

Address by Thabo Mbeki to the 118th Inter-Parliamentary Union Assembly

Cape Town, 13 April 2008

Chairperson,
President of the IPU, Ferdinand Casini
Secretary-General of the IPU, Anders B. Johnsson
Speaker of the South African National Assembly, Baleka Mbete,
Deputy Secretary-General of the UN, Asha Rose Migiro
Members of the IPU,
Distinguished delegates and guests,
Ladies and gentlemen:

It is great privilege for me to address you this evening and share with you some thoughts on the theme for this year's Inter-Parliamentary Union Assembly: Pushing back the frontiers of poverty.

I am confident that all of you, our distinguished visitors, will find South Africa and its people warm and welcoming. I have no doubt that the deliberations of this Assembly will be fruitful and its outcomes will help all our elected representatives to do everything in their power to intensify the struggle against poverty and underdevelopment.

As we all know, when this Inter-Parliamentary Union was formed in 1889, the majority of the people of the world were denied the right to vote and none of the participating countries had granted their women citizens the right to vote at the national level, the first country in the world to give suffrage to women at the national level being New Zealand,. Four years after the formation of this Union, in 1893.

Indeed, not only were many parts of the world denied democracy, but the overwhelming majority of the human beings did not enjoy peace and security as resistance to colonialism and foreign occupation defined the existence of this majority.

Naturally, in these conditions, the Inter-Parliamentary Union would not have contemplated deliberations on a theme that is the focus of this Assembly – Pushing back the frontiers of poverty!

This historical reality tells us that democracy, peace and security are some of the essential requirements if humanity is to win the struggle against poverty and attain the goal of a better life for all.

As South Africans and Africans we are happy that you have chosen to focus on this matter because poverty negates the very essence of humanity and can lead many who subsist in poor conditions to a sense of hopelessness, despair, desperation and even anger against society and its important institutions, such as parliament.

This is particularly so today, because humanity has reached highest level of economic, scientific and cultural advancement, while poverty exists cheek by jowl with incredible affluence.

Billions of people in various parts of the world live in conditions of degradation and marginalization is what has been called poverty reserves, in both urban and rural areas.

Among the tasks the clearly face parliamentarians is continuous engagement with citizens so that these people, themselves, are better equipped to help create conditions for individuals to give full expression to their innate abilities, as part of the effort to guarantee them full enjoyment of freedom.

In most instances, poverty is defined by the wretchedness of the lives of people, lives characterized by hunger, disease and lack of resources and assets. Poverty is also characterized by a self perpetuating

condition of powerlessness, which is multi generational reality that impacts on the next generation even before birth.

As the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen put it:

"Poverty is not only a condition of low income and lack of assets. It is a condition of vulnerability, exclusion and powerlessness. It is the erosion of (the peoples) capability to be free from fear and hunger and have their voices heard." (Amartya Kumar Sen – Development as Freedom)

Clearly, in our efforts to push back the frontiers of poverty we should, among other things, adopt measures that restore people's dignity, empower them with resources that free them from the fear that today's meal may be the last; the fear to face the dark of night because the nightly piercing cries of hungry children induce perpetual nightmares.

Our interventions should confront the challenge of inter-generation poverty. They should necessarily entail a gender perspective to development so as to enhance the contribution of women to development and ensure their equitable participation in public and civic life by strengthening their ability to become effective players in programmes that address issues of poverty and social equity.

Indeed, as we know, history has proven, again and again, that the liberation of women and ensuring full participation of women in all institutions of society, including parliament and government, are the necessary conditions for accelerated and sustainable development.

Part of the challenge as we work together to push back the frontiers of poverty is to strengthen democracy and ensure peace and security, in all parts of the world, especially here on the African continent.

Peace, democracy and the availability of resources, both human and material, are indispensable defining elements in the fight to push back the frontiers of poverty. We all know that the certainty of peace allows people space to build social, economic and political institutions that underline the march of progress.

Prevalence of peace, which, necessarily, entails the absence of internecine violence and instability in a nation, makes it possible for people to unleash their manifold talents, engaging in sustainable productive activity in various socio-economic areas whose aggregate output works out to the greater good of society.

There is therefore a dynamic relationship between democracy and political stability on the one hand, and development coupled with poverty eradication on the other.

