

Position Paper on Poverty and Social Exclusion

Introduction

Poverty and social exclusion grow every day, reaching a tragic dimension that hurts individuals and communities, especially young people, becoming a structural and permanent reality. In fact, extreme poverty rates have been cut by more than half since 1990. While this is a remarkable achievement, one in five people in developing regions still live on less than \$1.25 a day, and there are millions more who make little more than this daily amount, plus many people risk slipping back into poverty.¹ For this reason the first Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) that the United Nations have adopted from 2015 and 2030 is: “End poverty in all its forms everywhere”.

Fight against poverty finds a strong motivation in the preferential option or love of the Church for the poor. Unfortunately, more than ever, we underline that together with poverty, there is the dissemination of the inhuman phenomenon of social exclusion. As Pope Francis indicates in *Evangelii Gaudium* 53: Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be a part of the society in which we live; those excluded are no longer society’s underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised – they are no longer even a part of it. The excluded are not the “exploited” but the outcast, the “leftovers”.

Defining Poverty

The Salesians of Don Bosco aim to offer a service to young people who are poor: in the first place for youngsters who because of economic, social and cultural poverty have no possibility of success in life; for those who are poor at an affective, moral and spiritual level; and for those who live on the fringe of society.

As Salesians of Don Bosco and the whole Salesian Family, we are active in the fight against poverty, understood in the broader sense which goes beyond the mere economic meaning, and includes:

- Limited access to education, culture, housing, work;
- Lack of recognition and achievement of human dignity;
- The fact that they are often disbarred from exercising real citizenship.

Being present in 132 countries in the World, we find many realities that threaten the possibilities of growth of young people, becoming causes of social exclusion. Among these we note:

- The deterioration of areas with strong social problems in the peripheries of cities and the increasing presence of poor people within most of these affluent cities.

¹ <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/poverty/>

- Poverty that affects the migrant population: obstacles to regularisation, restricted access to the labour market, the difficulties involved in the learning of language and culture.
- Increased unemployment among young people, generating processes of social and personal degradation.
- The difficulties of living together in an intolerant multicultural society marked with a lack of acceptance of difference and the creation of ghettos.
- A crisis in the family's ability to educate its young and in the school system, perceptible in a high rate of school failure.
- The abandonment of children by their families and the increase in the number of minors suffering exclusion within their own families.
- The exclusion of particular groups of young people from processes of social integration leading to an increase in situations of addiction, violence, intolerance, gangs and sects.

The Salesian response to Youth Poverty and Exclusion

Situations of poverty and social exclusion have a strong social impact and, unfortunately, they tend to persist. We cannot remain indifferent in the face of all this. It urges us to put immediate short and medium term responses in place (cf. GC21, no.158; GC22, nos.6, 72; GC23, nos.203-214), so that by overcoming injustice and social inequality, we will be able to give the young opportunities to build their life in a positive way and be able to fit themselves responsibly into society.

a. What do we do?

Many of the works and services for youth at risk of exclusion offer a new pedagogical and Salesian model and, therefore, require professional competence, specialised programmes and collaboration with civil and religious institutions. An overview of these works is offered here:

- Works for street children: school-home, day care centres, family homes. Along with these are residential resources for young homeless people. There are reception centres for refugees and displaced persons, young drifters living on the streets, on city outskirts;
- Services for young people with special needs: minors under protection orders or in the penal system; prisoners; child soldiers; children exploited by sex tourism and abuse;
- Young people who need special education due to physical and mental disabilities;
- Attention to immigrants: literacy; psycho-pedagogical support at school; legal advice to regularise their situation; contributions to social and professional skills; participation and integration in context;
- Reception and accompaniment for recovery and rehabilitation: drug addicts, kids with behavioural problems, HIV-AIDS;
- Alternative educational services for coping with the problem of school failures: socio-educational projects; professional training workshops for pre-employment; additional

classes for scholastic reinforcement; socio-professional workshops; courses for training the unemployed; educational support programmes;

- Integration in poor neighbourhoods and cultural activities in fringe areas; activities which take in and accompany victims of violence, war and religious fanaticism;
- Centres which give attention and support to education by the family; services addressed to young people who suffer because they come from dysfunctional families, families without a home or in sub-standard accommodation;
- Specific services for the promotion of women: literacy, responsible parenthood, health education and hygiene.

b. How do we do it?

