

Poverty, Inequality and Discrimination: OMCT action addressing the Economic, Social and Cultural Root Causes of Violence

"How to prevent or reduce violence, including torture, by acting on its root causes often found in violations of economic, social and cultural rights, ... goes to the very heart of human rights protection."

Ms. Louise Arbour

United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights (2004-2008) ^[1]

"The overwhelming majority of those subjected to torture and ill-treatment are ...from the lowest strata of society."

Sir Nigel Rodley

UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and
other cruel, inhuman or degrading
treatment or punishment (1993-2001)
^[2]

Since the late 1980s, OMCT has been concerned to address the economic, social and cultural root causes of torture and the other forms of violence within the organisation's mandate.

The research^[3] carried out by OMCT demonstrated the strong links between failure to respect economic, social and cultural rights and violence, including torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, summary or arbitrary executions, forced disappearances, violence against women and violence against children. For example:

- People living in informal settlements are regularly attacked by police and others; their poverty and marginalisation makes them easy and defenceless targets.
- Indigenous people and rural communities are forcefully evicted from their land to make way for economic development projects that fail to take into account their rights.
- Persons peacefully demonstrating because of the rising cost of living and lack of work are attacked by the police, ill-treated and even killed.
- Individuals, community leaders and human rights activists defending economic, social and cultural rights are the target of government repression and attacks by private security forces.
- Certain government economic and development policies increase the poverty and marginalisation of sectors of society which leads to increased violence and extremism.

Finally, violence severely undermines economic and social development and thus, in turn,

perpetuates poverty. For more information on how disrespect for economic, social and cultural rights can lead to torture and other forms of violence.

That poverty, inequality and discrimination can lead to violence is not only a conclusion of human rights research. UN agencies, such as the United Nations Development Group, in a number of their Common Country Assessments (CCA), have also clearly established the link and called for specific government action to address those root causes.^[4]

What does OMCT do?

Based on its experience, OMCT launched in 2007 a project entitled "**Preventing torture and other forms of violence by acting on their economic, social and cultural root causes**". That project is designed help protect individuals and groups from torture and other forms of violence by identifying and acting on their economic, social and cultural root causes. This includes examining the links between violations of economic, social and cultural rights and violence, developing targeted recommendations for action on the national and international levels and building the capacity of national nongovernmental organizations to undertake such action. This website is one of the results of that project. Learn more about the project.

Under the project, OMCT works with national NGOs to strengthen their capacity to address the economic, social and cultural root causes of torture and other forms of violence nationally and internationally. Seminars and training courses are organised to help build NGO capacity and NGO representatives are assisted in taking part in UN meetings. Internationally, OMCT works with NGOs to prepare action files and appeals in urgent cases addressed to the UN, governments, development institutions and the private sector and alternative reports to United Nations Treaty Bodies. OMCT also works with the institutions of the European Union and undertakes advocacy activities.

For information:

- Press releases;
- The World Organisation Against Torture and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights;
- Influencing the UN System: The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights;
- OMCT Action files on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights;
- Report on implementing OMCT's Project, Preventing torture and other forms of violence by acting on their economic, social and cultural root causes: January 2007 to March 2010.

Lessons learned

OMCT's work has shown that addressing the economic, social and cultural root causes of violence through the appropriate channels has a real potential to reduce human rights abuses. This also can increase the space for economic, social and cultural development, reduce poverty and limit the temptations of extremism.

Demonstrating that violations of economic, social and cultural rights can lead to torture and other serious forms of violence strengthens the pressure for action not only on States, which do not want to see their economic and social policies explicitly linked to violence, but also on the corporate sector, banks and development agencies. While OMCT aims to ensure respect for all human rights, and in particular economic, social and cultural rights in government economic, development and other policies, it does not seek to determine what those policies should be.

Recommendations for effective action

Effectively eliminating torture and other forms of violence in a society requires multidimensional and integrated action aimed at ensuring the implementation of all human rights; civil, cultural, economic, political and social. Experience has shown that acting only on selected causes of violence has little chance of success. Thus, with regard to alternative reports to UN Treaty Bodies, OMCT has submitted reports on the economic, social and cultural root causes of torture to the Committee Against Torture and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights with regard to the Philippines (CESCR report and CAT report) and Kenya (CESCR report and CAT report). While each report responded to the specific treaty, they were submitted with a view to providing the Committees with the basis for mutually reinforcing recommendations.

In addition, when following up on the recommendations of the respective Committees with regard to those two countries, OMCT approached national authorities on the basis of the combined recommendations of the two Committees. This was in order to help address the implementation gap which can appear when on the national level the recommendations of the Committees are implemented separately through distinct channels.

The *recommendations* developed in the alternative reports include specific programmes of preventive measures based on the identification of the sectors of the population most at risk. They involve focused action for economic, social and cultural development (employment creation, housing, education, nutrition and health initiatives, actions respecting and promoting culture etc), reinforcing measures to ensure compliance by public authorities with legal standards and good practice (strengthening and training of the judiciary, police, local administration, military authorities etc) and the establishment of a permanent monitoring function with the participation of those directly concerned.

Finally, OMCT recommends the adoption of a human rights based approach to economic and development policy that would include human-rights impact assessments of government economic policy and development projects, including those by the private sector.

Multidimensional recommendations are also made, where appropriate, in OMCT action files .

It is important to remember that:

- **Economic, social and cultural rights are "real" human rights**, that is, in many cases they are subject to enforcement by courts, they are justiciable. Courts on the national level are increasingly enforcing economic, social and cultural rights in ways similar to civil and political rights as are international monitoring organs as many cases have illustrated. (The role of the courts in protecting economic, social and cultural rights)
- **NGOs can make a difference** : Participants in OMCT's 2005 international conference reported a growing realization that NGO, through complaints, advocacy, lobbying and information campaigns can be effective in changing policies and programmes which pose a threat to economic and social rights and thus reduce the risks of torture, ill-treatment and other forms of violence including violence against women and children.
- **You too can help** : By becoming aware of how poverty, inequality and discrimination lead to violence in your community, by raising awareness in your community and with your national

policy makers of the need to protect the poor from violence, and by sending reliable information to OMCT about cases and policies that need to be addressed. It is on the level of each individual and each community that this issue must be addressed; you can do much to help.

References

1. OMCT, Attacking the Root Causes of Torture: Poverty, Inequality and Violence - An Interdisciplinary Study, Geneva, 2006, p.9
2. Sir Nigel Rodley, UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment U.N. Doc. A/55/290, para. 35 (August 2000)
3. See OMCT's pioneering research regarding the economic, social and cultural root causes of violence notably the 2005 Interdisciplinary Study "Attacking the Root Causes of Torture: Poverty, Inequality and Violence" and the International Conference "Poverty, Inequality and Violence: Is there a Human Rights Response?" (Geneva, October 2005).
4. See for example OMCT Alternative reports to the Committee Against Torture on the Economic, Social and Cultural Root Causes of Torture in the Philippines and Uzbekistan and to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights also in relation to the Philippines. See also Chapter 8, Uzbekistan, of the Interdisciplinary Study and the CCA in the Study's reference documents.

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