

9 DECEMBER 2005
LONDON LAUNCH OF THE ‘CALL TO ACTION’
ON THE RIGHT TO HEALTH

**THE LAUNCH WAS ORGANISED BY THE BRITISH MEDICAL
ASSOCIATION, ETHICAL GLOBALIZATION INITIATIVE, AND ESSEX
UNIVERSITY HUMAN RIGHTS CENTRE**

*Opening remarks of Paul Hunt, UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to the Highest
Attainable Standard of Health*

Later this morning, I want to properly thank our hosts, the British Medical Association, Mary Robinson and all her team at the Ethical Globalization Initiative, and my colleague at Essex University, Stefania Tripodi, all of whom have worked very hard to make today’s event happen.

But just now I want to very warmly thank all of you for attending today – all the panellists and all the participants – with your extraordinary depth of experience and expertise.

I very much look forward to hearing your ideas, your advice, on how we can together take forward the Call to Action.

Today is the London launch of the Call to Action – and, significantly, it is the first launch. Perhaps there should be other launches – for example, in Geneva at the time of the World Health Assembly, and certainly at an appropriate occasion and location in the South.

In our different capacities, how can we take forward the Call to Action? Please share your ideas with us this morning. For my part, I will be referring to the Call to Action in my reports to both the UN Commission on Human Rights and the UN General Assembly.

When visiting various countries, I have been extremely impressed – even inspired - by civil society’s commitment to, and familiarity with, the right to the highest attainable standard of health. Today, numerous civil society organisations are actively organising on the right to health. They explicitly use human rights language. They run right to health information campaigns, they demand grassroots participation in health policy-making, they challenge extractive industries that pollute homes and damage lives, and they take test cases on the right to health.

In some countries, not just non-governmental organisations, but also national human rights institutions, are also deeply engaged in these right to health campaigns.

The People’s Health Movement – a coalition with members in many countries - has recently launched a global grassroots campaign on the right to health. This dynamic and important Movement both draws from, and generates, these civil society right to health campaigns.

In other words, at the grassroots level, there is a rising tide of support for the right to health. Of course, it is uneven. In some countries, few NGOs have even heard of the right to health. But elsewhere, there is an impressive fluency and familiarity in civil society with the right to health.

In my work, however, I am also struck by something less encouraging. Although every State on the planet has voluntarily signed one or more human rights treaties that expressly recognise the right to health – yet, at the highest levels of government, the right to health is often not taken seriously. Too often, States only pay lip service to the right to health. Too often, they regard it as little more than a gesture, a rhetorical flourish.

That is one reason why I think the Call to Action being launched today is so important. Many former heads of state and government have endorsed it. They affirm that the right to health is a fundamental human right, no less than the right to a fair trial and freedom of religion. They affirm that the right means something in practice - it means that states have an obligation to build strong, integrated, equitable, participatory and accountable health systems that are accessible to all. It means that

rich states have a human rights responsibility to help low-income states build effective health systems.

So the human right to health is not to be dismissed as a gesture, a rhetorical flourish. By their endorsement of the Call to Action a host of eminent leaders remind today's Governments that the right to health is real and demands action.

My final point is this. Sick people are more likely to become poor. And the poor are more vulnerable to disease and disability. Good health is central to creating the capabilities that the poor need to escape from poverty. In other words, good health is not just an outcome of development – it is a way of achieving development. The right to health has a vital role to play in tackling poverty and achieving development – it lies at the heart of our struggle for a fairer, more humane world. That, too, is one of the important messages in today's Call to Action.

I look forward to hearing, in our meeting this morning, your suggestions on how we can together carry forward these vital messages.
