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Poverty, inequality and violence:

The economic social and cultural root causes of violence, including torture,

A human rights perspective

A study prepared by
the World Organization Against Torture
for the International Conference*

**Poverty, Inequality and Violence:
is there a human rights response?**

Geneva, October 4 – 6 2005

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Introduction

The World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) recognizes that the fight against torture and other forms of violence, as well as their prevention, cannot be considered in purely legal, administrative or judiciary terms, in isolation from their socio-economic context. Since its 1991 General Assembly held in Manila, OMCT has given specific attention to socio-economic considerations. It is within this framework that the OMCT undertook the project which has given rise to the present study.

The aim of the project is to examine the causal connection between inequalities, poverty, violations of economic, social and cultural rights and violence. Violence in the context of the project is understood in its broad sense as state sponsored (torture, summary executions, disappearances, etc.), social and domestic violence. The project's ultimate objective is to identify specific actions which the various actors can take to reduce violence by acting on its economic, social and cultural root causes.

The project is being carried out by the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT) within the framework of the Geneva International Academic Network (GIAN) and with the financial support of the GIAN, the Dutch Foundation ICCO, the Fondation des droits de l'homme au travail and the Swiss Federal Government (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation).

The context

The fight against torture, summary executions, forced disappearances and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment within the international human rights framework has essentially developed through the denunciation of cases, the establishment of a normative system, as well as through the search for mechanisms - legal or other - that enable adequate protection and reparation of victims to be guaranteed.

These efforts have brought about significant improvements. Today, for instance, torture is defined and prohibited by international instruments with universal scope as well as by specific legislation in a number of countries. Further, national, regional and international institutions endeavour to prevent and punish torture, as well as to compensate the victims.

Shifting emphasis in the fight against torture; the need to look at root causes

Nevertheless, a very large number of individuals are still subjected to torture, ill-treatment, forced disappearances and summary executions. Furthermore, the cases that are being reported and documented are no longer so much the result of imposed ideologies, but rather, increasingly come as the consequence of growing social tensions, which often lead to violent clashes.

In fact, developments in the past decades, following the collapse of numerous dictatorships in Latin America, Africa, Asia, Central Asia and Central and Eastern Europe paved the way for democratic transitions in many countries. While it is true that this evolution has put an end to systematic and institutionalised repression of political opponents, these changes, as positive as they may be, generally did not go hand in hand with an improvement in socio-economic conditions. Indeed, significant inequalities, along with increasing poverty, still constitute the daily experience of a large part of the population of these countries.

Deep socio-economic imbalances, poverty and the growing number of excluded who see their absolute and relative income diminishing, depriving them of their basic needs, cause

frustration and produce such tensions. Claims for basic economic, social and cultural rights, in turn, are often met with severe repression, as they endanger a system based on privileges, whose beneficiaries do not want to abandon their favoured positions. As a result, the overwhelming majority of those who are being subjected to torture and ill-treatment are, today, persons that come from the poorest strata of society.

Similarly, the violence perpetrated against women and children is significantly influenced by their socio-economic marginalisation. Indeed, violence against children mostly affects socially and economically marginalised minors (often street children or working children). Similarly, violence affecting women is often related to their socio-economic role in societies where they are often considered as second-class individuals. This violence is often not recognised by States as being part of their responsibility.

This paradigm change requires a new look at how we combat torture and other forms of violence.

While the impact of socio-economic factors on the emergence of violence has already been the subject of much research, the question has not been approached from a human rights perspective. In other words, the relationship between the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights and violations of civic and political rights -- such as the right to life and the protection against torture -- still needs to be examined.

The study

The present study contains an extensive (84 page) academic analysis investigating the correlations between violence and socio-economic inequalities based on information from a total of 63 countries and using survey data from the People's Security Survey of the ILO's InFocus Programme on Socio-Economic Security. A further paper deals with the relation of women's access to resources and domestic violence in South Africa and another examines the relationship between economic recession and violence in a developed economy.

The study also includes an in depth analysis of the human rights situation in five countries (Argentina, Egypt, Nepal, South Africa and Uzbekistan) together with case studies examining specific instances in those countries of the relationship between violations of economic, social and cultural rights and violence prepared in collaboration with a national human rights partner in each country.

Further, the study will examine how selected international human rights mechanisms and selected international institutions and development and financial agencies approach the issue.

The Conference

The second part of the OMCT project consists in an international conference (Geneva, 4 to 6 October 2005) that will provide the occasion for a critical review of the study and its conclusions. It will be an opportunity to agree that failure to respect economic, social and cultural rights and the resulting inequality and poverty can cause or contribute to violence, including torture. The study should also lead to a better understanding of how well national and international authorities, including international human rights bodies and international financial and development institutions understand this relationship and how adequately they react.

Finally, the Conference will be asked to propose ways in which the wide range of actors involved can contribute to the elimination of violence, including torture, by promoting respect for economic, social and cultural rights. Particular attention will be given to how a network of national NGOs, such as the OMCT SOS-Torture Network, can respond to the need to act on the economic, social and cultural root causes of violence.

Methodology

OMCT adopted a participatory approach to this project involving relevant actors operating in the human rights field, including human rights NGOs, academics, experts and international organisations. This included collaboration with academic institutions and international organisations, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), 3 Special Rapporteurs of the United Nations Human Rights Commission, the Graduate Institute for International Studies (IUHEI), the University of Geneva (UNIGE) and the University of Lausanne (UNIL). This collaborative approach is reflected in the membership of the Scientific Council (see below).

The project was also carried out in collaboration with organisations in the field including OMCT's network of human rights organizations in the field. In addition, for the country profiles and case studies, OMCT established partnerships with five national human rights: the Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (CELS), Argentina; the Land Center for Human Rights (LCHR), Egypt; the Human Rights Institute of South Africa (HURISA); the Legal Aid Society (LAS), Uzbekistan; and Rural Reconstruction Nepal (RRN).

Scientific Council

- Mr. François Beaujolin**, President, Fondation pour les droits de l'homme au travail
- Mr. Yves Berthelot**, Former Executive Secretary, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
- Mr. Théo van Boven**, Professor Emeritus, University of Maastricht, former UN Special Rapporteur on the Question of Torture
- Mr. Andrew Clapham**, Professor of International Human Rights Law, Graduate Institute for International Studies
- Mr. José B. de Figueiredo**, Senior Economist, InFocus Programme on Socio-Economic Security, International Labour Office
- Mr. Miloon Khotari**, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing
- Mr. Giorgio Malinverni**, Professor of Law at the University of Geneva and member of the U.N. Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- Mr. Pierre de Senarclens**, Professor of International Relations, University of Lausanne
- Mr. Eric Sottas**, Director of OMCT
- Mr. Rodolfo Stavenhagen**, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples
