

CONCERTED EFFORTS ARE REQUIRED FOR PEOPLE'S LIVING CONDITIONS TO BE IMPROVED

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to state what should be done in order to improve on the standard of living of people, irrespective of the society in which they live. What motivated me to investigate and write on this topic was my observation. I drew the inspiration from my day-to-day experience in Burundi. I have been living in Burundi for the past four and a half years. As I move the streets of the capital of Burundi, Bujumbura, I come across people who display a spirit of despair. This desperation is manifested on their faces and by what they do. On the streets we find beggars in their numbers. On the radio and television we get news on how poverty is raving the Burundi population. About 42% of the national income comes from bilateral and multilateral donors. Currently, these external donors are conditioning the way these funds are to be made available for reasons of governance, human rights, as well as the management of these funds. From this situation in Burundi I realised that when a country relies so much on external support, the independence of the country tends to be questionable. There is the saying that "he who pays the piper determines the tune". My study in Burundi is a pilot study because Burundi is not the only poor country in the world. This paper is, thus, destined to all countries that suffer from poverty. Most people wish to live in America because the living conditions are favourable. I wish to posit that any country, irrespective of the continent can make its own country, "America" or even "more than America" so as to attract other nationals, including Americans. The approach I propose in this paper is what I term, "The Concerted Effort Approach" to the eradication of poverty. This approach states that all stakeholders in the socio-economic sector of any country should join hands to generate funds for common good. These stakeholders include the government, the civil society, private entrepreneurs, and the masses.

Keywords: Living Conditions to be improved, Concerted Efforts are required.

1. INTRODUCTION

An ideal society is one in which there is cohesion and happiness. Such a society can only exist when there is the socio-economic empowerment of the inhabitants of that society. In such a society, the inhabitants are able to satisfy their basic needs. These needs include, among others, food, clothing, lodging, as well as health and education facilities. When the basic needs of any society are provided, development follows with ease. This is possible because you cannot think of ways to develop your society when you are either hungry or homeless. When I talk of concerted efforts, I mean that people in a society that is threatened by poverty should join hands. They should put their brains in the same thinking cap and transform their society in a way that will be beneficial to the majority of the population.

2. RATIONALE

I have chosen the above-mentioned topic because I have realised that the absence of social cohesion results in conflicts, wars, genocides, migration, and suffering. Most of the time these unfortunate consequences of the absence of social cohesion are brought about because of two main reasons: First, there is the absence of economic viability. Second, there are, to an extent, resources but they are not equitably distributed. The United States of America is considered as the first economic power because of its economic viability. Most people, irrespective of their nationality, want to go and live in

America because of the economic solace that exists there. We also see that the World Bank measures the poverty indicator in terms of US Dollars. Thus, we can only say that the living conditions of the people of a given area are improved if their economic situation is stable and refreshing. Such conditions can, thus, be measured in terms of the American situation to a large extent and to that of China to a less extent (since China is the second world economic power). These will be illustrated later on in this essay.

To support the relation between resources and conflicts, we can analyse the following view of Vaughn (2007, p. 1), "Because the major issues that have arisen in the last century or so come from the legal interpretations, legislation and changes in public attitudes, a chronological approach is an appropriate way to explore the background of natural resource conflicts". When she talks of a chronological approach to explore natural resource conflicts, the implication is that the management of natural resources constitute a source of conflicts. This implies that the greatest wealth of every nation emanates from natural resources. It is also amazing to know that what constitutes a country's wealth is also the source of conflicts which may result in genocides. Natural resources can generate conflicts when they are not judiciously managed. When resources are not well managed, they are not distributed equitably. With concerted efforts, it is easy for resources to be managed in a manner that will reduce poverty and misery, thereby bringing happiness to the door steps of all and sundry.

My focus is on the economic perspective of natural resources. You would agree with me that natural resources constitute the backbone of the economy of every nation. I agree with Muhammad (2011, p. xii), when he states, "All it takes to get poor people out of poverty is for us to create an enabling environment for them", and that "Once the poor can unleash their energy and creativity, poverty will disappear very quickly". I, however, wish to go a step further by saying that in most situations the people are in that state of poverty because those in charge of the management of the natural resources are not doing their job properly. Instead of distributing the resources equitably, they rather divert them into personal pockets. When this occurs, poverty sets in within the ranks of the majority. With the majority being poor, goodwill people then step in to provide an enabling environment by giving loans to empower the people as Muhammad (op. cit.) propounds.

