

**PHNOM PENH MUNICIPALITY EVENT FOR 10 DECEMBER 2013
INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DAY**

**Address by Ms. Marie-Dominique Parent
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My respect to His Excellency the Governor of Phnom Penh, and His Excellency the President of Phnom Penh Municipal Council

Our partners in the Cambodia Human Rights Committee, the United Nations, Development Partners and Civil Society

Excellencies, participants, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour and a privilege to address today's gathering to mark Human Rights Day. 65 years ago, the international community, as represented by the General Assembly of the United Nations, adopted a humble document that has since served as inspiration to countless national Constitutions, laws, policies, regional instruments and demands of people everywhere. That document is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This year, the Phnom Penh Municipality has decided for the first time to celebrate the adoption of the Declaration. We hope that this marks the beginning of a new tradition for Phnom Penh, and that other sub-national authorities throughout the country will join this trend and similarly hold events in the future in celebration of Human Rights Day and in tackling human rights issues at their level of authority.

Today, the Universal Declaration for Human Rights is the most translated document in the world. It sets out our rights that belong to us not because they were granted by anyone, but because they are an inherent condition for human dignity. In other words, they belong to us because we are human.

If each of us has human rights, then we must logically recognize that others also have them. Human rights is fundamentally a pact of mutual respect. If I have a right to speak and be heard, so does he or she who disagrees with me. Human Rights Day is a celebration of our common humanity, but it is also a celebration of our diversity and an occasion to recognize that we all have duties to our fellow man and woman.

We have most of all a duty to those around us who are worse off, for whatever reason, and to act to remedy that which denies their human rights. Under circumstances of resource constraints and difficult choices, a commitment to human rights would require us to focus on the most vulnerable among us.

That is why OHCHR is pleased that the theme chosen by the Phnom Penh Municipality is the rights of the urban poor. Within the boundaries of a municipality, the urban poor are among the most vulnerable in many ways.

They depend more than others on the services provided by the authorities as well as NGOs, suffer more when these are denied, and suffer much, much more from societal prejudices than many imagine. Others who often claim a place among the vulnerable include children without families, persons with disabilities, internal migrants from the provinces, and persons evicted or under threat of eviction

without adequate alternative housing. There will be others living so precariously, such as those who live from payday to payday, that they could find themselves among the urban poor at any time and be trapped in the cycle of debt.

Although there is no simple manual for rectifying the situation, we are not without guidance at all. There are many ways to go about it, and among them there is one in particular that we would like to recommend. An approach grounded in human rights principles can help us understand better the situation of the urban poor and sort out what needs to be done.

Such an approach places people at the center. People are certainly the victims of urban poverty, but they are also part of the solution. In its groundbreaking study published in 2002 entitled “Voices of the Poor”, the World Bank showed what could be gained by reaching out and inviting the poor to express in their own words not only what they wish to have done for them, but also what they could do if properly equipped. Interestingly, this international study “Voice of the Poor” was the last in a series of three reports, the first one entitled “Can anyone hear us?”, and the second one “Crying out for Change”.

The interviews in that study pointed to deprivations - some personal, some structural. The most consistent common thread among all of them was the overwhelming sense of disrespect and helplessness that people felt. Disempowerment can be a strong disincentive for finding solutions, for caring for one’s family, or contributing to one’s community. A lack of protection, including against physical violence, compounds this sense of helplessness. While women’s responsibilities grow when a family is poor, their rights do not. Such insights came from around the world. We might ask ourselves what insights and ideas might emerge from a study on the “Voices of the Cambodian Poor”?

Let’s take the example of a study that our office published last year. This study on the human costs of resettlement in Cambodia was based on testimonies from urban poor communities in a number of urban resettlement sites. It highlights that, when there had been little preparation for an eviction and resettlement, when the community did not have opportunities to participate in decision-making, when legal safeguards were not applied and evictions were forced and violent, and when services, infrastructure and livelihood options at resettlement sites have been insufficient, families have usually been facing aggravated poverty. It also highlights that security of tenure at most resettlement sites continues to be an issue even years after relocation - an issue that relocated communities repeatedly raised as one of their main concerns. Other issues voiced in the study includes lack of basic services, including access to medical services, proper sanitation and clean water, difficulties to ensure children are enrolled in schools, and challenges in accessing basic processes in civil and administrative matters. Years after relocation, most families at resettlement sites are still struggling to make a living. They appear worse off in term of economic empowerment, dependent on outside assistance and often trapped in the cycle of debt.

As importantly however, and relevant for today’s event, the study also highlights that, conversely, when authorities, the community, NGOs and development partners had worked together to plan a resettlement, with community participation and community’s needs given full consideration, the negative impacts of resettlement were not only mitigated, but the process had led to improved and sustainable living conditions, as shown in the case of the Akphiwat Meanchey community.

Another positive example is that of the families living with HIV-AIDS who were relocated in 2009 to Tuol Sambo. This case illustrates how the initially negative impact of a resettlement can still be redressed even after relocation. At first, due to inadequate consideration of their needs, and lack of related planning, the families living with HIV-AIDS suffered from deterioration of their health and of their living conditions. They also experienced stigmatization at the resettlement site. Nevertheless, subsequent cooperation among the national and municipal authorities, NGOs, United Nations agencies and the community allowed for major improvements in these areas.

The human rights model is one of empowering people, of listening to them - and to all voices in the public arena-, and of acting. We are encouraged to see today that the Municipality recognizes the need to act, and wants to send out the message that it is willing to do so with the communities and with civil society.

We believe that an important tool available to the authorities to take action in this area is the 2010 Circular No 3 on the “Resolution of temporary settlements”, which aims to ensure that adequate housing is provided to some of the most vulnerable groups in society: the urban poor. We are ready to work with the Phnom Penh Municipality to ensure effective application of the circular, in consultation with the communities concerned and relevant NGOS and development partners.

I wish at the juncture to quote the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms Navi Pillay. In her statement for this Human Rights Day, she says: “a huge amount of work remains to be done to transform human rights from abstract promises to genuine improvement in the daily lives of all people, especially those who are currently marginalized or excluded.”

We take today’s celebrations as a promise for a new approach in the way the Municipality wishes to empower and support the urban poor. We stand ready to continue to work with all our partners, including the Municipality, to try and prevent human rights breaches from occurring. We will also continue to ask the authorities to do their part – the biggest part by far – to ensure that the human rights of all are protected and promoted, and we will continue to provide our support to all actors accordingly.

This year, we are not only celebrating Human Rights Day but also mourning the loss of one of the greatest human rights figure of the 20th century, Nelson Mandela. He had said: ‘Poverty is not an accident. Like slavery and apartheid, it is man-made and can be removed by the actions of human beings.’

I thank you for your attention and wish you a memorable Human Rights Day.