



## Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General  
1 December 2016  
English  
Original: French

---

### Commission for Social Development

#### Fifty-fifth session

1-10 February 2017

**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and  
the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:  
priority theme: strategies for the eradication of poverty to  
achieve sustainable development for all**

### **Statement submitted by Fondation Ostad Elahi: éthique et solidarité humaine, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council\***

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

---

\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

Ethics education is a fundamental factor in reducing poverty.

Through this recommendation, Fondation Ostad Elahi wishes to draw attention to the importance of ethics education as a factor in reducing both material and spiritual poverty.

Ethics education essentially involves understanding and applying what is known as the golden rule of ethics: not wishing for others what one would not wish for oneself, and treating others as you would wish to be treated. This formula is equivalent to the principle of “putting oneself in the other person’s place in all circumstances” or “acting in the legitimate interests of others as one would act in one’s own legitimate interests”.

Too few people are aware of the practical individual and collective implications of applying or not applying this principle.

It goes without saying that, when a larger number of people are impacted by the acts of an individual or group (as in the case of political, economic and cultural leaders and decision-makers and so on), the application of this principle promotes social well-being to an even greater extent and becomes a factor of peace and prosperity. Conversely, the risk of unrest and poverty increases when there is less consideration of that principle, because it is evident that a proportion of global poverty is linked to indifference to the fate of other people on the part of some political and economic actors.

The many aims of ethics education include the following:

- Raise awareness of the beliefs that are detrimental to our perception of human nature. For instance, prevailing international economic theory is based on the vision of the individual as selfish and aggressive, thinking only of maximizing profits. This vision — which is directly or indirectly responsible for many situations of poverty, inequality and conflict — has now been largely offset by scientific discoveries about the functioning of the human brain indicating that the brain has its own reward system activated by altruistic and empathic behaviour. This demonstrates that kindness is as much a part of human nature as selfishness and aggression.
- Reduce the negativity bias inherent in human psychological functioning. This functioning leads human beings to attach more importance to the negative aspects of existence than to the positive aspects, while also leading them to consider themselves morally superior to others and to hold on to the belief in their own superiority to others. This negative bias does not encourage caring, cooperation with others or fulfilment.
- Raise awareness about caring in the broad sense, so that people are aware that their well-being is largely dependent on their environment — in terms of the people around them, or the institutional and private structures in which they live and work. Caring for others fosters a true creativity for tackling poverty, as was recently illustrated by the remarkable actions of Christian des Pallières and his wife, who improved helped thousands of children who were living in poverty on open landfills in Phnom-Penh (inspiring the film “Les Pépites”,

released in France in October 2016). Concern for other people also activates a sense of responsibility and dignity in each individual.

- Enable each person to develop the human qualities that contribute to fulfilment and that will have a spillover effect on the human environment. The development and true assimilation of good intentions, and human virtues more generally, can and should be the subject of non-dogmatic learning.

Appropriate ethics training therefore leads to the construction of a truly human identity, taking account of other people but also considering one's own rights and duties. While the main changes to a person's identity certainly occur at the initial training stage, once the process is under way it can last a lifetime.

There is therefore much to be gained from:

- Supporting research into human nature, particularly in the sphere of positive psychology (which develops programmes showing how improved knowledge of brain functioning has impressive effects on altruistic behaviour). In particular, this knowledge improves understanding of the impact of virtuous behaviour versus unethical behaviour (selfishness, indifference, contempt, lying, oppression and so forth) on the physical and psychological health of victims but also those instigating the behaviour.
- Teaching ethics to future leaders and decision-makers in universities and other higher education institutes. Such teaching could include case studies (preferably real-life scenarios) in relevant areas, as well as field visits to see the impact of their decisions on the ground. This is because the risk of decision-makers being unaware of the negative consequences of their decisions on the individuals and populations concerned increases in direct proportion to their physical distance from such people.

Developing ethics research and teaching gives us the means to create a virtuous circle that will eventually have a tangible impact on poverty.

Lastly, ethics education has even more impact when it is part of a spiritual approach that sees life on earth as a necessary stage for the development of latent humanity (including embracing a respect for the legitimate rights of others and a sense of responsibility). Understanding that each person's quality of life — in the here and now, but also after physical death — is largely determined by the degree of personal development of truly human character traits is a particularly powerful motivator to practice altruism — even outside any institutional religious context. At every level of society, altruism can make a major contribution to fighting poverty.