

NELSON MANDELA INTERNATIONAL DAY

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First of all, I want to express my gratitude for having been invited to participate in this commemoration of Nelson Mandela's 100th birthday. For I personally as well as my organization continue to be inspired by Nelson Mandela's example. He was a man of extraordinary qualities – integrity, courage, humility, and unfailing dedication to the principles of freedom and social justice, as well as to reconciliation through genuine dialogue.

In *Long Walk to Freedom* – a wonderful book – he tells of the tribal meetings he witnessed as a young boy in the home of the acting paramount chief, where everyone was welcome to come discuss the important matters of the day. Mandela states, "It was democracy in its purest form. There might have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard: chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and labourer....The foundation of self-government was that all ...were free to voice their opinions and were equal in their value as citizens." He goes on to say that as a leader, he had always followed the principles that he saw demonstrated in those meetings, endeavoring to listen to what each and every person had to say before venturing his own opinion.

What we saw throughout his life was a confirmation of this principle – the ability to listen carefully to others, even if former enemies, and to take into consideration their needs and their aspirations. This was not politely listening to others, only to then impose what one had planned from the beginning – it was giving serious thought to what had been heard, and allowing it to help shape one's actions. This was one of the qualities that made him a peacemaker, a person who was able to take a nation torn by oppression and violence and hatred, and put it on a path to peace, on a path to building a nation in which every person could find his or her place in dignity. To again quote his book: "No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

On this centenary of his birthday, what then are the implications of his legacy?

We are convinced that the Sustainable Development Goals, elaborated through a lengthy process of negotiation, reflect many of his values – just, peaceful and inclusive societies, that are built through partnerships based upon a shared vision and shared goals that place people and the planet at the centre. But are we truly committed to those goals – committed enough to take the bold actions they will require?

As an international community, we face some of the greatest challenges of recent times: extreme inequalities within and between countries, climate change, terrorism and armed conflicts, massive movements of people. For us, one of the main underlying causes of much of the turmoil today are the persistence of extreme poverty and the growing inequalities. In London's Trafalgar Square, in February 2005, before a crowd of hundreds of thousands of people gathered for the Making Poverty History rally, Nelson Mandela stated: "Massive poverty and obscene inequality are such terrible scourges of our times ... that they have to rank alongside slavery and apartheid as social evils.... Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. And overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life."

Having suffered through periods of poverty himself, Mandela knew well the hunger and insecurity as well as the humiliation that are its characteristics. He also obviously knew all too well the institutional violence that maintained him and his fellow Africans in poverty.

Mandela would have understood a member of ATD Fourth World when she said: "The worst thing about living in extreme poverty is the contempt, that they treat you like you are worthless....We and our children experience this every day, and it hurts us, humiliates us and makes us live in fear and shame." Under such circumstances, rare is the person who finds a way out of destitution on their own.

Goal 1, to "End poverty in all its forms everywhere," certainly corresponds to the vision Nelson Mandela would have had for our times. And he definitely would have agreed with the vow to 'leave no one behind,' since he emphasized that "a Nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones." However, the extreme concentration of wealth that we have seen over the past decades threatens the achievement not only of Goal 1, but of the entire 2030 Agenda. Countries have become richer, but governments have become poor due to a massive shift towards private capital. And yet we desperately need governments to provide leadership in order to create more just, peaceful and inclusive societies, as set out as Goal 16, with effective and accountable institutions and participatory, inclusive and representative decision-making at all levels.

Meeting the goals we have set for ourselves is possible, if we work together - governments, civil society, the private sector, and those who are directly affected by poverty and inequality - to find solutions to the tremendous challenges we face today. This task will require a courage and moral fortitude equal to that demonstrated by Nelson Mandela. On that day in Trafalgar Square, he said, "Do not look the other way; do not hesitate...Act with courage and vision." And he ended by saying: "Sometimes it falls upon a generation to be great. You can be that great generation. Let your greatness blossom... Then we can all stand with our heads held high."

To truly commemorate this great man, we must carry on his legacy.

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