

GENEVE CONFERENCE (21.06.201)

My dear Friends/Ladies and gentlemen:

Fundacion Vicente Ferrer is an organization devoted to ACTION, Action to eradicate poverty at the very grassroots level in 3,000 villages in the chronic drought prone area of Anantapur District and surrounding areas of Andhra Pradesh State, South India. In the words of its great founder Vicente Ferrer, who died in 2009 after being 60 years of his life in India: *"Poverty and suffering are not here to be understood but to be resolved"*, *"El sufrimiento y la pobreza no están para ser entendidos sino para ser resueltos"*. I don't want to stand here and give a whole lot of figures and statistics about the impact of the work of the Foundation during the last 41 years in India. I would rather speak about the people and what living in poverty means for them, as I have understood, and what for them is development and peace.

Though as an organization we recognize that poverty in any small corner of the world is affected by policies and decisions taken far away in developed countries, from the very beginning Vicente Ferrer always reminded us, "We are here right now in this small corner of Anantapur District and in front of us are these 20,000 families (at that time) living in extreme poverty, and this is our job, to help them, to be with them in their struggle for justice and equality. And therefore one of the decisions we took 40 years ago was: *"We are here in Anantapur to stay for as long as it takes. We are an integral part of Anantapur society and we do not see our work in terms of 5, 10 or 15 years, but for as long as it takes for people to come out of extreme poverty"*.

What does it mean then to be poor for *dalits* and tribes and other backward castes who have been living in oppression, virtually the servants of others since generations? For them it means a feeling of desperation and hopelessness, hunger most of the time and no belief that the life their communities have lived for generations can ever change... it means sickness and struggle and bondage to the commands of others. Especially for young people never ending grinding poverty leads to loss of faith and patience in their government and in their fellow human beings and therefore a chance that these young people will take the road of rebellion and violence.

And what then does it mean for *dalits* and tribes progress and development? Again I don't want to give statistics and figures, but what I have understood in these forty years working alongside people at the very grassroots level... progress is a feeling of equality with others, to be able to hold your head high and look at higher caste people directly face to face; it's a feeling of wellbeing and comfort for you and for your family, hope for the future and having respect in society, Progress is having confidence in yourself, and your ability to access and demand resources and services, a belief that change is possible, that it is actually happening, and that justice is not a far off impossible dream. Progress for *dalits* and tribes and others means seeing their own people in positions of authority in government offices, not only upper castes, as it has been for many years. And of course, equality and justice means everything else that we all know: access to clean water, a right and access to quality education and health services, a right to work and a dignified life.

Many years ago in the seventies and eighties there were certain opinions in the development world that thought that NGOs should take a more radical approach to development and promote violence with people and direct confrontation with higher castes in order to break the barriers of oppression and discrimination. Vicente Ferrer always cautioned us: "that is not our way and as a principle we do not believe in violence that encourages people to directly confront the higher castes and then leaves them alone to face the consequent reprisals and revenge.... that we will not follow this path but we will help people achieve the same results - development, justice and equality working with them side by side, sharing each others knowledge and skills, and working in all the areas of development so that these families can take their rightful place in society".

You will excuse me for reading some more words of Vicente Ferrer, who said: "*We are tired of big plans, continuous discussions, that in the end leave people just exactly as they were*" "*Estamos cansados de grandes planes, de grandes discusiones que no evitan que el pueblo esté como está*".

As I said in the very beginning we are an organization of ACTION, practical action that focuses on eradicating poverty and helping people bring positive change in their lives. On behalf of the Foundation I don't claim to give all the answers. Eradication of poverty are big words, I would rather say "practical help and support" to as many poor people as possible to come out of extreme poverty and

have a better life. Every situation, every country is different, governments are different. In India we have the benefit of a functioning democracy, unlike in some other developing countries, and many acts of parliament in favour of the poor. However it is obviously not an easy task in the vast extent of India until her very last corner village to see that all these legislations are put into practice; but they are there and help organizations like ours to bring awareness to people that there are laws in the country in favour of their rights and equality and against discrimination and injustice.

It is a frequent scenario in poverty situations as it was 30 years ago in Anantapur that the poorest people were all illiterate and did not believe that education was for them, but was only for the higher castes, which also benefits those more powerful landlords since as long as those in your bondage remain illiterate they will be forever in your grasp. For people to believe in the value of education as a part of their development and progress was a process that took 20 years. In the early years hunger, the daily search for work and the need to feed the family were more pressing needs than sending children to school. Therefore for 10 to 15 years the main emphasis of the Foundation in education was to motivate parents to enrol their children in primary school, to be able to read and write, even though many children dropped out to help the parents at home and in the fields.

Now all *dalits* and tribes and other backward class families believe that education is one of their inalienable rights and the new generations are convinced of the value of education. Therefore in villages where we have worked for many years, the Foundation does not have to play a role in motivating parents for the education of their children. At present more than 90% of eligible school children finish primary school and more than 80% complete high school. Many other children continue higher education. In more than 1,900 villages people's community development committees (CDCs) run their own small coaching centres for their children after government school hours selecting and paying the teacher themselves. In some cases, the teacher may also be a member from a higher caste, something unheard in the early years. The CDC supervises both the regular attendance of their community children in the government school and also the running of the coaching centre.