Our practice is guided by the **criteria** that underpin our educative proposal which, in turn, is based on the Preventive System of Don Bosco, the founder of the Salesians:

1. **Youth participation and integral education:** We believe that we can tap into a range of possibilities for the future of young people at risk, provided we manage to involve them in the process of their growth and integral development. Our goal is to lead young people to consciously and responsibly assume those values that guide and give meaning to their lives, so that they become protagonists of their individual process of maturation.
2. **Prevention:** Directly linked to the pedagogical and spiritual methodology characteristic of the Salesian charism, the Preventive System tries to tackle problems before they become too difficult to reverse and attempts to do so through the style of education that knows its beginning to Don Bosco.
3. **Evangelizing Criterion:** In the Salesian Family, we share the Good News of the Gospel with the young through our work of education as the two go hand in hand. In this sense, the evangelising criterion should express itself in a gradual educational process, developing roadmaps that are simple and yet closely linked to everyday life, and that respect the different rhythms and starting points of each individual.
4. **Inter-culture and religious diversity:** Some youths in our target group have other religious persuasions or none at all. Our educational proposal seeks to accompany these youths in a process of personal growth marked by respect for their beliefs. We endeavor to help them grow as people in a world we want to be characterized by dialogue, mutual recognition and respect for others' convictions while holding on to one's own beliefs.
5. **Family and community:** Some adolescents and youths live a lonely life, as though existing in an emotional desert. Lacking roots and solid points of reference they are often obliged to shape their personal identity just with reference to themselves. Faced with such situations we trust in the young persons' capacity to take their future in their hands and the possibility of opening themselves up to a different reality. We do this while embracing a caring attentiveness to their needs and those of their families.
6. **Socio-political commitment:** Every Salesian presence promotes a social culture that provokes and nourishes positive changes in young people's choices and behaviors. It fosters attitudes that become a culture of welcome, respect, generosity, gratuitousness, justice and peace. This requires caring for, and cultivating, the social and political

formation of the educators and the young people themselves. This process is completed when one assumes his or her responsibility towards the group and society, in the quest for the contribution one can make to build up the common good.

7. **Networking:** Working to enhance cooperation between all socio-educational services in a certain area, we try to establish and share an educational system that accompanies the young. We endeavor to reach agreement on joint programmes that encourage a vision of the youth as a whole person with interconnected needs. In an effort to maintain continuity in young people's life we also intervene at the point where others would have finished.

Social and Political Perspective: tackling the roots of the problem

Starting from practice...

*"Young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of (...) the sufferings of the excluded"*² The Salesian response to youth exclusion is also necessarily a social and political one. These kinds of works and services should promote a culture of the 'other', of moderation, peace, justice understood as respecting the right that everyone has to live a dignified life. Hence our works also take on a prophetic dimension, promoting a change of mentality, collaborating in the transformation of the social and political landscape, in a commitment to justice.

Educational activity in these works prepares and supports young people to commit themselves in their territory. Our aim is to accompany them in this commitment, helping them be active in different fields: in the field of education, social exclusion, development, politics, trade unionism, defense of culture and historical heritage, health, science and technology, ecology and economics.

Effecting advocacy...

It is necessary to tackle the struggle against poverty and social exclusion as a structural challenge. Constant reflection on these themes, on how they influence youths and families, requires a systematic collaboration between the various institutions involved.

As Salesians we want to transform social reality and make it as inclusive as possible for youth at risk. For this reason, the 27th General Chapter of the Salesians decided to make young people living in poverty a priority. This explains the involvement of Don Bosco International and other Salesian networks in platforms that combat poverty in various parts of the world. Hence, we consider it necessary:

² Pope Francis, Letter Enciclica *Laudato Si*, 13.



DON BOSCO INTERNATIONAL

Salesians of Don Bosco in European institutions

- To create and increase an awareness of the importance of networking with other institutions in the elaboration of educational, familial, juvenile, and urban policies, etc., that are able to prevent and overcome the structural causes of the inequality;
- To reinforce the presence of Salesian Provinces and other Salesian organizations in the competent civil institutions to follow the evolution of youth and social policies, to participate in reflection and legislative decisions, and to be the voice of those who are not heard;
- To promote in all our works a culture of respect for Human Rights, particularly among minors, through the dissemination of information and initiatives promoted by international organizations.
- To collaborate with other civil society organizations to strengthen the Third Sector of Social Action, giving greater visibility to those working in the child and youth sectors, which are often forgotten by governments and institutions.

We do all this in order to educate and support the integral development of children and youth wherever we Salesians are present, and to ensure that full citizenship is accessible to all young people.