

## **Introduction to the Workshop Why Do We Need to Talk about Poverty & Development? Dr. Sunil Deepak**

Good morning and welcome to every one. As usually happens in such international workshops, where persons come from different corners of the world, not all of them are able to reach in time. We still have some persons who were expected to be here this morning but they haven't arrived yet. We hope that they will be able to make it soon.

Let me start with a clarification. I can imagine that some of you are saying to yourself that this is another of those meetings about poor persons and poverty, where we sit in a luxurious hotel and talk about far away places and far away persons. I have also been to some such meetings and I know the feeling. As you can see, the hotel for this workshop is very nice. While looking for a venue for organising this meeting, we really had to search very hard as we needed a place, which was accessible to wheel chairs and disabled persons. In Bologna city the prices for such a place were too high for us. Finally, we found this place, a little isolated, lost in the rural periphery of Bologna where they have the facilities to accommodate disabled persons and where, the management, once they heard about the kind of persons who were coming here and our subject of discussion, agreed to offer us a very special price for boarding, lodging and meeting rooms. This is the reason, why we are here and I shall like to take this opportunity to thank the management of this hotel for their collaboration.

Another small point I would like to make is about the participants for this workshop. There are very few participants from Africa present here and we sincerely regret that. However, for one reason or the other, many of the persons from Africa, who were invited to this workshop were unable to come.

On the other hand, we do have very large representations from India and Brazil, the two countries where AIFO is involved in many projects with a number of different partners and where we have our regional offices. This will create a challenge for your informal sharing of experiences and knowing each other because of linguistic barriers. All the formal plenary sessions have simultaneous translation in English, Portuguese and Italian. For group discussions, the groups have been divided on the basis of language. I do hope that you will make your efforts to take advantage of those persons who can speak both English and Portuguese, to get to know each other.

**AIFO's interest in poverty related issues:** Now coming to more specific issues related to this workshop. Why did we decide to organise this workshop on the subject of poverty and development? As many of you know, in 1961 AIFO started as an organisation for working with leprosy affected persons. Right from the beginning the founders of AIFO felt that leprosy disease is closely linked to poverty, injustice, exclusion and underdevelopment. Thus the motto of work chosen by our founders was "[Against Leprosy and Against Other Leptosies](#)", where "other leptosies" includes issues like poverty, exclusion, under-development, etc., which create the conditions so that diseases like leprosy can exist.

This philosophy also meant that our work for fighting leprosy has to be extended to developed countries, even if there are no persons affected by leprosy because the conditions of poverty and under-development in the South depend also upon the past colonial history of developing world and the continuing imbalances and exploitation relationships that exist between the North and the South of the world. For this reason, apart from supporting health care, rehabilitation, research and development activities in different parts of Asia, Africa and South America, AIFO groups are also involved in activities of development education in Italy, promoting a change of mentality, to create awareness in general public about issues of injustice about existing world economic order, about importance of cultural diversity, about sustainable development, about human rights, etc.

**Impact of AIFO's work on the poor:** It has been quite some time that we have been asking our selves, "Do projects supported or managed by AIFO, reach the poorest & most marginalised population groups?" I do not think that there are any development NGOs, who do not wish to focus their work on the poorest and excluded population groups. Yet can we take it for granted that the projects and the programmes we support are effectively reaching the poorest groups for promoting sustainable development?

Over the last decade, there have been different occasions when we have tried to look into this question through evaluation of community-based and primary health care programmes. In 1999, an evaluation carried in South Sulawesi in Indonesia, focused on the impact of the community-based rehabilitation (CBR) project supported by AIFO on the lives of poor groups living in the urban slums in the city of Ujung Pandang. In Mongolia, another evaluation of a CBR programme focused its analysis on benefits to the poorest groups through the rotating credit for income generation activities. *There have been many other such evaluations and the end result has been almost the same every where - often the poorest population groups and most vulnerable persons do not benefit from development activities but are involved in mainly social-welfare or charitable kind of activities.*

In 1998, in another international workshop organised by AIFO, Dr Peter Evans had presented the preliminary results of a multi-centric study carried out in different parts of India with support from DFID, in which a team of researchers had looked at the accessibility of different kinds of services to disabled persons from the poorest population groups. This study analysed the accessibility of governmental institutions, charitable and missionary institutions and efficacy of community-based rehabilitation programmes. The results of this study indicated that the issue of accessibility of services to the poorest groups is complex and in spite of providing free services in an institution, these can still remain inaccessible to many vulnerable groups. He also reported that community-based services were relatively more accessible to the poorest groups, though most of the poor groups were not aware about the activities carried out by NGOs.

Over the last six years, AIFO has been involved in a joint initiative with Disability & Rehabilitation team of WHO (WHO/DAR) called "Promoting CBR among vulnerable population groups". This initiative is trying to look at the feasibility of promoting CBR programmes in two specific vulnerable population groups – the slum dwellers and the refugees, through a series of pilot projects in different parts of the world. From this initiative, it comes out that involving the poorest

population groups in development is not easy but it is possible. The same lesson comes from some other community-based projects like WATCH in Nepal, working for empowerment of rural women through participatory development methodologies.

Some of the reasons coming from these different experiences for explaining the exclusion of the poorest population groups from development activities include – their lack of prerequisites for participation in project activities, their lack of education and skills, their lack of awareness about their rights and the availability of services, their lack of self-confidence, etc. At the same time, they are excluded because of barriers created by more powerful groups in the communities and societies because of religious, ethnic, linguistic, racial or caste differences.

**Aims of the workshop:** The aim of this workshop is to be together, coming from different countries, cultures, contexts with your experiences of working along with the poorest population groups, and to reflect together on how we can reach the most marginalised groups in our work.

Over the next four days, there will be different keynote presentations to provoke you and to stimulate you, followed by group discussions and then plenary sessions during which the groups will share their discussions. At the end of the workshop, I hope that each of us will be able to look at our own work and reflect on ways to improve it so that it responds better to needs of poorest groups. There are three main themes for this workshop:

Defining Poverty & Criteria

Equity & Access to services

Listening to & Understanding the Voices of Poor

I shall like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have accepted to present the keynote presentations for this workshop and all the participants, coming from near and far.