Accordingly, without freeing up this vast human potential through the creation of conditions of peace and stability conducive to economic productivity, society will find it hard to defeat poverty and underdevelopment.

We are referring to these important elements of democracy, peace and the empowerment of the people in the fight against poverty, because our own history, as South Africans, tells us that, had we failed to defeat apartheid and bring about these important conditions of democracy, peace and empowerment of the people, our nation would have degenerated into a racial conflagration that would have reduced it to rack and ruin with no possibility to begin the struggle against poverty and underdevelopment.

We are indeed referring to these matters because our own experience, as Africans, has taught us that an important constraint in the fight against poverty and underdevelopment in some of our countries on the African continent, has been lack of democracy, peace and the empowerment of ordinary people, especially women.

We are indeed referring to these matters because we would like to suggest to this conclave of the people's representatives from across the world to help all of us the better to respond to them.

Chairperson,

There are other critical matters, which, from our point of view as Africans and as part of developing countries, we would like this leadership to deliberate on and find common ground as we join forces together to push back the frontiers of poverty.

Today, while there are enough resources to feed all of humanity we are faced with serious challenges around food security.

Indeed, recently it has been reported that at least five people have died in violent protests against high food and fuel prices in Haiti's capital, while there were similar disturbances in Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Mauritania, Ethiopia, Madagascar, the Philippines, Indonesia and other countries in the past month.

It has been reported that in Pakistan and Thailand, military units have been deployed to avoid the seizure of food from fields and warehouses.

In its latest Crop Prospects and Food Situation Report, the Food and Agriculture Organisation said thirty-seven countries currently face food crises.

Commenting on this situation, Jacques Diouf, the Director General of the FAO, last week said, among other things, that soaring cereal prices are a growing threat to world peace and security and to the human rights of developing countries facing food crises.

He told a news conference in Rome, "I am surprised I have not been summoned to the UN Security Council, since many problems discussed there do not have the same consequences for peace and security in the world and the human rights of people who need to be fed". (From uk.oneworld.net)

He further said that new funding of between \$1.2 billion and \$1.7 billion is needed to help developing countries deal with the food crisis.

Diouf said seed prices have risen 36 percent for maize and 72 percent for wheat, while fertiliser has gone up 59 percent and animal feed 62 percent.

Again, Diouf attributes this crisis to issues such as political and economic factors, global warming, rising demand for bio-fuel, rising meat consumption and speculation on commodity futures.

Jose Sumpsi, Diouf's assistant for technical cooperation, also said: "The markets are not working well. A few operators are controlling everything, raising the prices of inputs."

Sumpsi also said that not only the global market but also regional, national and local market systems needed reform.

Further, part of the challenges around the issues of food security can be found in the evolution of agricultural policies of the countries of the North. One such policy was the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Economic Community, the predecessor of the European Union. This Policy has, since the 1950's, offered subsidies to farmers and guaranteed prices against the risk of volatile markets.

The US Farm Bill of 1949 was similar to the Common Agricultural Policy of European Economic Community. In fact, in the USA, small family farms merged over decades into large units attracting the

bulk of the subsidies. Firms dealing with input chemicals, food processing and distribution also became concentrated into very large "agribusiness" corporations.

When agriculture was included in the world trading rules from 1995, these farm support programmes in the EU and USA remained in place. By 2006 the OECD estimated that annual farm subsidies in developed countries totalled \$362 billion, more than half the GDP of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Today it is estimated that the annual subsidy of each European cow is several times greater than the average earnings of an African farmer. Indeed, these subsidies in the EU and US protect a small percentage of the workforce while blocking development in the world's poorest countries where billions of livelihoods are derived from agriculture.

At the same time, and thanks to these subsidies, the era of deregulation of world markets and capital flows allowed agribusiness to expand its grip on the world market, to the extent that they own about a third of the world's productive land and control 75% of global farm trade.

Clearly, such industry concentration makes for unfair competition, inefficient markets and inappropriate influence over policy areas such as trade regulations.

Because these policies are part of the obstacles that make it difficult for developing countries to achieve security, we urge this leadership to look seriously into these matters if we are indeed to make progress in pushing back the frontiers of poverty.

As the delegates are aware, the majority of Africans on our continent depend on agriculture for their livelihood. That is why I thought it appropriate to make some remarks on important elements of the global agricultural sector. And indeed, for the same reason, the Doha Development Round is paying particular attention to this matter.

