

International Consultation on Caste-based Discrimination Held in Kathmandu

Communities affected by caste-based discrimination in Asia, Yemen and Senegal, solidarity networks in several European countries, and international organizations including international NGOs, gathered in Kathmandu for three days from November 29 to December 1, 2011, for an international consultation on good practices and strategies to eliminate caste-based discrimination. The event was organized by International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) in cooperation with Feminist Dalit Organization (FEDO), Nepal National Dalit Social Welfare Organization (NNDSWO) and Dalit NGO Federation. With the participation of 100 people, the consultation began with an inaugural session attended by representatives of the Nepali government, UN Office of the Human Commissioner for Human Rights, the Danish government, and the event organizers. At this session, several speakers welcomed the recent promulgation of an act to criminalize “untouchability” and caste-based discrimination in Nepal, while calling for utmost efforts by the government and legislative bodies to guarantee its full implementation.

The consultation consisted of four sessions: 1) Setting the scene for effective civil society strategies, 2) Effective frameworks, policies and institutions to address caste discrimination: Challenges, good practices and opportunities, 3) Best practices and future strategies for addressing caste discrimination in humanitarian relief and rehabilitation assistance, and 4) Addressing multiple forms of discrimination against Dalit women. There were also workshops on eight themes, during which participants exchanged good practices in each of the specific areas and discussed the draft recommendations. The eight themes were: 1) Effective frameworks, policies and institutions, 2) Addressing multiple discrimination against Dalit women, 3) Humanitarian standards and a framework to eliminate caste-based discrimination in humanitarian response, 4) Forced and bonded labor and discrimination issues in employment, 5) Access to services, resources and development, 6) Public awareness and campaigns against caste discrimination, 7) “Untouchability” practices and inter-community experiences, and 8) Civil society strategies – linking local, national, and international.

The issue of caste-based discrimination, or discrimination based on work and descent, has gained more attention at the international, regional and national levels over the past

decade, and particularly since the World Conference against Racism in 2001 in Durban, South Africa. At the UN level, the former Sub-commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights has created the draft UN Principles and Guidelines for the Elimination of Discrimination based on Work and Descent, and the very significant and important message of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay states, “Caste-based discrimination constitutes the very negation of the human rights principles of equality and non-discrimination. Other seemingly insurmountable walls, such as slavery and apartheid, have been dismantled in the past. We can and must tear down the barriers of caste, too.”

National movements, solidarity platforms and an international network for combating caste-based discrimination have been established while solidarity links among them strengthened. As a result of the international advocacy work of such groups, the UN human rights mechanisms have given more attention and focus to the issue and made important recommendations in their respective reports or concluding observations. Stronger networking and solidarity links have also brought together national platforms in the affected countries for conferences, consultations and workshops.

Yet, one of the most serious concerns shared by all participants rests with the “culture of non-implementation.” While almost all affected countries enacted laws, acts, institutions or programs to address caste-based discrimination many years ago, people still face injustice, exclusion, inequality, and discrimination on daily basis. Session participants undertook a deep analysis and discussion of the issue of the culture of non-implementation. Political will, political structure or framework, equal participation of affected communities in decision-making bodies and administrative processes, human rights education and awareness-raising targeted at law-enforcement agencies, government agencies, the private sector and the general public are the most crucial factors affecting implementation.

Also of serious concern was the issue of multiple forms of discrimination against Dalit women and girls. Women and girls face intersecting forms of discrimination in the spheres of education, employment, health and access to land. Women need to be guaranteed proportional participation in politics and decision-making structures. They need to have equal access to educational and training opportunities to build their capacities. They are particularly vulnerable to various forms of sexual violence, forced and ritual prostitution, trafficking, and domestic violence. Measures should be taken to

increase protection from these crimes.

To conclude the end of two-day program, the consultation adopted Recommendations on Good Practices and Strategies and a draft Joint Declaration and Global Call for Actions to eliminate caste-based discrimination. For the full texts of these documents, please visit the IDSN website.

<http://idsn.org/news-resources/idsn-news/read/article/urgent-global-call-for-action-to-end-caste-discrimination/128/>

(Megumi Komori, IMADR Under-Secretary-General)