

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT OF COLOMBIA, JUAN MANUEL SANTOS, DURING THE LAUNCH OF “*THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL POVERTY PEER NETWORK*” AT OXFORD UNIVERSITY (v.13)

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Poverty and inequality are two words mentioned often in our world. Many people, that rest in complete procrastination, voice them with passiveness, in a sort of a mechanic way.

This conveys the risk of turning them into empty, worn-out concepts.

Fortunately, there are many other voices that do not only talk about ‘tackling poverty and reducing inequality’, but that act on it. And this room today is full with such minds and spirits.

I cannot go any further without confessing the pride and joy I felt when I received this invitation.

It is both encouraging and refreshing to witness the coming together of committed and visionary leaders towards one simple but great goal: making life better for millions of our fellow citizens.

I believe, quite passionately, there is no other greater role for us as human beings.

I also believe in ambition –when accompanied by action– and in making bold decisions to transform our visions into reality.

If we truly aspire to bring changes into our countries, we must be determined, and act as resolute dreamers.

No aspiration –regarding the well being of men, women and children– is either too small or big enough.

We are called to think big, and take long steps, because this will pave the road toward positive and profound transformations.

And this is –EXACTLY– how we are doing things in Colombia.

Almost three years –34 months tomorrow, to be exact– have gone by since I took office. From day one, we decided to set in motion a very thorough process of rethinking and reshaping the current state of affairs in my country.

We are aiming to transform Colombia into a more solid, brighter and prosperous nation. We want to change the life of our people for the better.

With this in mind, we deployed a handful of programs to build a country where people are capable to find –and create– quality jobs while they can see their incomes grow in a sustainable fashion.

A country where Colombians can own, and enjoy, a decent house, whether they are able to afford it or not...

A country where children –in their earliest years– receive the right care and attention, and where they can later attend a good school... And when they become adults, they all have equal opportunities to follow the life of their choosing and are able to generate enough and sustainable incomes in a well-functioning labor market.

A country where the gap between the rich and the poor blurs and weakens...

These images could be easily mistaken for mere idealistic dreams and be classified like impossible goals. And as a matter of fact, they have.

We have been accused of being “too ambitious” for addressing all of our country’s pressing issues at once.

But we would not want it any other way. I am certain that I would not.

We understand it as our duty to seize this moment and reach as many milestones as possible.

It is our responsibility to make the most of it, for the sake of more than 47 million Colombians that keep our country moving every day.

So, one of the first things we thought of, when paving our way forward, was how could we achieve groundbreaking results in the reduction of poverty and inequality.

We strive to be efficient, effective, accountable and transparent. More so, we LIVE by these principles.

Very soon we became aware that –to reach these ambitious goals– we had to create an instrument that enabled us to tackle poverty in the most effective way: with programs to target specific needs and with reliable indicators that allow us to track our progress.

With this on mind, our government, with the help of international experts, designed a new way to measure poverty based on the Alkire-Foster methodology, to be used on top of the traditional of measure of household income poverty.

So, the new National Multidimensional Poverty Index (*MPI-Colombia*) was launched, as an official measurement of poverty, on August 2011, with the presence of Sabina Alkire, Director of the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, and Professor James Foster of George Washington University, who accompanied and guided us in this process.

Radical social advances are only possible if we understand – through careful observation and analysis– the deep roots of our poverty and the many shades of inequality within our society.

Hence, the urgency of implementing a multidimensional approach in our battle against poverty.

We know this challenge has more than one side, more than one face, and to outsmart it we need to uncover them all.

And this is precisely what we have been doing, with the utmost dedication and the guidance of our *Multidimensional Poverty Index*, during the past two years.

It has helped us design public policies aimed at achieving substantial social improvements. The *MPI* inspired the social programs and strategies that are improving most aspects of people's lives in my country.

Right now we are assessing five dimensions: education, employment, health and access to public services, conditions of our children and youth, and –of course– housing.

And we are producing considerable results. We proved that IT IS POSSIBLE to meet our ambitious objectives.

In just two years, poverty –measured by the traditional income approach– decreased in 4.5 percentage points, from 37.2 percent to 32.7 percent. That means that 1.7 million Colombians were taken out of poverty.

Importantly, we are about to reach, in just two years, the goal set out for 2014 of 32 percent.

