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***The Tunis Imperative:  
Human Rights in Development Cooperation  
in the Wake of the Arab Spring***

**Statement by  
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**Presentation of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to the CEB  
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Thank you, Secretary General, for this opportunity to engage with you and with my colleagues on an issue that has been thrust before us not in the form of a mandate from the General Assembly, but rather from the demands of ordinary people in Tunis, in Cairo, in Madrid, in downtown New York, and now in cities and towns across the globe.

This, colleagues, is one of those moments in history when the world looks to the United Nations and asks: “where do you stand?”

Today, I am asking that we act to send the message that we stand squarely on our Charter and on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in solidarity with “the peoples of the United Nations”, and for the mission outlined in our core documents of promoting “freedom from fear and want.”

People as our principal constituency.

Freedom from fear and freedom from want as our central mission.

Sounds like a non-controversial proposition. But is it?

No doubt, all of us in this room are fully committed to these principles, and each of our institutions has been dedicated to them. But have our approaches kept pace with the demands of the people we serve?

Have we been principled enough in our relationships with governments? Have our relationships with civil society been deep enough? And has our notion of “development” reflected these principles both in word and deed?

Today, I am suggesting that there are things we can do—things we must do in the current historic context—to make sure that our answers to those questions are as unequivocal as the Charter intended them to be.

Colleagues, the spark that lit the fire of the Arab Spring was the desperate act of a single human being who, repeatedly denied the most basic elements of a life of dignity, set himself alight, and, in doing so, declared that a life without human rights, is not a life at all.

But the dry kindling of repression, deprivation, exclusion, and abuse had been piling up for years, in Tunisia, across the region, and beyond.

The actions, omissions, excesses and abdications of the governments of the region were certainly at the centre.

And the actions of other powerful states in propping up authoritarian regimes, and pursuing destructive policies of self-interest that fostered repression, impunity, conflict, and economic exploitation must not escape the lens of accountability.

But what about us? What about the international community and, more specifically, the development agencies, and international financial institutions, the donors and the United Nations? Each of our agencies and institutions dedicated significant financial resources, decades of hard work, remarkable creativity, and a sincere commitment to improving lives in the region. But did we get it entirely right?

What does the Arab Spring tell us about our methods, and our analytical frameworks? Did we have the right objectives? And was our solidarity with those demanding their fundamental rights evident enough?

Most importantly, what must we do to integrate these lessons into our work, both in the policy discussions of New York, Washington and Geneva, and in our operational activities on the ground?

Of course, we have been arguing for years about the imperative of human rights-based approaches to development. And the system has increasingly embraced these. Today, I believe we can all take comfort in the fact that the message of human rights based development has been vindicated in the streets of Tunis and Cairo and Rome and beyond.

But a quick look at the assessments provided by financial institutions and development agencies in the immediate lead-up to the Arab Spring is illuminating.

Even as the events were unfolding, we read, for example, that Tunisia showed “remarkable progress on equitable growth, fighting poverty, and achieving good social indicators”, that it was “on track to achieve the MDGs”, was “far ahead in terms of governance, effectiveness, rule of law, control of corruption and regulatory quality”, was “one of the most equitable societies”, “a top reformer”, and that “the development model that Tunisia has pursued over the past two decades has served the country well.”

But, at the same time, the human rights mechanisms, and voices from civil society, were painting a different picture.

Here we heard of excluded and marginalized communities, imposed indignities, and a denial of economic and social rights.

Here we heard of inequality, discrimination, absence of participation, absence of decent jobs, absence of labour rights, political repression, absence of fundamental freedoms, including free assembly, association, and speech.

We heard of censorship, arbitrary detention, and the lack of an independent judiciary.

In sum, we heard of fear, and want.

In this room, we all agree that this is not what we would call “development.”

And yet, somehow, this side of the equation carried very little sway in our development analysis.

Now this is not to say that the dominant development analysis was all wrong. And, indeed, much of the data on which these assessments were made was certainly accurate.

The problem, I would submit, was that the analytical lens was, in some instances, too narrow, and in others it was simply turned in the wrong direction.

Clearly, it was not fixed squarely on freedom from fear and want – at least not for the many. It often too narrowly focused on growth, on markets, and on private investment, with relatively little attention to equality, and virtually none to civil, political, economic and social rights.

Attention to the MDGs provided only a very narrow set of economic and social indicators, none of them rights-based, all of them with low quantitative thresholds, none guaranteeing participatory processes, and none accompanied by legal accountability.