The topic under study stresses the fact that everybody in any nation should collaborate to ensure that poverty, which is a canker worm, is eradicated. By this, I mean that those who are given the responsibility to manage public resources should do that judiciously. Those who do not have the opportunity to manage the resources should collaborate in their own way. That is to say, they should use the little amounts of money that they are given, in income generating activities like retail businesses. This is because when some of the poor people are given loans, they squander the money in drinking, smoking and prostitution. If they invest the money in little businesses, some of the proceeds can be ploughed back into the businesses to increase the business size while the rest is used to educate their children and improve their living conditions. The world of today is a capitalist one. That is to say, the world is controlled by wealth. Nobody can deny the fact that the United States of America is the number one state because of its economic prowess. Each nation of the world is striving to attain the level of America. This is because they are above the World Bank poverty indicator of \$ 1.25 per day. This is confirmed by Rycroft (2013, p. 2) when he says:

By the World Bank's commonly used poverty indicator of \$ 1.25 per day, over 20 percent of the world's population (about 1.4 billion people) are poor (World Bank Development Indicators 2008). By that same standard, probably not a single American or resident of any other similarly prosperous country is poor. In fact, the poorest American is probably better off than over two-thirds of the world's population (Milanovic 2011, 177).

From the above quotation, we can infer that the United States of America is the first economy in the world. This is based on its poverty line which is quite attractive to a billion of the world's population. The American economic situation is measured in terms of that of the entire world. This is normal because the world has become a global village and anything that affects one country also affects the world at large. It is for this reason that the international community always ensure that they maintain peace where conflicts and wars crop up. We all know that poverty cannot be stopped or reduced where there is no peace.

A country like China is doing a lot to achieve economic force. They are succeeding because they concert their efforts. They work as one man in developing their economy. Many countries, especially in the developing world, are still lagging behind because they operate in dispersed ranks. This paper is stressing the fact that the eradication or reduction of poverty can be realised in the modern world if efforts are concerted. There is a saying in my community that "one hand cannot tie a bundle". This means that people in a country can only succeed in improving on their economic situation if they

collaborate and help each other in their development projects. The following scholars: Hu, Z. and Khan, M. S. (1997) throw light on the economic status of China:

In 1978, after years of state control of all productive assets, the government of China embarked on a major program of economic reform. In an effort to awaken a dormant economic giant, it encouraged the formation of rural enterprises and private businesses, liberalized foreign trade and investment, relaxed state control over some prices and invested in industrial production and the education of its workforce. By nearly all accounts, the strategy has worked spectacularly. From the above quotation, we agree that an economy needs to be liberalized so as to allow the private sector which is viable to invest. If they are to collaborate with the government, the private sector should manage the bigger share. The success story of the Chinese approach can be seen if we further examine the view of Hu, Z. and Khan, M. S. (1997 op. cit.):

While pre-1978 China had seen an annual growth of 6 percent a year (with some painful ups and downs along the way), post-1978 China saw an average real growth of more than 9 percent a year (with fewer and less painful ups and downs). In several peak years, the economy grew more than 13 percent. Per capita income has quadrupled in the last 15 years, and a few analysts are even predicting that the Chinese economy will be larger than that of the United States in about 20 years. We observe from the above view that the Chinese economy is bearing fruits. Predictions are saying that they would surpass the United States economy, which is currently the first. These predictions may be correct because in all the countries I have been to (Cameroon, Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda, Central African Republic, and Gabon), Chinese products flourish in the markets. The main reason is that the Chinese are able to produce goods that are accessible to all categories of people, the rich and the poor. Currently, they have reinforced their ties with the African continent by assigning an ambassador to the African Union. This will secure both political and economic ties with the African continent that provides a large market for their goods.

However, I think that in spite of the economic prowess of China, it cannot surpass that of the United States of America easily because of the following reasons: First, America possesses both economic and political might. Second, America is quite democratic but China is not very democratic and its human rights record is not very commendable. I am in effect saying that democracy and a positive human rights situation are very necessary in reviving any economy. This is because the improvement of the living conditions of people should not only be seen from the perspective of physical wealth.

