

International Day for the Eradication of Poverty
17th October 2009 (observed on 19th Oct.)
United Nations Headquarters
Theme: Children and Families Speak Out against Poverty

Sisters and Brothers,

On this very important day, I feel humbled and privileged to bear testimony to a children's endeavor in building a world of equity and dignity. This is in fact the principal aspiration of the United Nations.

I bring you the saga of the children of Tamilnadu, Kerala and a few other States in India where there are what are called "grassroots parliaments". Children of about 30 families from a neighborhood form as neighborhood parliaments and hold sessions. There they discuss together issues that affect the neighborhood, be it individual or collective. Their resolutions are carried out very responsibly under the leadership of respective child-ministers who have specific portfolios i.e. responsibilities. They talk about questions such as child rights, school dropouts, child laborers, poverty eradication, human rights, water and sanitation, street lights, garbage disposal, pollution, and care for members of the community with special needs (e.g. the elders, the mentally and physically challenged).

Says Aishwarya, Education Minister of a Neighborhood Parliament of Children: "Sathish stopped going to school in the middle of his second standard to join his parents in begging. We talked about the problem in our children's parliament. Accordingly the Education Minister spoke to the Child Protection Committee and to the president of the Local Governance Council. With their help, we met the parents. We approached the school headmaster and got for Sathish notebooks and textbooks. Now he is going to school."

These neighborhood parliaments are guided by five basic principles: numerical uniformity, smallness of size, recall scope, subsidiarity, and convergence. The parliaments do not function as isolated entities; they are federated at the levels of the village, local governance body, sub-district, district and State. The most recent session of Tamilnadu State Parliament of Children produced a Charter of Demands by children, well-covered by the media and submitted to the government.

The Neighborhood Community Network (NCN), an NGO in Tamilnadu and the State Government in Kerala have facilitated this innovative initiative of the children Parliaments. UNICEF-Chennai also helped the Neighborhood Parliaments of Children when they were first beginning.

Early this year, the Tamil Nadu State Parliaments of Children received the global UNICEF San Marino Alexander Bodini Award for the best Child-led Organization for Child Rights Action.

The Children's Neighborhood Parliaments dream of the day when children of the whole world will be federated from the neighborhood on a global level. They believe that the participatory forums at neighborhood level linked together in a multi-tier global federation will provide an enabling environment for children to exercise their rights and responsibilities as present and future global citizens. This would promote good governance for a life of dignity for all. No one should be left out, most especially those living poverty. We need to help them realize their dream, should we not? To know more about them, please visit www.ncnworld.org

I thank you for this opportunity to share with you what children in India are doing to create a society where all people can come together to work to make a better world- one where no one lives in poverty.

Fatima Rodrigo, PBVM
International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation