

People living in persistent poverty, the indispensable partners in sustainable development

By Xavier Godinot, Director of the Research and Training Institute, International Movement ATD Fourth World

Introduction

Let me first introduce in a few words the NGO I am working for. Joseph Wresinski, who had endured dire poverty in his childhood, founded the International Movement ATD Fourth World in 1957 with people living in a shantytown near Paris. Nowadays, ATD Fourth World has permanent teams dedicated to combating extreme poverty in 25 countries in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas. Its activity covers four main fields including working at a grass roots level with families in chronic poverty, supporting their public representation at local, national and international levels, carrying out research and raising public awareness of the necessity to fight extreme poverty.

My contribution will address two main issues related to the conference objectives. Firstly, what is extreme poverty? Secondly, what does it take to reach the very poor and build partnerships with them in development programs?

1. What is extreme poverty? A multidimensional definition related to Human Rights

a) We should never define extreme poverty without giving priority to the opinions and experience of the very poor themselves. If we don't, we assert our own power to the detriment of the weak, and we contribute to their exclusion by evicting them from the process of building knowledge in the very field where they are the true experts. After all, aren't they the ones who possess the vivid experience of extreme poverty and who know better than anyone the suffering and shame that most of us will never experience?

So, what do the very poor tell us about extreme poverty? Whether it is in industrial or developing countries, whatever the huge differences in their ways of living, people who endure dire poverty express the same feelings of being treated more like animals than like human beings. This feeling of contempt and exclusion, so corrosive of self-esteem and confidence, lies deeply ingrained in them.

In Great Britain as in many European countries, people living in poverty have often known poverty since birth. Their family legacy is one of illiteracy and unskilled work. Many have spent part or all of their childhood in foster care, and many have children in care. Here are some excerpts of what parents from poor families living in London recently told us about poverty:

Poverty is ... having no education, no skills, no job, and no value.

Wearing cast-off clothes, and being expected to be grateful.

Needing help, but being too scared of being judged an unfit mother to ask for it.

Being treated like nothing, less than nothing

Everywhere in Europe we have heard very destitute people telling us "All the same, we are not dogs".

Our teams hear very similar expressions from those living in developing countries, under the bridges of Manila, on the garbage dumps of Guatemala City or in the slums of Antananarivo. A Fourth World full time volunteer in Tanzania sent us these thoughts from Michael, one of the youths living on the streets whom he knows well:

“ I am often running. Sometimes I am running from the police, sometimes to get a small job, and sometimes just because of the violence here. I feel like an animal, like a rabbit. But when I have meetings with you and the others, I feel like a human being because we listen to each other, we learn together and we get to know friends”.

b) Yet a definition of extreme poverty shouldn't just rely either on the sole expression of the poorest or of researchers. It should include their experience but also that of mainstream society, in order to create a common language about poverty that can be understood by all groups of society.

Amartya SEN, the 1998 Nobel Prize winner in Economics, contends that poverty must be seen as the deprivation of basic capabilities rather than merely a problem of low income. He views the expansion of freedom as the primary end and the principal means of development¹. There is no denial that his approach incorporates a critical feature of the experience of the poor. Whether in rich or poor countries, above all else, people living in extreme poverty talk about having no choice in so many aspects of their lives. To them, extreme poverty means a lack of freedom, a lack of means to assume one's responsibilities and enduring the resulting contempt.

For many years, ATD Fourth World has suggested a holistic definition of extreme poverty that has been adopted by several national authorities and by United Nations Human Rights Commission in 1996². This definition finishes as follows; *“The lack of basic security leads to chronic poverty when it simultaneously affects several aspects of life, when it is prolonged and when it severely compromises people's chances of regaining their rights and of reassuming their responsibilities in the foreseeable future”* This definition underlines the continuity existing between poverty and extreme poverty, the multidimensionality of extreme poverty, its chronic character, and its links with rights and responsibilities³.

Joseph Wresinski, the late founder of ATD Fourth World, had this message engraved in the stone on the Plaza of Human Rights in Paris *“Wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty, human rights are violated. To come together to*

¹ Amartya SEN, *Development as freedom*, Oxford University press, 1999.