A society with good living standards has more than physical wealth; the respect of human rights and the provision of other basic necessities are mandatory. This is confirmed by Bornstein and Davis (2010, p. 1) when the state thus, "Social entrepreneurship is a process by which citizens build or transform institutions to advance solutions to social problems such as poverty, illness, illiteracy, environmental destruction, human rights abuses and corruption, in order to make life better for many". We find in this view above, the inclusion of human rights abuses in the list of the issues that have a negative impact on living conditions. On the news we hear how many people flee their countries not because of poverty but because their human rights are violated. In order that the Chinese economy becomes the first in the world, they should further improve their human rights records. This is because there is a close link between improved living conditions and human rights records.

In order to have a picture of the human rights situation of China, we can have a look at the following evaluation: Rapid socio-economic change in China has been accompanied by relaxation of some restrictions on basic rights, but the government remains an authoritarian one-party state. It places arbitrary curbs on expression, association, assembly, and religion; prohibits independent labor unions and human rights organizations; and maintains party control over all judicial institutions. The government censors the press, the Internet, print publications, and academic research, and justifies human rights abuses as necessary to preserve 'social stability'. China's education system discriminates against children and young people with disabilities. (www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country.../china)

The above evaluation of the Human Rights Watch's 2014 report on China portrays China as still lagging behind in the human rights situation of its citizens in spite of its economic strength. This is unfortunate because a country which is economically viable like China should provide socio-economic facilities to every citizen. They are satisfying the majority of people all over the world. This is good because their goods are accessible. By this I mean that their goods are available and affordable to all classes of people in all parts of the world. However, they should not only be useful internationally, but also nationally irrespective of status or physical condition. When the Chinese authorities discriminate against the underprivileged in the society like the disabled children and young people, as indicated in the report above, their policy

does not fall in line with my view of concerted efforts to provide maximum facilities to the majority of the population, both national and international. When we build social business, we do not have to discriminate. When you have the basic necessities but not free to express yourself, you are not comfortable and consequently, your living condition is not good. I have already presented examples of countries that have taken giant strides to put poverty under control; that is, America and China. Now, I need to delve into the discussion on a country that is classified among the world's poor countries, Burundi. This country can be presented as thus:

Burundi is a landlocked resource-poor country with an underdeveloped manufacturing sector. The economy is predominantly agricultural...Only one in two children go to school...Food, medicine, and electricity remain in short supply. Less than 2% of the population has electricity in its homes...The purchasing power of most Burundians has decreased as wage increases have not kept up with inflation. Burundi is heavily dependent on aid from bilateral and multilateral donors: foreign aid represents 42% of Burundi's national income, the second highest rate in Sub-Saharan Africa. (www.indexmundi.com/burundi/economy_profile.html).

Though a Cameroonian, I can give an eye-witness account of the critical poverty situation of Burundi because I have been living in this country for more than four years. I interact with people from various rungs of the society and this gives me the possibility to paint a picture of the socio-economic situation of Burundi. As I move in the streets, I see men, women, and children begging as a means of survival. Some of the children, who are supposed to be in school, accompany their parents in the begging process. Some of the children spend the nights on the streets under conditions of squalor. The poverty situation is visible as one moves the streets of Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi. Bujumbura reflects the entire nation. If there is a change in the poverty situation in any of the cities of Burundi, then, it will be worse because Bujumbura offers more opportunities for jobs than any other city of the country since it is the political capital.

Even the 2% of the Burundians and residents who can pay for electricity do not have it regularly. Since it is the cash power system where you pay in advance, you are conditioned on how to use it because it is rationed out. All users cannot have power 24/24 because when some areas have electricity, others do not have. This means that the electricity supply is not sufficient to all those who are able to pay. This is unfortunate because electricity is very vital to any economy that wishes to be emergent and industrialize. All the sectors that need to stimulate the economy need electricity. Billions of dollars are needed to invest in this electricity sector but the government is still looking for shareholders and donors because it is unable to generate the huge amount alone without external support. With regards to water supply which is the most basic necessity, it is very irregular in some parts of the country. Currently, it is on local radio stations that portable water is in very short supply in the Musaga quarter in the capital, Bujumbura, and also in the Province of Kayanza. The electricity and water corporation, Regideso, is unable to provide portable water and electricity regularly and in adequate quantities. This further aggravates the already precarious socio-economic situation of Burundi.

