

Attacking Extreme Poverty

*Learning from the Experience of the
International Movement ATD Fourth
World*

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FOREWORD

Governments in developing countries and international organizations are scaling up their programs for the reduction of poverty, but they still have difficulties in reaching the poorest. There is a fine line between reaching the poor and the poorest. Although poverty is increasingly conceptualized as a multidimensional problem (see, for example the recent WDR on *Attacking Poverty*), the multidimensionality of poverty is even more obvious and forceful in extreme poverty. For the extreme poor, a lack of basic securities or assets in many different areas (financial resources, education, employment, housing, health care, empowerment) have a mutually reinforcing impact, lead to deprivations in new areas of life and convert them in prisoners of a vicious circle. With no basic security or asset left as a solid foundation to rely upon, despite their efforts to fight extreme poverty, they normally cannot improve their condition without the help of others.

Apart from the plurality in areas of life affected, the very poor also share a history of deprivation and exclusion. They tend to suffer from a high degree of economic and social isolation. This isolation, and the state of deprivation in which the very poor live, implies that traditional programs and policies which may be effective in helping the poor may not work for the poorest. Helping the very poor to emerge from poverty requires extra public resources and time. A mutual relation of trust and understanding, normally non existent, must be developed between the extreme poor and the institutions and individuals willing to help them, and this requires time and patience on both sides.

This report was prepared with support from the World Development Report 2000-2001 on *Attacking Poverty* and the Regional Studies Program for the Latin America and the Caribbean Region in the World Bank. The first part of the report deals with reaching the very poor not only through programs and projects, but also through efforts to make public and private institutions more responsive to their aspirations. It makes a rich use of case studies, that help to enhance our understanding of difficult issues that we normally do not deal with in our daily lives and work. The second part analyzes the relationship between extreme poverty and human rights. The report was written with the collaboration of the International Movement ATD Fourth World, the NGO at the origin of the United Nations' World Day for Overcoming Poverty (October 17).

While this report suggests ways to reach the poorest, there is one feature of the approach of the International Movement ATD Fourth World that is worth emphasizing. It relates to the possibility for the non-poor to learn from the poorest. This can be discussed conceptually, but ultimately, learning from the poorest cannot be just an intellectual exercise. It must be a personal experience, gained from encounters with the very poor. For the non-poor, whether they work as public servants in a country's public administration or in an international organization like the World Bank, going through this experience is not a common day opportunity. I hope that all of us can enrich our experience in this respect in the years ahead, as we try to make sure that our programs and policies reach not only the poor, but also the poorest.



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ABSTRACT

This report consists of a collection of essays on extreme poverty. The first part of the report deals with what it means to live in extreme poverty, how to reach the very poor through programs and interventions, and how to make private and public institutions more responsive to their aspirations. The second part analyzes the relationship between extreme poverty and human rights. The report places its emphasis on the contribution of the International Movement ATD Fourth World, and its founder Joseph Wresinski, to the understanding of the very poor and what is needed for “attacking extreme poverty.”

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All but one of the chapters of this report were presented in seminars organized by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund from mid 1999 to the end of 2000. Huguette Redegeld and Charles Courtney presented their respective chapters during the World Bank's PREM week in July 1999. Bruno Tardieu (in January 2000) and Jona Rosenfeld (in November 2000) discussed their joint chapter at seminars of the informal World Bank and International Monetary Fund Group on Reaching the Poorest organized by Quentin Wodon at the World Bank and Christian Josz at the International Monetary Fund. The story of Doña Matilda was discussed by Kathy Lindert (in July 2000) within the context of the Guatemala Poverty Assessment prepared by the World Bank, and parts of the introductory chapter were presented by Quentin Wodon (in May 2000), both through seminars of the informal World Bank/IMF Group on Reaching the Poorest.

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CHAPTER 1: ATTACKING EXTREME POVERTY: AN OVERVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

This report consists of a collection of essays on extreme poverty. The first part of the report deals with what it means to live in extreme poverty, how to reach the very poor through programs and interventions, and how to make private and public institutions more responsive to their aspirations. The second part analyzes the relationship between extreme poverty and human rights. The report places its emphasis on the contribution that the International Movement ATD Fourth World (hereafter ATD), and its founder Joseph Wresinski, have made to the understanding of the very poor and what is needed to fight extreme poverty.

Joseph Wresinski (1914-1988) was a French Catholic priest. He founded ATD in 1957. ATD is a non-confessional, non-profit grass-roots and advocacy organization at the origin of the United Nations' World day for overcoming poverty (October 17). Today, ATD runs projects with the very poor in about twenty five developed and developing countries. ATD also aims at representing the poorest in national and international forums. The organization has been granted consultative status 1 with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) at the United Nations.