On the other hand, 700 thousand Colombians were taken out of extreme poverty conditions.

We are –with Peru– the two countries of Latin America where poverty has been reduced the most.

And what about our new *MPI index*?

The *MPI* index also reveals we are on the right track. As of now, it has decreased in 3.7 percentage points, which means 1.3 million Colombians have overcome multidimensional poverty. All of the dimensions taken into account by the index improved between 2010 and 2012.

Furthermore, and probably more importantly, we are reducing inequality.

We broke, for the first time, the perverse trend in which the economy grew but under unjust conditions: the rich became richer and the poor, poorer. That is, the economy grew but inequality also increased. That was true in Colombia, at least, for the period between 1985 and 2009, as the scarce data available show.

We are no longer the second or third most unequal country in Latin America. We are now closer to the average. And we are – with Ecuador– the two countries where inequality has decreased the most.

The Gini coefficient dropped 2.1 points, from 0.56 in 2010 to 0.539 in 2012, which means we already accomplished our goal, set in 0.54 for 2014.

And why did this happen? Because in the poorest households incomes are now growing at 13.2 percent, while within the richest ones this growth is of 2.3 percent. Today, education in public schools is free for almost 9 million boys and girls, and we have brought internet access to 6 million homes.

A great deal of these results have been possible because we are creating good, productive jobs that result in higher incomes for millions of families and improved living conditions.

Two million jobs have been created –most of them inside our poorest communities– during the past two and a half years. More so, unemployment has decreased more than double among the poor than among those with higher incomes.

And, for the first time since 1994, formal employment is increasing faster than informal employment.

These are all symptoms of real progress and evidence of the profound social transformation we are producing in Colombia by improving the living conditions of the poorest sector of our society.

And we expect these results to continue in the coming years because, among many other things, the full effects of the tax reform and the reform to the royalties system –both with profound impacts on reducing inequality–, plus the revolution we are creating in the housing sector, will be felt from 2013 and on.

And we owe a great deal of this to our *Multidimensional Poverty Index*, a most valuable tool to know where we should be allocating resources and efforts, and at the same time allows us to measure if we are doing the job in an appropriate way.

Such progress has been possible because two groups of extraordinary people worked together in adjusting the Alkire index to our reality.

I must applaud the hard work and long hours invested by the OPHI team and our Government in this mission. This is, beyond doubt, international cooperation at its best and we are deeply grateful for your support and guidance.

Great things do happen when bright and responsible people join hands towards a higher purpose, inspired by the vision and way of thinking of a remarkable human being: my former professor, Amartya Sen.

What you all achieved –by putting the pieces together to build this comprehensive approach– is resulting, as we gather here now, in better living conditions for millions of Colombians.

We know it works because we can see the results of this approach across our country. This is why we must now take it to a higher level, step it up.

I am a firm believer that it is our duty to lead ambitious social changes within our countries. Fortunately, the *Multidimensional Poverty Peer Network* will be the platform to help this happen.

The sole idea of applying this tool in more countries is inspiring. It will stimulate growth and wellbeing wherever it goes. Of this I am sure.

No matter how different and diverse our nations are, we are all alike in one regard: we have more than one dimension. And this is the beauty of this instrument.

The time has come for us to share our experiences in a broader manner and to build collective experience and knowledge.

So far, six countries –including Colombia– have taken a step forward by adapting the methodology to their own set of circumstances. And it is paying off.

Here, the political will 'to do what is right' is key.

It would be unthinkable not to multiply this around the globe.

It would be irresponsible not to create a network that will assist us in planting the seeds of prosperity in lands beyond our borders.

This system of peers will show many other countries the way to foster true and lasting transformations within the poorest communities and households.

We shall believe and trust our potential as leaders to bring these changes about in the lives of millions of people.

It will not be easy.

It will be challenging, it will be demanding and it will certainly be hard. But that is precisely why we must do it.

And we must not lose our drive and enthusiasm.

Let us push forward in our actions and permanently measure ourselves to guarantee progress. Let that be the spirit of this new peer-to-peer network.

I trust that we can make this work, so we can benefit more and more families around the world.

I have learned that we must let vision guide us. Let ambition drive us.

If we think big –while reaching out to others– we will turn our countries around towards a prosperous and thriving reality, one where poverty, hopefully, becomes a distant memory, as time goes by.

Thank you