² *“The lack of basic security means the absence of one or more of the factors that enable individuals and families to assume basic responsibilities and to enjoy fundamental rights. Such a situation may vary in extent; its consequences can vary in gravity and may to a greater or lesser extent be irreversible. The lack of basic security leads to chronic poverty when it simultaneously affects several aspects of life, when it is prolonged and when it severely compromises people's chances of regaining their rights and of reassuming their responsibilities in the foreseeable future”* UN General Assembly Resolution 53/146 and UN Human Rights Commission Resolution 1996/23 adopting the *Final Report on Human Rights and Extreme Poverty*, submitted by the Special Rapporteur, Leandro Despouy. (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1996/13). This definition was proposed by Father Joseph Wresinski, in the report entitled *“Grande pauvreté et précarité économique et sociale”*, adopted by the French Economic and Social Council in 1987 (Journal officiel, "Avis et rapport du CES", p. 25)

³ More comments on this definition can be found in Quentin Wodon, *Attacking Extreme Poverty, Learning from the experience of the International Movement ATD Fourth World*, World Bank Technical Paper n° 502, May 2001, 135 p.

ensure that these rights be respected is our solemn duty". As the UN Human Rights Commission recognized it later, extreme poverty is a violation of human rights, since it denies all economic, social, political and civil rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Very poor people mean exactly the same thing with more simple words when they express "*we are not treated like human beings, but like animals*"

2. Reaching the poorest and building a partnership: what does it take?

Many actions are undertaken to alleviate absolute poverty, but these actions often fail to reach a portion of population intended to be the beneficiaries. This phenomenon occurs again and again, whatever the size and the objectives of the actions. UNICEF has been one of the first United Nations Agencies to express its difficulty in reaching 20% of its target population, and its executive board requested that research be undertaken in order to reach out to the poorest population groups. After several years of preparation, this research has been carried out through ATD Fourth World action-research projects initiated in different settings in seven countries; Burkina Faso, Canada, Guatemala, Haiti, Peru, Thailand, Uganda. A book describing the findings, entitled *Reaching the poorest*⁴, was published in 1999. In this book, the words "the poorest" are to be understood as a question "who are the poorest?" much more than as the designation of a specific group. It gives guidelines for action that I will try to sum up.

a) Guidelines for meeting a population and reaching the poorest

I will make 3 points. Firstly, *it is essential that efforts to improve the lives of the very poor be rooted in efforts that the community is already making on their behalf*. In each of the 7 projects under review, the members of the team tried to get to know the entire community and its poorest members. Their determination to seek out the poorest was rooted in two observations that have been confirmed again and again. In every group there are some members who are poorer than the rest of the group and more definitely excluded. At the same time, every community is already, in one way or another, showing solidarity with its most deprived members and has some idea of how to increase their well being. It is essential to locate people or groups who express such solidarity in order to support them and get their support.

Secondly, reaching the poorest requires finding new ways for acquiring and sharing knowledge. For that purpose, the development of a long-term closeness with the population constitutes a determining factor of success. As stated in the first newsletter of the Chronic Poverty Research Center⁵, social exclusion and discrimination often render those who are the most vulnerable uncounted in surveys and "invisible" to policy makers. Even participatory approaches often lack the time and preparation to get in touch with people whose links with the community are the weakest. The seven assessed projects were based on a commitment of at least 10 years. Such a lasting involvement was necessary to establish relations of trust. Researchers have demonstrated that "Rushing to

⁴ ATD Fourth World and UNICEF, *Reaching the poorest*, 1999, 134 pages, available at UNICEF in New York or at ATD Fourth World.

⁵ Chronic Poverty Update, July 2002.

help the poor through participation may be self-defeating⁶”. A genuine knowledge of the very poor does not only require a close proximity, but reciprocity as well. A young man in Peru echoed this: *“To know supposes to be humble and to be available. And the first act of humility is to accept this question: what can this person in front of me, so marked by misery, teach me?”*

Thirdly, it is also crucial to develop actions based on the aspirations of the poorest, not on their problems. A project from Guatemala illustrated this point. In the rural area of San Jacinto, the poorest families were the hardest hit by severe malnutrition. The death of their children caused the parents great pain and shame, since it proved that their long hours of hard work were ineffective. A project only focused on combating malnutrition would accentuate the parents’ feeling of failure. Thus the team insisted that the project should be centered around a pre-school that would send a strong message of hope to the parents and enable the community to mobilize itself around their children’s education. A nutritional program linked to it made it possible to tackle malnutrition.

b) Guidelines for building genuine partnership

It must be stressed that *fostering consensus among the partners, including the poorest members, around a number of inclusive goals aimed at reducing poverty and ending extreme poverty should be an ongoing concern.* Every new project within given communities (local as well as national and international) should take into account the existing dynamic consisting on the one hand of the efforts and acts of solidarity demonstrated by the very poor themselves, and on the other hand, on the commitment of those working side by side with them. The need for such mobilization was a component of all programs under review and was part of their planning process.

