

Poverty and Democracy Don't Mix

Rigoberta Menchu Tum

(Reprinted with permission of the *San Francisco Chronicle* from an op-ed appearing on Dec. 29, 1995).

Many less-developed countries have not been able to achieve democracy. Over the years I have learned that the countries considered to be great democracies feel this is due to an inability on the part of the people to understand democracy. However, the absence or loss of democracy has nothing to do with knowing what democracy is or what it stands for.

Simply put, the democratization of a country is closely linked to decision-making by the people on which the political stability of their countries depends. The so-called modern democracies do not realize this and try to gloss over the root causes of instability that very often lie in poverty.

If we are to aspire to create democratic societies we must strive to eradicate poverty, because the two are incompatible. As we have learned, the economic security and the political stabilities of a country are also very closely linked.

The death of people from hunger is one of the greatest injustices, one of the most serious violations of human rights that we must suffer at the end of yet another century. Along with these deaths come cries of indignation, public instability and social unrest.

The great challenge that developed countries must now face is understanding that we cannot talk of democratization when millions of people are condemned to a life of misery. The yearning for world peace can never become a reality when millions of children die every year from hunger and malnutrition.

The costs of social unrest are greater than the investments needed to prevent them. No matter how we look at it, investing in social development

brings broader benefits than merely remedying social injustice. I suggest to you that responding to civil strife created by a condition of human dignity is far more expensive than building a school, or a hospital, or providing the seeds for a harvest.

I am a daughter of the Maya, from a region where there has been a struggle for democracy and liberty. In my country, Guatemala, only a few years ago we thought that it would be impossible to continue living, immersed as we were in a conflict that lasted more than three decades. Yet we never lost the hope of reconstructing a multiethnic, multicultural nation. Through dialogue we have caught a glimpse of solutions to many of our ancestral problems. The recognition of the rights and values of indigenous people further strengthens our hope that we will eventually establish a true democracy.

Progress toward democracy must be based on human development as the foundation for sustained development. It has become clear that charity and paternalism have not solved the problem of poverty—self-determination by the people offers greater certainty that development will be sustained.

In various countries women have been seen as one of the great creative forces in the fight against poverty. Women are responsible for more than half of the food production in less developed countries. Women are the weavers of the social fabric. Discrimination against women is another challenge that must be overcome to create just and democratic societies.

I appeal to developed countries to genuinely seek peace by encouraging sustainable development, which requires a respect for democracy and accompanying it with continuing educa-



Rigoberta Menchu Tum speaking at the Conference on Hunger and Poverty in Brussels, Belgium. Photo: IFAD.

tion. This will help to root out political instability at its source.

Although the wealthier countries are diminishing their financial support to fight poverty, there are programs that have helped people reach self-sufficiency. For example, the conference on Hunger and Poverty organized a short time ago by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), recounted many successful projects, emphasizing the participation of the people who benefited from them.

The involvement of the community in the design and implementation of programs is critical to guaranteeing their success. The programs presented by IFAD emphasize this fact and that they can be productive when combined with access to education and markets.

The message of democratization is being broadened by appeals to care for millions of poor people. To achieve and maintain peace, it is necessary to have democracy. We cannot attain peace as long as economic inequities exist. Peace and poverty cannot coexist. Democracy and poverty are incompatible. □

Rigoberta Menchu Tum is a Guatemalan leader internationally known for her work in the promotion of the defense of human rights, peace and indigenous people's rights for which she received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992.