Nevertheless, the picture for Burundi will not remain eternally gloomy. Steps are being taken by stakeholders in the economic sector of Burundi to ensure that the poverty situation is reversed. Those who are furnishing these efforts include the following: the government, bilateral and multilateral bodies, as well as other goodwill institutions and individuals. The government, through the Ministry of Solidarity, is struggling to ensure that the vulnerable groups are taken care of. The Ministry of Solidarity identifies vulnerable groups like street children, women (especially the illiterate ones), handicapped people, and old people. After the identification, the ministry tries to solve their most pressing needs which include, among others, portable water, healthcare facilities, lodging, and food. The government, in an effort to reduce the illiteracy rate, has made primary school education tuition free. This is what Kun (2005) says in that respect:

After 12 years of civil war, Burundi now has a new democratic government, and there construction process is gathering momentum. As part of his programme, President Pierre Nkurunziza has reaffirmed his pledge to provide free primary education for all the country's children.

This free education in Burundi is working well because the rate of literacy is increasing. Though the literacy rate in Burundi is only timidly rising, time is needed for it to be completely realised.

The Head of State of Burundi is also making efforts to alleviate the poverty effects by providing advice. Each time he is on a visit to any of the communes or provinces of the country, he advises the population to indulge in family planning and reduce the number of births so as to be able to take care of their children according to their means. He also admonishes those who are indulged in agriculture to constitute themselves into cooperative groups so as to solve common needs like

looking for markets for their products, transforming their products into finished or semi-finished products, and searching for means to preserve their products (most of which are perishable). Some analysts think that the population needs concrete help which is financial or material that can actually improve their living conditions.

The Burundians in the Diaspora are not left out of the fight against poverty. It is but normal that people who have made money are not happy to find that their compatriots' living conditions are not improved. They have constituted themselves into an association and are collaborating with the government to see how they can help create jobs by providing funds. The idea that these patriotic Burundians have is good but they should be careful the way they go about it. I say so because immediately they announced their plans to collaborate with the government, voices were already raised that they were with the ruling party. When partisan political views are already brought in, success would be farfetched. I propose that they should meet the masses who constitute the target population and discuss with them the way forward. In this way they will be able to identify the real needs of the disadvantaged groups. With the identification of problems, solutions would be easily sought since this Burundian Diaspora said that they had made enough money and wanted to help improve the living conditions of the Burundian masses.

With regards to the Non-Governmental Organisations, they are doing everything in their power to ensure that poverty is reduced to the minimum in Burundi. There are quite a good number of NGOs in Burundi. They include among others, the following: USAID, The War Child, Concern World Wide, Handicap International, Health Net, and Action Aid Burundi. They provide support to the vulnerable groups in the form of training, moral guidance, initiation into income generating activities, and other activities that keep them out of the trauma of the ethnic conflict and war that is, to a large extent, responsible for the hardship that is currently prevailing in Burundi.

From the perspective of common initiative groups, Burundi is not left out. In Burundi, common initiative groups have constituted themselves into micro-financial establishments. This is done with the intention of bringing together little amounts of money to create a bank that provides safety for the funds of members and offer loan opportunities at affordable rates. These establishments also make available counselling services to members on how to create income generating activities that can improve their living conditions. An example of such an initiative group that has constituted itself into a co-operative union bank in Burundi is MUTEK, which is the French acronym for "Mutuelle d'Epargne et de Credit", which may be translated into English as "Savings and Loans Co-operative". What is interesting about this micro-financial institution is that it has attracted many members for just eleven years of existence. (Mutec-bi.com/microphp). The reason for the popularity of this establishment is that it is looking for low profit margins to permit it to survive. Its focus is to provide financial facilities to its members. This is in conformity with Muhammad (2010, pp. 57-58)'s differentiation between social business and entrepreneurship. This is what he says:

But when you start a social business, you don't begin by looking for a business case that will generate maximum profit. Instead, you pick a social problem you want to solve and then seek the business solution for it. Profit is important only as a necessary condition, not as the ultimate goal.