Born poor, Wresinski developed a line of thought in which extreme poverty is conceived as a multidimensional phenomenon which can lead to violations of human rights in their indivisibility. According to Wresinski, encompassing policies dealing with the various areas of deprivation felt by the poorest are needed to help them emerge from extreme poverty. Moreover, beyond their poverty, Wresinski believed that the social exclusion of the very poor was as detrimental to their development as their lack of basic material security and income. Today, the approach to the reduction of extreme poverty adopted by ATD remains anchored in the life and writings of its founder.

In this introductory chapter, my aim is to present some of the ideas developed by the authors of the following chapters. While some arguments presented by the authors are straightforward, others may be unusual. In discussing ATD's contribution to the debate on what is needed to reach the poorest, and my interpretation of the relationship between extreme poverty and human rights within the framework proposed by Wresinski for discussing extreme poverty, I hope to give a map of the various chapters that will facilitate their reading. Below, I first review some of the main messages provided in each of the chapters of the first part of the report devoted to reaching the poorest (section I). Next, I discuss the definition of extreme poverty proposed by Wresinski, and the relationship between extreme poverty and human rights on the one hand, and social exclusion on the other (section II).

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REACHING THE POOREST

What does it mean to live in extreme poverty? The story of Doña Matilda

Chapters 2 to 4 deal with the issue of reaching the poorest. Chapter 2 tells the story of Doña Matilda who lives in Guatemala. Doña Matilda was 32 years old at the time her story was written, a few years ago. She lived in a shack in Guatemala City, on the edge of the railroad track leading to the marketplace and bus terminal *Mercado la Terminal*. Matilda lived there with her five children and Maria, a young Salvadoran woman who had been staying with them for almost one year. Her story was told in a publication of the International Fourth World Movement for the United Nations on the occasion of the International Year of the Family. Various aspects of the life of the Doña Matilda, which I outline below, clearly illustrate the multiple handicaps faced by the very poor.

- *Location.* Doña Matilda's current residence is a small shack (9x9 square feet) right on the edge of the railroad track. This has advantages. The location is in the center of the city, near a large market place which provides opportunities for work. But the location also has disadvantages. Apart from the lack of space and amenities (no access to water, no electricity, no good sanitary installation), there is constant danger because of the trains. The children cannot be left alone without supervision. In 1991, after a collision with a car, a train derailed and took with it eight shacks. The families living there do not own the land: they came through *invasión*. There have been confrontations with railroad authorities, but no eviction. The promises of resettlement to public housing projects have not materialized. At one point in time, the families made a few payments in order to be able to buy their land, but it appears that they do not own it. Despite all the disadvantages of her current location, Matilda is happy to have a home. As she puts it, when she settled there, she felt: "*At last I was in my home, even if it was just a shack.*"
- *Migration and mobility.* Matilda's childhood was spent in a small village of southeast Guatemala where people lived off the land, a dry soil which required hard work. The family did not own much land, and it did not yield enough to meet the family's needs. The family constantly had to seek some alternate means of survival and the children had to contribute to this endeavor. When Matilda was 14, one of her aunts suggested that she move to the capital. Matilda accompanied her aunt who lived in a poor area, not far from the center of the capital, in the first shantytown spawned by the city's expansion. Matilda spent three happy years with her aunt from the age of 14 to 17, attending school for the first time. One day, a cousin proposed to Matilda that she come and live with her, promising a brighter future. But Matilda ended up being exploited: she became her cousin's maid and was no longer able to continue her schooling. She worked day and night, watching over four children and cleaning house without compensation. To people outside the family, the cousin introduced Matilda as a servant, refraining from mentioning the fact that they were relatives. Matilda left her cousin at the age of 18. Thereafter, being on her own, she moved for many years from one place to another. She lived with a variety of acquaintances, boyfriends, and protective employers. At times, she was homeless. From her childhood until she settled down in her own shack along the railroad, she moved at least 19 times.

