

## For being a woman, for being indigenous, for being black...

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In the last decade, the process of globalisation deepened historic inequities, led to more poverty, and reduced opportunities for human development for the majority of Hondurans. In this period, imbalances between rural and urban areas and rich and poor people grew, and exclusions by class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and age increased.

While the government enacted legal and institutional reforms to strengthen representative democracy and the respect of human rights, it also undertook structural transformations demanded by the international financial organisations. Honduras was inserted into the global market on terms unfavourable to most Hondurans, and given little opportunity to implement an independent and sustainable program.

The arrival of political democracy was expressed in judicial system reforms, the creation of a public ministry and National Commission of Human Rights, legal modification of the traditionally authoritarian political parties, reduction of the army and influence of military powers in the governance of the country, and elimination of mandatory recruitment. Nevertheless, structural problems persisted and were aggravated by corruption, impunity, centralised government, authoritarianism, a two-party political system, citizen insecurity resulting from the rise of violence, increasing poverty and the influence of international financial organisations on the internal affairs of the country.

After Hurricane Mitch (1998), there was general consensus that reconstruction should be considered an opportunity to transform the region. More than two years later, the Stockholm proposals adopted at the Meeting for the Consultant Group for Central America, have not materialised. Furthermore, these have been diluted by large infrastructural projects that will benefit national and foreign firms. The National Reconstruction Plan has not contributed to reducing the vulnerability of poor sectors, which were the most severely affected.

### Deficient growth, structural poverty and a high concentration of income

Honduras has registered historically low growth in GDP with an average *per capita* growth of 0.5% from 1920 to 1999. Structural poverty affects 62.1% of the population (with a trend toward feminisation of poverty), and income distribution is concentrated. In 1991, the lowest quintile of society received an income equivalent to 5% of the income of the richest quintile; this figure dropped to 2.3% in 1999, which reveals impoverishment and a widening gap between the rich and the poor. In rural areas, poverty grew from 70.8% in 1991 to 72.6% in 1999. The percentage of poor women and poor men was similar in 1991, but in 1999 the percentage of poor women was greater.<sup>1</sup>

Social compensation policies, implemented through the Family Assignment Program (PRAF) and the Honduran Social Investment Fund (FHIS), did not have the expected effect on poverty relief. Recently, the government elaborated and approved a Poverty Reduction Strategy (2000) with a 15-year implementation period. This strategy establishes no measures to correct the neoliberal economic model, which is responsible for deepening structural poverty.

Honduras was eligible for the second phase of the Heavily Indebted Countries Initiative (HIPC-II), approved at the G-7 in Cologne, Germany, in 1999, but favourable effects of the debt relief have not been felt and the country has contracted significant new debts. A report of the Social Forum on the External Debt and Development of Honduras (FOSDEH) concludes that the HIPC is unsustainable: the objectives of the HIPC Letter of Intention are incompatible with the Poverty Reduction Strategy, because the former promotes an economic model that expands the inequities that create and increase poverty.

In the 1990s, the country registered increases in average levels of education and literacy, and, though the pace of change was slower than expected, these indicators were significantly balanced by gender. Still, enormous imbalances persist in the most excluded social sector (indigenous and black people), with sources indicating illiteracy percentages greater than 80%.<sup>2</sup>

The 20/20 Initiative goal of allocating 20% of the national budget to basic social services, agreed at the Social Summit in Copenhagen in 1995, has not yet been achieved. According to official data from the Technical Support Unit (UNAT), expenditures for education and healthcare as a percentage of the GDP dropped from 4.2% and 3% respectively in 1990 to 3.8% and 2.7% in 1998.

### Inequity affecting women...

In the 1990s, there were positive advances toward closing the gender gap in legislation, institutions and public policies. This progress resulted from the mobilisation and growth of the women's movement and pressure from international organisations. There are still persistent inequities that affect the human development of women and girls.

The Gender-Relative Development Index shows inequalities in income. Women's income is equivalent to 80% of the average national income, while male income is 111%.<sup>3</sup> In terms of political participation, under the last administration women held 33% of ministerial positions, but only 10% of seats in parliament and 15% in municipal governments.

Maternal mortality remains high (147 deaths for each 10 thousand births). Ten per cent of maternal deaths is caused by the lack of legal and institutional guarantees for safe abortions, which mainly affects poor women dependent on public health services. Private and public violence against women continues to be an important problem, and there has been no significant increase of capacity in the specialised institutions nationwide (Family Councils and Women's Prosecutor's Office).

<sup>2</sup> *La Prensa*, 10 August 2000.

<sup>3</sup> UNDP, *op. cit.*

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Development Program (UNDP). *Human Development Report 2000*. Editorama S.A.

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### ...and affecting indigenous or black

Historically, indigenous and black people have not been a priority of government. In the last decade, indigenous and black people united in a belligerent social movement with a great capacity for mobilisation, to defend their right to land, their human rights as minorities, and the right to satisfaction of basic needs of their communities. While it has had some influence on negotiations, the movement has suffered repression, persecution and, in recent years, the assassination of leaders such as Cándido Amador and Ovidio Pérez of the Chortis people.

The document "Summary of commitments contracted between the government and indigenous and black peoples" for the period 1994 to 1998, states that only 21.8% of these commitments has been met, 57.3% has not, and 14.6% is pending.<sup>4</sup>

### The action of social movements

In the last decade, environmental and ecological movements have played a significant role in the defense of natural resources and the environment. The movement has remained in permanent opposition to the depredation of natural ecosystems by transnational corporations. An example is the coastal mangrove swamps in southern Honduras, where one of the largest industrial shrimp complexes in the world operates, and where the movement achieved approval of the Protected Areas Decree (1998).

The women's movement grew significantly during the decade, with the rise of organisations and organised groups in every department of the country. Network initiatives, such as the Collective Against Violence, were strengthened. For the first time in the history of Honduras, on 17 October 2000, more than 10,000 women met simultaneously in nine cities in the World Women's March initiative. The women also presented a document with proposals to the central and municipal governments, basically aimed at the elimination of poverty and violence against women.

The last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw the rise of the gay and lesbian movement, in the framework of the defense of their human rights and the recognition of their citizen's rights. The movement defends the human rights of HIV/AIDS infected persons. It favoured approval of the Special HIV/AIDS Law (1998), which guarantees, among other things, the right to employment and health care, but not public provision of medicine.

In the 1990s, the union movement entered a deep crisis because of the lack of leadership, divisions surrounding traditional leaders, new emerging worker interests, and the lack of new strategies and alternatives for struggle. The unions were anchored in traditional economist demands that did not reflect the changes in gender and age of working people.

In the export maquila sector, which generates 130,000 jobs in Honduras, 80% of employees are women with an average age of 21 years. A group formed by women's and human rights organisations, the Catholic church, and other social groups, created an independent team to monitor and denounce labour violations of women workers.

In the framework of reconstruction following Hurricane Mitch, new spaces for social participation opened and various local initiatives and national coalitions, such as INTERFOROS, appeared. New social actors (women, environmentalists, and indigenous peoples) have emerged. Local and national processes are being articulated along with global initiatives. Groups have emerged to monitor and follow-up on public policies and commitments and coordinate various social initiatives, and the social movement has been decentralised to local spaces. These civil society initiatives represent the main trends in the search for alternatives to overcome poverty in the face of neoliberal globalisation of recent years. ■

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4 Confederación de Pueblos Autóctonos de Honduras (CONPAH) (Honduran Confederation of Native Peoples) - UNDP, *Op. cit.*