



International Day for the Eradication of Poverty 17 October 2007

**United Nations
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
Bangkok**

Welcome Address by Ms. Noeleen Heyzer Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of ESCAP

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests,

Today marks the 20th Anniversary of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, a day to remember those who continue to live with poverty, violence and hunger. Despite the remarkable economic progress of the last two decades, the Asian and Pacific region is home to more than two thirds of the world's poor. We are gathered here today because fighting poverty still remains our greatest challenge.

Ten days ago, ESCAP, UNDP and ADB launched a report on the region's progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. The data reveal harsh realities: while some countries in the region are well on their way to achieving many of the Goals, 640 million people in the region live on less than \$1 a day. Almost 100 million children aged under-five are underweight and one in every three children out of school worldwide lives in Asia and the Pacific. Almost 660

million people lack access to clean water and almost 2 billion people in the region do not have basic sanitation.

And let us not forget that behind each number stands a person's life --- one person's story of daily struggle against poverty. It is the story of the woman giving birth miles away from any hospital, without access to any medical assistance. It is the story of the girl next door seeing her brother leaving for school every morning and knowing that her parents had to make a hard choice about not sending her to school. It is the story of the man going to bed hungry because he spent his meager income that day to repay a debt. It is the story of girls trafficked so that their families can survive another day. It is the story you will hear in a few moments from the courageous people sitting right next to me.

Poverty has many faces, very often a woman's face. It affects social groups, members of the same community and even members of a single household differently. But at its most basic, to be poor means to suffer from a *lack of choice* and a *lack of security*, the crushing of dreams and gifts of millions of people.

This year's theme for the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty is "people living in poverty as agents of change". This is where we need to focus our efforts in our fight against poverty. All too often, others have decided *for* the poor instead of *with* them.

If we want to eradicate poverty, poor people have to be at the centre of development, at the centre of our investment. The fight against poverty has to be participatory and inclusive from policy planning all the way through to implementation and evaluation.

Listening is a first step towards recognition of the poor as agents of change, yet in itself it is not sufficient. To be agents of change, the poor, especially women and girls, need to be invested in and to be empowered so that they can

make choices and can live with dignity, as basic needs become basic rights. This means that they need mechanisms to hold governments accountable --- accountable for securing access to basic services for all, for social protection, and for ensuring participation in decision making.

I have just assumed the position of Executive Secretary of ESCAP. I want ESCAP to become known for promoting inclusive and sustainable economic and social development. One main pillar of our work will therefore be the strengthening of accountable governance and social inclusion which put the rural and urban poor at the centre of development. Asia-Pacific has the experience, the expertise and resources to achieve all the MDGs. Let us be the region to do so by 2015. We will energize partnerships with Governments, civil society, business, think tanks and other agents of development and work harder towards delivering as one to achieve this goal.

I am therefore happy that today's event has been organized jointly by the UN in Bangkok, the Government of Thailand and the international NGO, ATD Fourth World. Let us today join hands to making poverty history. Let us together stand up and speak out against poverty.

I thank you.
