it employs and the techniques it uses can be applied in a variety of circumstances.
4. Scope: concretely, this means that the project actually has spread beyond its initial context and has been used successfully in other settings in the country where it began, or internationally, either by those who initiated it, or by others who have adapted elements of it.
5. Innovation: the project has brought about significant social change by transforming traditional practice. Transformation has been achieved through the development of a pattern-changing idea and its successful implementation.

## INVITATION TO RESPOND

We are global citizens. Our interconnectedness can help us in making a positive difference. Considering the issues and the responses, it requires from us –

- to find concrete ways to promote inclusion of the poor in our mission areas
- to seek creative means to collaborate with NGO's/civil society and governments for inclusion of the poor in changing their situations
- to share good news stories with VIVAT International

### **What can be done?**

- Work with vulnerable communities in rural and urban areas, especially our focus groups – women and girls, indigenous communities, people living with HIV/AIDS, internally displaced, migrants and refugees, and other vulnerable persons.

- Celebrate the International Day for Poverty Eradication on October 17 in your school, place of work or community.
- Educate yourself about the issues on the 2030 Agenda of the UN and work with national and local governments, and interest groups
- Contribute examples of best practices for VIVAT International's poverty eradication program.
- Partner with UN agencies on poverty reduction projects.
- Conduct research and provide grassroots input to support the policies on poverty eradication.

- Team up with VIVAT to organize a workshop, roundtable, etc. centered on poverty eradication.
- Advocate at the national level for poverty eradication programs.
- Invite speakers to your prayer group, classroom, church, community centre, etc.
- Find local development projects in your area to support tutoring centers, healthcare centers, housing development, etc.
- Mobilize communities to advocate that governments: help establish SDGs at the core of national poverty reduction plans; in financing in national budget, collaboration with Governments
- Plan across all sectors and integrate human rights.

#### Priority actions on poverty eradication include:

- improving access to sustainable livelihoods, entrepreneurial opportunities and productive resources;
- providing universal access to basic social services;
- progressively developing social protection systems to support those who cannot support themselves;
- empowering people living in poverty and their organizations;
- addressing the disproportionate impact of poverty on women;
- working with interested donors and recipients to allocate increased shares of ODA to poverty eradication; and
- intensifying international cooperation for poverty eradication.

## FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING

What is helping me/us to enter into the process of conversion toward greater communion and friendship with the marginalized and excluded?

## PRAYER

We thank you, God, for your Spirit present in and among us. God of justice, give us courage and persistence to work for justice for those reeling in a vicious cycle of poverty. God of all wisdom, give wisdom to the leaders of all the world's nations. Give them the determination to find a just solution that protects the people who are most vulnerable in our world. God of love, enable and allow us, with all our weaknesses and fears, to continue this walk of faith and hope. AMEN.

