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Statement submitted by Fondation Ostad Elahi — Ethique et Solidarite 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

Rethinking and strengthening solidarity within society by teaching altruism

By analogy, solidarity within a society has often been thought of in terms of the supposedly natural solidarity found in the nuclear family. The family is not just the first, elementary form of solidarity. In it, all the dimensions of human solidarity are put to the test: in sickness and in health, youth and old age, good and ill fortune, preference and difference, and so on. The family is deemed to teach each of its members not to be egoistic and to show solidarity with the others. However, as noted by social ethics professor Franco Riva in a study published by Fondation Ostad Elahi, (“Franco Riva, la famille et l'éthique de la solidarité — l'obligation et la promesse”, in *Ethique et Famille*, Volume 2, l'harmattan, *Ethique en contextes de la Fondation Ostad Elahi* series, edited by Edwige Rude-Antoine and Marc Piévic, 2011), when patterned after the family model, solidarity is often identified with the cohesion of closed groups that fosters social rivalry.

At the same time, the far-reaching changes undergone by the family unit — related, among other factors, to a global trend of individualization, but also to progress in medicine (increasing longevity, etc.), the impact of new legal standards (marriage, divorce, adoption, guardianship, etc.), demographic shifts, cultural interpenetration, new technology and the environment — also challenge the family solidarity model. The difficulty of maintaining intergenerational ties is a case in point.

In our so-called post-modern society, the ethics of solidarity takes on global importance and poses a fundamental challenge for social development: how to generate a feeling of solidarity that goes beyond pertaining to a more or less restricted group — be it a community, a nation, a culture, a generation or a group devoted to a struggle — and is potentially capable of reaching all individuals regardless of their social origin, culture or creed? Developing a sense of “the other as such” (*l'autre en tant qu'autre*), in all its unfettered difference, is the only way that solidarity can achieve true universality without exclusion: an open society at peace with itself.

Therein lies the importance of education for altruism, which social surveys have already proved vital for social cohesion, for the avoidance, easing or settlement of conflicts (see, for instance: Jacques Lecomte, *La Bonté humaine — Altruisme, empathie, générosité*, Odile Jacob, 2012).

This education for altruism — a virtue that can be defined as a pattern of conduct shaped by commitment to others based on disinterested kindness — can be approached from both a theoretical and a practical standpoint. Theoretically, through a parsing of models of human nature and the functioning of the brain in line with the latest scientific discoveries, in social psychology and neuropsychology, in particular, according to which the human brain has an in-built award mechanism that is activated when it perceives altruistic and empathetic behaviour, thereby showing that kindness is as much a part of human nature as egoism and aggressiveness. Practically, on the one hand, by studying the thinking and deep-seated intentions shaping our interactions with others and identifying the types of thinking, stereotypes, prejudices, and so on that induce or inhibit altruistic behaviour. Practically, also, through concrete altruistic acts analysed according to

both objective and subjective criteria in terms of effects on oneself, on others and on the local social environment.

While the family remains the first place where, potentially, altruism can be learnt, its introduction to schools and universities opens up very encouraging prospects (see, here too, the above-mentioned work by Jacques Lecomte). Such an education for altruism proves to be more solid and effective in the long term the more it is couched in a comprehensive ethical development perspective aimed at gradually mastering in oneself all the manifestation of one's ego that are harmful to others. That is a step that thinker Ostad Elahi (1895-1974) described as the "fight against the imperious self" (*lutte contre le soi impérieux*) and which constitutes one of the pillars of ethical improvement.

By teaching altruism and performing the individual moral work it requires, it is possible to pave the way toward forms of contemporary wisdom, tailored to the social coexistence and cohabitation of human beings, and respectful of everyone's opinions and beliefs and their freedom to hold those opinions and beliefs.
