

December 10th- Human Rights Day 2006

Dear Friends,

As we celebrate Human Rights Day with the global community this December 10th, the Human Rights Project of the Urban Justice Center would like to invite you to participate in a series of conversations dedicated to realizing this year's theme: **"Fighting Poverty, a matter of Obligation not Charity!"**

New York City is well suited to launch a renewed fight against poverty in the United States for many reasons, some hopeful, others unfortunate. While the City has a rich history of protecting the rights of the disaffected, it is also home to the poorest urban county and the largest income disparities in the nation. Mayor Bloomberg deserves commendation for his initiative in tackling poverty with the creation of the New York City Commission for Economic Opportunity (CEO). The CEO report released earlier this year had several recommendations consistent with the human rights approach, but it fell short of naming the City as the primary duty-bearer in the fight against poverty. Unfortunately, we will not be able to eradicate poverty if we continue to view it as an aspiration not a duty. A shift that recognizes our duty to fight poverty would reflect the human rights approach.

We view the fight against poverty as an aspiration because ours is a culture that too often blames the poor for their circumstance and so we think of helping the poor as optional. We have long espoused the virtues of hard work and a free market economy as a guarantee against poverty. Yet according to the recent CEO report over 46% percent of households living in poverty in New York City have the head of household working. Clearly, work alone does not guarantee against living in poverty. We must begin to view poverty through a human rights lens and that means recognizing all the factors that perpetuate poverty including discrimination, stigmatization, and unequal access to resources. More than a simple lack of income, poverty is about the whole set of conditions in which people without an adequate income are likely to find themselves. People living in poverty are more likely to lack adequate and safe shelter; die from a preventable disease; be exposed to violence including state perpetrated violence; be involved with the foster care system; have inadequate representation in court; attend an under-funded school; and live in a toxic environment. These are all factors that we have an obligation to address under the human rights system, and that the United States has even committed to fight in signing onto a number of human rights treaties.

Our approach to fighting poverty must move beyond its reliance on the charity and good will of people in power. While charity and good will are important and necessary aspects of this fight, they are too dependent on the whim of those in power. And the poor are often not in positions of power nor are they adequately represented in the policy-making arena. As promised by human rights, we must accept that fighting poverty is an obligation of our government. If the government is of the people, by the people and FOR the people, then we must demand that the government help all of us live free from poverty. Starting in January, we will be kicking-off a ten month campaign to connect anti-poverty activists to human rights mechanisms and to educate the publicly elected officials about the human rights approach to fighting poverty. Please visit our website at www.hrpujc.org for more details on how you can participate. We look forward to working with you in 2007! Thank you.

—Ejim Dike, Human Rights Project
Saturday, December 10, 2006