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Information Note on Human Rights and Poverty

Human Rights Day, December 10 2006

Living in poverty means a greater likelihood of dying from preventable diseases, a higher rate of child mortality, and lack of adequate shelter. It also means more vulnerability to crime and violence, inadequate or no access to justice and the courts, and exclusion from political and public life.

Poverty affects all human rights. However, poverty is rarely seen through the lens of human rights.

Many ingredients go into making poverty, but such factors as discrimination, unequal access to resources, and social and cultural stigmatization have always characterized it. These are factors that governments and those in a position of authority can and are obliged to address. Human rights obligations require that governments put people's well-being first and that they end discrimination and differences in treatment among different groups.

All States have ratified at least one of the core seven international human rights treaties, and 80 per cent have ratified four or more. In so doing, they have accepted to varying degrees a legal obligation to ensure that their people enjoy, among other rights, the rights to life, liberty, an adequate standard of living, education, the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, food and housing. All States have signed on to the international consensus to make poverty history, through the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals.

Despite these commitments, too often public policies, at the national and international levels, ignore or violate standards essential for ending poverty. While it is accepted that realizing these rights will take time in poorer countries, it is also clear that human rights are not optional, or simply aspirations.

It should be noted that links between economic development and social progress are not automatic. Some of the strongest performers in reducing income inequality are widely off-track on human development targets such as maternal mortality and child mortality, which are frequently the result of entrenched patterns of discrimination. Sustainable solutions to poverty will often depend on multi-faceted responses, aiming at a just redistribution of power relations, rather than quick fixes or one-off handouts.

Poverty is about power: who wields it and who does not, both in public life and behind closed doors. Getting to the heart of complex webs of power relations in the political, economic and social spheres is the key to understanding and grappling more effectively with entrenched patterns of discrimination and poverty.

Practically all countries can take immediate measures aimed at ending poverty. Claiming a lack of resources does not absolve countries of responsibility. Ending poverty will often cost money, but not all rights require significant resources for their realization. Ending discrimination will, in many cases, remove barriers to employment and other structural constraints to the fulfillment of human rights. Most child deaths are avoidable, yet child mortality rates are high in many countries because of the

indefensible under-use of effective, low-cost, low-technology interventions, and a failure to address the structural causes of poverty and inequality.

The primary responsibility to protect human rights rests with national governments, but other states, as well as institutions, also have a responsibility to act in accordance with international human rights norms and standards. A state that lacks the means effectively to protect basic human rights for its people has an obligation to actively seek international assistance and cooperation. Equally, states in a position to assist have a responsibility to support other states to enable them to ensure adequate protection of rights to their populations.

Human Rights and Poverty in Cambodia

Cambodia is party to the main international human rights treaties, with the exception of the treaty on migrant workers. Under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Cambodia is committed to progressively achieving the full realization of the rights in the Covenant for all its people without discrimination of any kind. Under the Conventions on the Rights of the Child and the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Cambodia has made additional commitments to the women and children of Cambodia.

Cambodia has enjoyed fast economic growth since it emerged from civil war and international isolation. Recent assessments, such as the World Bank 2006 Poverty Assessment, show that this growth has resulted in rising living standards and a decline in poverty. Better basic services appear to be resulting in some gains, for example improvements in child survival and primary school enrolment, especially for girls.

Yet poverty remains a very serious problem. One in three Cambodians still lives below the poverty line (around \$0.45 per capita per day), and one in five subsists below the food poverty line. Many more have living standards that place them only slightly above the poverty line, and they remain highly vulnerable to being pushed down into poverty. Persistent problems include low rates of post-primary schooling, poor quality of education at all levels, and a maternal mortality rate that has remained effectively unchanged over the last five years.

Given the exceedingly high rates of economic growth over the last decade, considerably more Cambodians could have been lifted out of poverty, had the poor been able to share more equally in this growth. As it is, reductions in levels of poverty have been accompanied by widening inequalities. Between 1994 and 2004, living standards for the richest 20% of the population rose by 45%, while standards for the poorest 20% rose only by 8%. Disparities between urban and rural areas remain stark, and poverty is now overwhelmingly a rural problem, with over 91% of the poor living in rural areas.

In explaining these disparities, many sources point to increasing difficulties for the poor in accessing land and common property resources; dwindling household asset bases which leave the poor unable to cope with shocks; and local governance which regularly favors the rich over the poor (see, for example, the Cambodia Development Resource Institute's forthcoming participatory poverty assessment of the Tonle Sap region).