From Muhammad's view point above; we see that it conforms to the approach that is being adopted by MUTEK- Burundi. They make the loan and savings conditions attractive to people of all rungs of the society. This micro financial institution is doing a good job for the masses in Burundi. They attract many customers because the interest rates for loans are affordable and the amount to create an account is within the reach of all and sundry. Let us examine the following together: In order to open an account in MUTEK, you need a deposit of just 10000 FBU, that is about \$6.4; whereas a commercial bank like Banque Commercial du Burundi (Bancobu) charges 250000 FBU, that is about \$160. We see from simple statistics that Bancobu is an elitist institution, whereas Mutec is for everybody. What is interesting in MUTEK is that, once you make your deposit of 10000 FBU, you automatically become a shareholder and your deposit generates dividends which are shared at the end of each financial year. This helps considerably in reducing the misery in Burundi. The efforts of MUTEK are laudable but we need more of such institutions in Burundi. We rather find more banking institutions being created because their objective is to generate as much profits as possible. Also, the efforts of MUTEK are still beyond the reach of many Burundians who are unable to have three square meals a day.

As far as the contribution of bilateral and multilateral donors is concerned, their impact is immense. In the quotation above, we are told that these donors contribute about 42% of the Burundi national income. Unfortunately, the relations between these donors and the Burundi government have recently not been the best for reasons related to human rights and governance. As a result, these donors are currently conditioning the disbursement of funds on the improvement of the

human rights situation and governance. In such a situation, the masses are still suffering the effects of poverty. I also wish to say that I, a Cameroonian, am lecturing English linguistics at the Department of English Language and Literature of the University of Burundi as part of the Inter-University co-operation between Cameroon state universities and the University of Burundi. This co-operation stipulates that there will be the mobility of lecturers to ensure that the Department of English Language and Literature is reinforced in the disciplines of English language and literature. We all know that education refines the intellect. When the mind is refined, it gives it the ability to reflect on how the society and economy are developed to enable the members of that society experience a high living standard. This is what this Inter-University co-operation is out to ensure. This is also in line with concerted efforts in the domain of education. Education does not know boundaries and that is why I, a Cameroonian, have adopted an international touch to education as a teacher (my pedagogic functions in Burundi) and as a student (my current academic activities at AIU).

In Cameroon a lot of concerted efforts are being made to improve on the living conditions of Cameroonians and residents. This is done in the sphere of what is called, the Cameroon Cooperative Credit Union League. From a historical perspective, I can say that this joint initiative activity first saw the light of the day in 1963. This can be substantiated as thus, "The credit union idea was introduced in Cameroon by Rev. Father Anthony Jansen, a Roman Catholic Priest from Holland. He formed the first credit union in Njinikom in 1963 with a membership of 16 and a total savings of 2100 CFA Francs (representing about \$3.5)". (www.mixmarket.org/mfi/camccul). Five years later, that is, in 1968, the Credit Union was transformed into the Cameroon Cooperative Credit Union League, abbreviated, Cam CCUL. This is confirmed as thus:

Formed in 1968, the Cameroon Cooperative Credit Union League (Cam CCUL) is a network of 208 credit unions that also offer microfinance services. Cam CCUL re-registered under the cooperative law in 1994 and has been registered by the Banking Commission of Central Africa (COBAC). In 2010, it reported a gross loan portfolio of USD 141 million disbursed to approximately 74000 clients. Its member institutions serve approximately 1.5 million clients. (www.microcapital.org/microcapital-brief-Cameroon).

From the above quotations, we notice how the cooperative movement has transformed the Cameroonian socio-economic landscape from a humble beginning with a capital of \$3.5 for 16 members to \$ 141 million for 1.5 million clients. This common initiative group started in the minority Anglophone part of Cameroon. It is important to note here that Cameroon is 20% Anglophone and 80% Francophone (2 regions and 8 regions respectively). It is interesting to realise that the 80% Francophone Cameroonians have copied the cooperative example of the 20% Anglophone Cameroonians. The cooperative movement has transformed the lives of millions of Cameroonians and residents. The cooperative movement in Cameroon, though doing a good job, still has weaknesses. It is not really united as I would have expected. Many branches are cropping up like mushrooms, with many of them being fake. It becomes difficult to identify authentic ones. Many instances of embezzlement have been reported in branches of these cooperative societies. Order is still to be installed within the rungs of the administrators of these cooperative societies in Cameroon.