One of those fundamental decisions of the Foundation in the early years which both facilitated the work of the organization and the development of people was that the organization should work through groups of organized people at village level. Therefore community organization, building up people's groups, leadership training and a constant imparting of knowledge skills and awareness in all areas of life, has in people's own words given them an identity and a confidence that they did not have before and enabled them to take control of their own lives.

At the start of our work in the early seventies, a dominant need of people was sufficient work and food for the family. Many *dalits* and tribes owned 3-5 acres of land given to them under the Land Ceiling Act of those years, but the land was often stony and uncultivable. Therefore *dalits* and tribes were mostly labourers in the land of others earning a pittance in kind. At that time the Foundation started a revolving fund for people to take loans, clear their lands and have the resources to cultivate the land. Therefore within a short space of time *dalits* became farmers and landowners, moving a little further forward on the road to equality.

Obviously nobody comes out of extreme poverty unless their income improves and in the context of Anantapur where most people depend on agriculture that means saving the land from further desertification so that it can feed its population. I think I can safely say that starting from 1987 when there were 3 consecutive years of drought, in Anantapur district it was the Foundation that first initiated massive anti-desertification programs such as soil conservation, preservation of water through percolation tanks and check dams, and plantation of millions of trees, which programs were subsequently taken up also by the government and other NGOs, and therefore today there has been some slowing down of that inexorable progress of Anantapur district towards becoming a desert.

In the same way it took 20 years for *dalits* and tribes to understand the value of education, it also took that many years for them and other small farmers to be convinced of changing the mono-cropping pattern they had been following for years which only further degrades the quality of the land, and to vary the crop with other drought resistant varieties such as lentils, sunflower and fruit plants. Now wherever you go in Anantapur District, for every 8 rows of groundnut you can find one row of lentils and many farmers keeping a portion of the land for fruit trees. In early years it was only better off farmers who cultivated fruit trees especially

mango. Therefore for *dalits*, tribes and other poor communities who now grow fruit trees along with their main crops, this is not just an agricultural improvement but for them is another step towards equality. Irrigation by drip and sprinklers help these poorer farmers to preserve water and irrigate crops at the same time.

Not everything in development happens as a result of great foresight or methodical planning. Sometimes some activity is successful by chance which happened in Anantapur in the case of dairy farming. In the continuous search for improving people's income and to have something to fall back on in case of crop failure, 10 years ago the Foundation started giving loans and subsidy to women to purchase a buffalo or a cow so that they could supplement their income by selling milk. This activity was also taken up in the ecology sector while trying to improve the breed of the local cow and the output of milk. This program grew over the years, was also taken up by the government, and now there are many thousands of women and farmers having dairy animals. It was recently observed both in government circles and within the Foundation that those families owning dairy animals could withstand a drought year and crop failure better than others.

In India as in many societies women are the backbone of family and community. India is still a patriarchal society and women face great discrimination, being victims of murder, rape, torture, trafficking and harassment. Although a great deal of progress has been made in the country in general, justice for many women is still a faraway dream. In the villages of Anantapur from illiteracy and bondage women have come a long way. Since 1982, Women have gained in strength, confidence and capability, discussing and taking up both social and economic issues in their organized groups called *sanghams* at village level. Each village has 3 or more groups on the understanding that 15 to 20 members per group function better than larger groups. There is also a small network at the village level in which 2 members of each group participate. These groups take up all type of issues from abuse of women in families to petitioning the local government for cement roads in their colony or for street lights. It often happens that drinking water schemes are centralized to the main village without a connection to the *dalit* or tribal colony. In that case women *sanghams* insist the local government for a connection to their part of their village. The network group deals with problems that individual groups cannot solve, such as if a group has become defunct because of quarrelling members, or any other problem that an individual group finds difficult to deal.

At present in 1,279 villages there are 5,704 *sanghams* with 76,000 women members. These groups have a capital of 12 crores of Rupees (almost 2 million euros) to use for various economic activities. Women *sanghams* are constantly discussing and assessing different options of income generation activities both individual and group to improve their incomes. These women members can now independently manage a wide range of activities, from small businesses in fruit, vegetables or cloth, to running small village shops, taking out land on lease to cultivate, and of course, the very popular activity of sheep rearing and dairy animals. These groups also access a wide variety of resources available in governments and banks. Constant trainings are necessary for both the Foundation staff and the group leaders, on leadership, team building and problem solving.

These groups alone can not deal with the greater problem of violence against women and last year the Foundation started a special cell to deal with this matter. It will take many years of learning, collaboration with authorities, lawyers and police and men and women's groups at the village level to try to bring a change in the violence and harassment that women face both at home and also in the society.

I am often asked whether the programs and systems of the Foundation developed over the years to eradicate poverty are a model for governments and organizations in other countries. Whilst I don't think that one set of systems and projects can be picked up and planted somewhere else, I do most sincerely believe that with commitment, staying as long as it takes, working alongside people, sharing each other's ideas, having the flexibility to work in an integrated manner, not just focusing one area of development, poor communities in any country of the world can come out of poverty.

Poor communities across the world are tired of waiting: change has to come fast.... We need to respond, each and every one of us. My husband used to say, that "*Todas las acciones pequeñas hacen y suman una de muy grande*", which means that all of our small actions put together make one big one. It is our responsibility, each and every one of us. We cannot leave it just to the governments of this world. Together each and every one of us can make a difference.