Chairperson,

I am certain that the delegates are familiar with the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), the development programme of the African Union.

In the context of the critical matter of food security, we have adopted the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP). Among the main pillars of the Programme are: Extending the area under sustainable land management and reliable water control systems; Improving rural infrastructure and trade-related capacities for market access; Increasing food supply and reducing hunger; as well as Agricultural research, technology dissemination and adoption.

Clearly, the implementation of this Programme needs substantial resources. Accordingly, among other things, it has been agreed that all African countries should allocate at least 10% of their national budgets to agriculture.

I mention this Programme to this gathering, Chairperson, because we clearly need the support of both public representatives of the developed countries as well as those from the countries of the South to become our partners in this fight against hunger.

Indeed, if we were to succeed, as we should, in achieving food security we would have gone a long way in pushing back the frontiers of poverty.

Chairperson,

The 2000 UN Millennium Summit Meeting recognised the critical need for the international community to join in partnership to fight poverty. The progress made thus far, and indeed the lack thereof, with regard to meeting the Millennium Development Goals underline the central importance of the necessary political will to meet our declared objectives.

The latest, April 2008, Progress Review of the Millennium Development Goals says:

"These extracts from 40 OneWorld Country Guides offer a unique snapshot of progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, now more than midway to the target date of 2015. With some exceptions, the picture is not encouraging, confirming the conclusions of the UN Report published in July 2007. Recurring problems include the failure of conventional economic growth to relieve poverty, extreme regional disparities, inadequate spending on health and education, and insufficient aid. A seismic shift in political will, both domestically and internationally, is necessary to realise the ideals of the Millennium Declaration." (uk.oneworld.net)

This Review is important for all of us as we continue to seek better ways of implementing international agreements, which are central to our efforts to push back the frontiers of poverty, focusing especially on those countries, which have clearly no possibility to meet the MDGs by depending on their own resources.

The Progress Review says about Benin that it "has a very underdeveloped economy with about half of its people considered poor or extremely poor. Over a quarter of the population suffers from such extreme poverty that it cannot meet its own basic food requirements".

About Burundi the Review notes that the country is most unlikely to meet the MDG's. Decades of political turmoil and conflict made the GDP to fall by 20% and extreme poverty increased from 33% to 67%.

Similarly, the situation in Cambodia is also not good, with 35% of the population said to be living below the poverty line and 80% surviving on less than US\$2 per day.

Indeed, the Review shows that countries as diverse as Georgia, the Philippines, Peru, Malawi, Yemen, Uzbekistan and others are facing serious challenges with regard to poverty reduction.

Yet, Chairperson, as the international community, we have failed to implement the many good decisions aimed at pushing back the frontiers of poverty.

These critical decisions, which only need the necessary political will to implement, include the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation on the issues of sustainable development; the Monterrey Financing for Development, G8 Africa Action Plan and others. This also includes the urgent and successful completion of the Doha Development Round.

As the Marshall Plan at the end of the Second World War, and the contemporary Regional Programme of the EU demonstrate, decisively to push back the frontiers of poverty requires significant and sustained resource transfers from the richer to the poorer countries, for productive purposes.

Experience of the evolution of the process of globalisation shows that these transfers will not happen automatically, driven by the operation of market forces. They can only take place on the basis of conscious decisions based on the shared understanding that poverty constitutes a structural fault in the global human society, and that, because of this, no society anywhere in the world can insulate itself from the negative consequences of global poverty.

At the height of the Cold War, parliamentarians across the globe stood in the forefront of the world movement that fought for comprehensive nuclear disarmament, given the universal recognition of the fact that nuclear warfare threatened the very existence of human society.

I am convinced that our contemporary parliamentarians, organised in the IPU, now have the challenge to occupy the front ranks in the struggle to push back the frontiers of poverty, recognising the fact that poverty constitutes a serious threat to the cohesion of human society.

Accordingly, we plead with the leadership gathered in this hall, that in order for all of us successfully to push back the frontiers of poverty we should urge our parliaments and governments to implement the many decisions we have taken at the national, regional and international levels that would help us to advance towards the achievement of the noble goal of a better life to all of humanity.

I wish you a successful Assembly.

Thank you.