



## **Disarmament to combat poverty: an international campaign Désarmer pour combattre la pauvreté: une campagne internationale**

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### **Disarmament, development and democracy: a civil society perspective**

Civil society is a broad concept. I propose to focus on the poor people's perspective. A few months ago, I had the opportunity to visit a village 40 km away from Bangalore in South India and to discuss bread and butter issues with the villagers: a kind of informal grassroots level seminar, full of vital information on what security is all about for poor people.

All the villagers happened to be landless agricultural labourers from Dalit (lower caste) background. The local agriculture provides them with 3 to 4 months of employment a year, at best - for the farming activities are totally dependant on the rains for want of irrigation facilities. Although the Minimum Wages Act imposes a rate of at least 50 Rupees a day, male workers get 30 Rs and the female ones 20 Rs only...For the remainder of the year, they manage to earn a poor living by collecting fibers (roots) in the neighbouring forest and making baskets that they sell on the local markets. The craft is risky though, for quite often they are chased and harassed by the local thugs operating in the hands of the contractors who exploit the forest for commercial purposes. Fake accusations of robbing valuable timber are charged against these poor fellows. Some are beaten up; several have been jailed and had to pay corrupted officers to get released. And all are being regularly abused and pushed aside for being "intouchables", supposedly polluted.

I came out of that meeting with the feeling that we are quite used to the idea that poverty has to be reduced in order to minimize the risk of violence that is attached to social injustices. But we are not so frequently underlining that poverty is in itself a massive form of violence, which has to be eradicated in order to provide basic security to billions of human beings all over the world. For the situation of those villagers is no exception. Most poor people in India, whether in rural or urban contexts, do face the same kind of brutal social insecurity. At the global

level, the perspective of the poor clearly indicates that for many people insecurity is not only a national issue related to international affairs, but also and to a large extent primarily a social issue related to their economic, cultural and political conditions of life.

By all democratic standards, since the poor and low-income people do represent the majority of the human beings, since the demand for less arms and more rights is widely shared all over the world, one could expect a fairer balance between national security expenses and social development investments. This is why I think it is relevant to add the D of Democracy to properly link up the D of Disarmament and the D of Development.

There are many other reasons to put forward the democratic perspective in relation with disarmament and development. The first one relates to the arms race and the way accumulation of weapons is strongly connected with militarization of regimes. This is not a concern restricted to overt military States like Pakistan. In France for instance major armament industries play an increasing financial and thus political role within the media sphere; it is most unlikely that such a trend would contribute to reducing the lack of transparency which prevails around national security and weaponry policies.

Arms traders are certainly better informed than ordinary citizens that the French army is engaged in a plan of reducing its heavy equipment by 2015. Such an important reallocation of public money - which is the people's money - was never publicly presented and discussed. As a French citizen I understand I have every right to know whether the money thus saved is being used to fill the national budget deficit, or is channelled to finance the acquisition of a new aircraft carrier...And I am sure many people would welcome a public debate on alternative allocations of cuts in weaponry expenses such as the launching of a national or European programme to involve youth in non-violent social action and voluntary work. By the way, such a scheme in France could be fully financed by reducing and reallocating less than 10% of the national defence budget...

Anyway, beyond the financial implications, security policies have such a tremendous impact on the lives of so many people all over the world that there is a strong democratic justification for more transparent information and more open public debates on those issues in all countries.

My last point relates to non-violent resistance and struggles to curb violence of all kinds. As an NGO militant involved in international solidarity and development initiatives in North and

South, I can testify that civil societies are carrying out a wide range of initiatives to combat poverty by promoting social rights. And there are many constructive efforts of the same kind to improve education, health, environment, and so on....All those non-violent efforts are crucial in spreading the democratic ethos throughout the social fabric: is not democracy basically a commitment to the radical, non-violent assertion of rights in response to violence and to resolve conflicts?

We are used to considering non-violence as a philosophical and moral personal stand; I feel we are not so much promoting non-violence as a **political** option as part of the democratic culture. In this regard, how can we expect to enlarge the understanding and the practice of non-violent social action and democratic development at the local and national levels, while continuing to give full legitimacy to violence as the first, and often the only, way to solve conflicts at the international level?

In my view, here are some of the basic points which tightly inter-relate the 3 Ds of Disarmament, Development and Democracy. Actually this is not just an individual point of view; it is an approach which has been largely shared with many social activists in North and South who are associated to the international campaign ***"Disarmament to combat poverty"*** which promotes the **"10% Option"**<sup>2</sup>. An approach and an option we are keen indeed to discuss and to share with all those who are committed to linking the agendas of peace and social justice .

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(1) 1 "Disarmament to combat poverty" campaign coordination: [pdt@fdh.org](mailto:pdt@fdh.org)

(2) 2 As a first step the campaign puts forward "the 10% Option": 10% reduction in military expenditures and arms trade to be converted into social investments to develop access to basic rights such as social security, health and education for all. More information available on [www.fdh.org](http://www.fdh.org)