Guarantees of a minimum social floor, including minimum core obligations for economic and social rights, have been largely lacking.

And, it must be said, the framework itself effectively leaves out a full half of the development equation, that is, all civil and political rights considerations.

Essentially, we did not get the answers wrong, we just never asked many of the most important questions.

The normative imperative for the full integration of human rights into our development work should, by now, be self-evident. These are after all our standards, promulgated under United Nations auspices and with the status of binding law for all Member States.

For the UN, health care, education, housing, and the fair administration of justice are not commodities for sale to the few, but rather rights to which all are entitled without discrimination.

And anything we do in the name of development should be designed to advance these rights and, at the very least, should do nothing to undermine their realization.

But there are at least two other compelling reasons for us to more seriously embrace human rights, and human rights-based approaches to development today.

The first is that, in the wake of the Arab spring, it should be evident that these approaches make good practical sense. In other words, there are good instrumental and operational reasons to integrate human rights into our development work.

We have already seen that failing to do so has real consequences for the effectiveness of our programmes, our relationships with people on the ground, and our credibility as international development partners.

Put simply, participatory development is more sustainable, accountable development is more efficient, non-discriminatory development is more equitable, and the empowerment of women, minorities and marginalized communities mobilizes vastly more development resources to the cause.

And ensuring that justice, political participation and personal security are as much a part of the development matrix as any other sector, simply makes for a more complete, rational and effective framework.

Finally --and this is a central lesson of the Arab Spring-- human rights in development makes sense because this is what the people demand.

The litmus test of development is not to be found exclusively in indicators of growth, or private investment, or even within the narrow confines of the MDGs. Rather, it is the degree to which, those or any other strategies and interventions satisfy the legitimate demands of the people for freedom from fear and want, for a voice in their own societies, and for a life of dignity.

To ignore these demands, as often has been done by governments, brings tremendous risks. And today, on the streets of our cities everywhere, we are seeing the results of just such an approach.

If we are to truly apply the lessons of the global uprisings of 2011, I believe we must move beyond soft rhetorical commitments to human rights and beyond simple “mainstreaming.”

I believe it is time that we deliberately, publicly, and assertively pursue a meaningful policy shift toward the full and robust integration of human rights in development cooperation, and the adoption of human rights law as the basis for policy coherence across the international system.

This means expanding our analytical lens to include **all** civil, political, economic, social and cultural **rights**.

It means ensuring the free, active and meaningful **participation** of the beneficiaries of development, including the most marginalized, women, minorities, and indigenous peoples.

It means moving away from charitable or technocratic models and ensuring the **accountability** of duty-bearers and rights-holders.

It means paying real attention to **non-discrimination** and equality, not only on the basis of gender and geography, but also on the basis of race, and language and religion and age and social and economic status.

It means embracing strategies for the political and economic **empowerment** of people, especially the most vulnerable and the most marginalized.

And it means explicitly **linking** development work to the norms and standards of international **human rights** law.

At the same time, the Arab Spring has revealed the critical importance of expanding our domestic partnerships beyond government, to foster closer relationships with civil society, marginalized communities, minorities, indigenous peoples, youth, and women.

And, in perhaps the greatest challenge to us as international institutions, it has shown us that the time has come to take a hard look at the nature of our engagement with individual Member States.

Secretary-General, colleagues, our institutions are intergovernmental institutions. And our duty to the member States is beyond doubt. But, at the same time, ours are not norm-neutral organizations.

To the contrary, we are all duty bound to uphold the norms and standards and principles of the UN and the international system so painstakingly built up over the course of the past sixty-plus years.

This includes the standards and principles of human rights.

What is the proper role of the international development community in the face of national (or international) policies and practices that violate or undercut internationally guaranteed human rights and fundamental freedoms?

What are the moral and legal parameters of our cooperation?

Here, we all agree that our duty to governments cannot include a requirement to turn a blind eye to injustice and abuse.

Rather, colleagues, the standard of engagement with all governments, rich and poor, north and south, must be the same in all circumstances: principled, norm-based, constructive engagement.

In this sense, our engagement with governments on questions of governance should be no different than our engagement on any other development question. Just as we would not hesitate to point out where water supplies are tainted or infrastructure crumbling, so too must questions of the prisons, the press, the polls and the police be addressed forthrightly and in a manner unapologetically consistent with the applicable international norms and standards.

And, at the international level too, I believe that the need for system-wide policy coherence, based on the rule of international law, including international human rights, humanitarian, criminal, and refugee law, is more imperative today than ever before. And I believe that, as the guardians of these international institutions, it is right that this call comes from us.

