

GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Human Rights Council
Forty-Sixth Regular Session

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Item 2: Meeting on the role of poverty alleviation in promoting and protecting human rights

Statement delivered by Kai Mueller on behalf of the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (HFHR)

Madam. President,

We welcome efforts to eliminate poverty, but it should be recalled that poverty alleviation can only promote and protect human rights when policies are guided by a respect for individual human rights.

Programs labelled as poverty alleviation are not necessarily benevolent. The language of poverty reduction can be co-opted to enforce a homogenous vision of society on marginalized groups and violate human rights.

To illustrate this, I would like to draw your attention to the recently uncovered coercive labour program in the Tibet Autonomous Region. Under the banner of the 'Poverty Alleviation' Campaign, the labour program has forcibly transferred over half a million rural Tibetans into military style training centers and onwards into factories across China. The program aims to rid Tibetans of their Tibetan-ness, labelling Tibetan culture as being "backward" and unproductive. This is unacceptable.

Any discussion on poverty alleviation should recognize these risks and emphasise the importance of a human rights-based approach to tackling poverty. This approach, which centers the individual, empowers individuals to decide how they live and work, what language they speak, and what religions and cultures they practice. This approach protects an individual's agency and dignity, and facilitates justice in cases where individuals have been wrongfully treated. It is also the sustainable approach to poverty reduction, because any gains made are owned by the people, and not forced upon them.

Helen Clark, the former head of the UN development program, put it simply: development should enable all people to “have the freedom to choose to live lives which they value.”

Thank you, Madam President.

ENDS