Let me illustrate this process with the project in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Its director chose to develop natural relationships with children and young people living in the street in particularly difficult conditions. He refused to respond to their immediate demands for help and instead asked them systematically “to whom can you turn for help?” He discovered and revealed the existence of an informal network of people who had built relationships with the children: civil servants, small businesses, trade owners. At the same time, he established working contacts with people who privately or in the context of their official responsibilities, expressed concern about the future of the children. Two years later, he launched with all these people the “Courtyard of Hundred Trades”, where young people in the street could try and learn a real trade, try and reestablish links with their families. They were in the position to work and help instead of being assisted, which made them proud. This spirit inspired the whole project and was present throughout its implementation. A few years later, the young people worked in the courtyard fabricating toys and pedagogical materials for pre-schools, which completely lacked such means. The press gave this event broad coverage, emphasizing that these deprived children were

⁶ Jean-Philippe Plateau, *Rushing to help the poor through participation may be self-defeating*, Center for Research on the Economics of Development, Namur, Belgium, July 2002. Plateau contends that donors who want to disburse within a short time period and who need rapid and visible results will tend to get in touch with the only small elite groups that have the ability to deal with external sources of funding. These elites create NGOs to “capture” the benefits of the aid programs, lower the share accruing to the grassroots and deflect the participatory development from its intended purpose.

taking an active part in their country's development. Later on, the Ministry of Family Development and Solidarity, the Ministry of Social Action and UNICEF supported the project.

- I wish to underline several features of global partnership that arise from this project and others. Firstly, partnerships that are restricted only to the groups that are the easiest to reach can become powerful tools of exclusion for the others. *If the very poor are to be considered real partners, not only recipients, but agents, they must be given the opportunity to take parts in all steps of the project, from the very beginning to the daily implementation and evaluation.* Then the project may enable them to retrieve a respected position in their community, which benefits themselves as well as others.

- Secondly, it is important *to resort to the poor in identifying others poorer than themselves.* This is documented in the project of Ouagadougou and in an "Art and Poetry" project in Bangkok as well. Through cultural activities run in a poor area (Klong Toey) the team got to know poor families, and in turn these families made it possible to meet other, poorer families living in a slum that no one knew about. They were the ones to indicate where these rejected families lived. They also insisted that the team went to meet this community and offered to be go-between.

- Thirdly, *ongoing training is necessary for all partners in development programs.* Goodwill is not sufficient for partners with such different backgrounds and experiences to really meet, understand one another and dare to take risks together. People coming from very poor backgrounds need training to express themselves, to gain self-confidence, to understand their rights and take on responsibilities. Training those who intervene in the life of the very destitute will enable them to be in better position to meet and act with the very poor. Learning from and networking with others should be considered part of the training process, as well as the recognition that reaching the poorest requires the commitment of determined individuals. Without the significant human investment of individuals carrying out home visits and many other personal forms of support with the poorest, their participation in collective projects is impossible.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize the challenge we are all facing. How can we learn from the very poor, who are despised and whom we often consider ignorant and even incapable of thinking? A clear view of this challenge was given two years ago by Christopher Winship, professor of sociology at Harvard University, in the preface he wrote to one of Wresinski's books: *'Wresinski's argument is one of an iconoclast. Only by understanding that those in the Fourth World are our moral equals and by embracing them as full members of society ... can we possibly begin to deal with the problem of extreme poverty. This is a radical proposal. It suggests that giving charity, paying higher taxes, voting correctly and political advocacy are not nearly enough. It is only by fundamentally changing our relationship to the poor that true change will be possible'*⁷

Twelve academics from different disciplines and universities recently lived this radical experience with fifteen people from a background of poverty and five core-workers from

⁷ Christopher Winship, preface to the English edition of « *The poor are the church* » a conversation with Fr. Joseph Wresinski, by Gilles Anouilh, Twenty-Third publications, 2002, p. xii.

ATD Fourth World. Advised and backed by both a high level academic council and a steering group, the participants researched and evaluated five themes over a two-year period, with the highest standards of equality among them. A book was published, demonstrating the success of the methodological processes that were used and their fruitfulness for all participants, including academics⁸.

More can be found on the website of ATD Fourth World, under the heading of its Research and Training Institute: www.atd-fourthworld.org

⁸ Groupe Quart Monde Université, *Le croisement des savoirs. Quand le Quart Monde et l'Université pensent ensemble*, éditions de l'Atelier et éditions Quart Monde, 1999, 525 pages.