If you observe carefully this essay, you will realise that I examine social economy from societies of varied levels: those that can be considered as having succeeded, those that are moving towards success, and those that are still lagging behind. I draw inspiration from the successful societies (The United States of America, for example) as well as those that are at the threshold of success (China, for example); then, I combine that knowledge with my observation. With this combination I propose strategies that can be adopted by poverty stricken societies in an attempt to eradicate poverty from the lives of the majority. My approach to the improvement of living conditions is global; that is, examining living conditions in relation to the existing global socio-economic realities.

As recommendations I can state the following: All stakeholders in every society, irrespective of the status, have to join efforts in order to ensure that the living conditions of the inhabitants are improved. That is to say, the task should neither be left solely to the authorities nor to the masses. The authorities should have the goodwill to create an enabling environment that is conducive for business. An enabling environment is one that is peaceful, secure, with a competent and free justice system. The taxation system should be accommodating rather than hostile. That is to say, the taxation officials should take into account the strength of the economy. In Burundi, for instance, the taxation policy is not considerate at all. This is because the taxes are very high in relation to the capital of the business people and their turn over. With the high taxes, there is the multiplier effect which is incidence on the final consumers. This is because the business people can neither sell at a lost nor breakeven; they need to make profits in order to continue operating. With the high prices (taxes inclusive), sales dwindle and most of the business people close up; thereby increasing the unemployment rate and misery.

There is the saying that "too much taxes kill taxes". When the business people close up, the government also encounters difficulties to meet up with its financial engagements since the taxes constitute the government's main source of revenue. The adoption of a taxation policy that is conducive for business people will stimulate the economy, and hence the population and the government. In such a circumstance poverty and misery will be put under control.

Since the poor management of resources constitutes the greatest source of conflicts, the concerted effort approach to the management of affairs can go a long way to build a society socially and economically. If we examine the case of the former Sudan, we realise that conflicts resulting in decades of civil war had at the root cause the poor management of natural resources. This is what Shahnawaz (2014, p. 4) says in relation to the root causes of the conflict in Sudan and South Sudan, "After independence Republic of South Sudan immediately grabbed in border conflict with his closed neighbour Republic of Sudan regarding on citizenship, security, and oil rich area Abyei, where violence took place in early summer of 2011". This shows how resources can cause conflict if there is disagreement over their ownership or management. Even after the separation of Sudan into two states, with the creation of South Sudan, the conflict has not stopped. The conflict in South Sudan continues because efforts are not concerted in the management of what God has created and given for free. When a part of the society feels cheated in the distribution of common wealth, it is bound to revolt. Concerted efforts are needed to bring peace and consequently happiness and economic boom.

Furthermore, both the managers and members of common initiative groups should exhibit honesty in the executions of their various tasks in the march towards poverty elimination. This recommendation is addressed both to those at the top and those at the bottom of common initiative bodies. I draw this inspiration from several instances of officials of cooperative movements that have embezzled funds meant for common good. The masses themselves are not left out. Instances have been reported in which members of common initiative groups, who have been granted loans, have not refunded the loans but absconded. I, therefore, call on all stakeholders in the fight against poverty to display moral rectitude, as this will go a long way to render conducive the society in which we are living.

3. CONCLUSION

To round off I can say that the union of efforts to create initiatives that can help the population, irrespective of the region, nation or continent, should be the approach to alleviate poverty and misery. In order to improve the socio-economic situation of people in the world at large, efforts should be joined in the creation of common initiative organs. I have talked about bilateral and multilateral bodies, NGOs, cooperative movements, and the provision of an enabling environment by local governments for the alleviation of poverty. Muhammad (2011, p. 5) posits thus, "NGOs do a lot of good work in the world. But the charitable model has led me to create the concept of social business as an alternative". I totally agree with his model because most NGO officials swim in affluence while those who are supposed to benefit remain miserable. The objective of any common initiative group should be to provide solace to the masses. Anything other than that is not worth encouraging. However, it is worth mentioning that the task is not an easy one, and that is why there are still so many poor people in the world today. Nevertheless, hope is not lost because with joint efforts, the future is bright. The future would be bright if the approach to be adopted is multidimensional; that is to say, all stakeholders in the world economy should concert with governments, civil society organizations, and the population to fight against poverty and misery.

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