I recognize that this may seem a daunting agenda. And I am well aware of the political sensitivities. But I am encouraged by the knowledge that the work has already begun, and we have a firm foundation on which to build. A framework for progress has been built up, block by block, starting with the UN reforms of 1997 and 2002, which began the human rights mainstreaming process. We were given unequivocal mandates to broaden and deepened this work by the 2005 World Summit, the 2010 MDG review, and, most recently, the 2011 Istanbul Conference on the LDCs.

Most importantly, this Secretary-General has shown important leadership, first with his 2008 Policy Committee decision on human rights in development, and, most recently, in his 2011 PC decision on human rights due diligence in United Nations missions.

To build on these, to bring forward the human rights message coming from the Arab Spring and beyond, and to ensure that our development cooperation continues to evolve to meet the challenges and realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, I believe there are five, specific steps that we can take now:

1. First, we can issue a **joint CEB statement**, under the SG's chairmanship, to show the world that we are indeed aware of the events unfolding outside our windows, that we hear and support the call for urgent and meaningful action to promote freedom from fear and want, that we are committed to providing human rights-based development cooperation, and to advancing human rights-based policy coherence across our agencies, to ensure, in the words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that "everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration can be fully realized."
2. Secondly, we could commit together to **joint advocacy for the integration of human rights** in the next **QCPR**, in our positioning on **Rio + 20**, in the substantive parameters of the **post-2015** development agenda, and beyond. The reticence that may still exist in some governmental circles is not an adequate justification to reduce our advocacy, or compromise our principles. To the contrary, it is a reason to promote them more vigorously.
3. Third, our **guidelines on human rights for the RC system** were adopted over a decade ago. At the time, they were a great step forward. But surely it is time to move forward on strengthening them, and the capacities and support necessary for Resident Coordinators to confidently integrate human rights into their work. New guidance is needed on government engagement, civil society engagement, and RC positioning on human rights issues, to name but a few. And RC's need to know the parameters of their role, and what kind of support -- technical and political—they can expect from all of us. The new Human Rights Mainstreaming Mechanism established under the UNDG could take the first steps, for ultimate consideration by this body.
4. Fourth, could we consider taking the first steps toward discussions under CEB auspices (perhaps in the HLCP) to explore possibilities for advancing **human rights-based policy coherence** among the development, financial, trade and human rights organizations represented in this body? Given our broad membership and senior composition, it would be

difficult to imagine a more appropriate forum than this. Given the events unfolding today across the globe, it would be hard to imagine a more appropriate time than now.

5. And, finally, is it not time that our organizational structures better reflect the **three pillars that were established by the UN Charter**: peace and security, economic and social progress and development, and human rights? The 2005 World Summit, and all major conferences since, have reaffirmed these three pillars. Former UN Secretary-General based his groundbreaking 2005 report “In larger freedom” on those three pillars. It follows that our own operational and policy structures should mirror and give the same prominence to all three pillars. This would imply reforming the current four Executive Committees by introducing a cross-cutting three pillar structure. Indeed, today, human rights, democracy and the rule of law are as much a part of the UN brand as peacekeeping and development assistance. A three pillar structure would support this.

Mr. Secretary-General, dear colleagues, these are some of the thoughts I wanted to share with you today. I have offered some questions for discussion, and I look forward to your comments.

Thank you.

### **Some Questions for Discussion**

1. How can the lens of development analysis be broadened to look more systematically beyond growth, markets and a narrow set of socio-economic indicators, to include attention to the full range of civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights, including the right to development?
2. What can be done to expedite the move from the system's rhetorical commitment to human rights-based approaches to development (now 14 years old) and into a more significant shift in the way we do business on the ground, with a focus on free, active and meaningful participation, the accountability of rights-holders to duty-bearers, non-discrimination and equality, political and economic empowerment strategies, and an explicit linkage of our work to the norms and standards of international (human rights) law?
3. How can operational relationships and target constituencies on the ground be expanded beyond close government relations in the capital to better include representatives of civil society, marginalized communities, minorities and indigenous peoples across the country?
4. What is the proper role of the international development community in the face of national (or international) policies and practices that violate or undercut internationally guaranteed human rights and fundamental freedoms?
5. How can CEB members act collectively to reinforce approaches that respect and integrate human rights and the rule of law in intergovernmental fora, in headquarters policy discussion and with national counterparts on the ground?