- *Education and work.* Matilda only had a chance to go to elementary school for a few years, from age 14-17, when she was living with her aunt. About her experience with schooling, she says: “*I did not lose a single year. I really wanted to learn and I retained everything.*” Today, she pins most of her hopes on the education of her children. While school costs are not very high, they are nevertheless a serious burden given the limited resources of Matilda. Although formal fees are not charged, the costs of informal fees, materials, and uniforms have to be paid. Matilda ends up saving, scraping together all she can to send her children to school. But this does not always work. In her village of origin, Matilda’s household and farm work prevented her from attending school as a child. As a teenager, she worked as a restaurant waitress and a maid. Later, she held a variety of odd jobs -- laundress, bottle recycler, etc. Today, the trade-off between work and schooling continues to affect her children. Household duties hampered her older daughter’s ability to successfully pass the first grade. While Matilda tries to protect her children from extra work and household chores to free time for school, this is always a struggle.
- *Family life.* Having a family is important to Matilda. As a mother, she is constantly seeking to create a homely atmosphere and a nurturing environment for her children. This may be in part to compensate for her own lack of a mother when she was a child (her mother left when she was five, and she did not have a good relationship with her step-mother; she was rejected by her step-brothers and never really felt part of the family). But sustaining a family life is not easy. There are many obstacles, such as abuse, jealousies, alcohol, drugs, mobility, changes in companions, violence, and death. Matilda has five children. Her first daughter was born when she was 20 years old, which is not especially young among poor Guatemalan women. All of Matilda’s children, however, have different fathers. Some of the fathers simply did not want to take care of the children. One was assassinated. And one spent time in prison before leaving Matilda for another woman.
- *Inter-personal relationships and social capital.* There are many examples of solidarity in Matilda’s story. The poor do help each other in times of crisis. When the train wrecked shacks in Matilda’s neighborhood, people took in those who had lost their home. There are many other examples of hospitality and rooming for those without a place to go. After Matilda left her cousin at the age of 18, she was helped by employers. There are also informal cooperative child care arrangements. And Matilda enjoyed and took pride in doing committee work in her neighborhood. She was part of a fountain committee, and she also helped with a child nutrition project. At the same time, there are negative interactions. Jealousies and fights are major determinants of life changes, affecting both working patterns and housing arrangements. Physical abuse is also present, as is alcoholism and violence.
- *Humiliations and hopes.* Matilda places her hope in her children’s well-being and education. “*The only thing which will remain after my death is their education.*” But she does not always manage to protect them. One day at work, a waitress accused Matilda wrongly of having stolen money. Matilda, profoundly humiliated, preferred to quit: “*What made me suffer the most was the humiliation. People think that because we are poor, we steal.*” She stayed home with her children and didn’t want to leave the house. As Matilda explains it, “*At that time, I was caught in extreme poverty. I didn’t open my door any more. Dirty laundry piled up in a corner. I didn’t have enough money to pay for water or soap. I prepared only*

one meal per day. My children went to bed without having eaten. Once they had fallen asleep, I broke down into tears, heartbroken at having to see them in such a situation.” But life and hope must resume. “One night, I prayed to God from the innermost depths of my being... I don’t know what happened, but the next day, neighbors brought me their laundry to wash. Life was about to change. For the past three years, my work at the wash house has put food in our mouths.”²

The day-to-day difficulties with which the very poor are confronted can be illustrated further by the efforts of Doña Matilda to enroll and maintain two of her children, Clara Luz and Santiago, in school.

- *Clara Luz.* Doña Matilda enrolled Clara Luz in the first year of elementary school when she was eight years old. Clara Luz was placed with children who had already attended pre-school. She felt rejected because this was a school in a working class area, one in which girls like Clara Luz, who lived on the edge of the railroad track were called beggars. Clara Luz did not want to go to school anymore. Matilda encouraged her to continue, but other obstacles arose. It was difficult for Clara Luz to learn when living in a shack with no electricity, furniture, or place to open a notebook to do homework. Writing and reading exercises were made harder by the fact that she had to sit on the front doorstep to have enough light, surrounded by the noises of the neighborhood, the coming and going of little siblings in and out of the shack, and other people walking by the door. Moreover, Clara Luz had to help with household tasks. All these factors contributed to the failure of Clara Luz’s first year in school. Despite encouraging her daughter, Matilda realized that she was not learning. She allowed her to drop out of school by mid-year. Two years later, Clara Luz was again registered in the first year of elementary school in another school. The classes were in the afternoon and the atmosphere was different. *“Clara Luz feels good here”* said Matilda. Matilda still had in mind the failures of preceding years. So she attended to her daughter’s work. Since she knew how to read and write, she was able to help her daughter when necessary. The year went well and Matilda proudly told about a parents meeting where she was congratulated by the teacher for her daughter’s behavior. She did not want to miss any such meetings, even if it meant giving up working hours. She felt it was too important for her child’s success. *“I don’t send Clara Luz out to make cornmeal, she doesn’t do laundry,”* says Matilda, expressing her wish that Clara Luz need not work. And yet, she could not always avoid it. During hard times, Clara Luz did small jobs and brought in some money. For example, Clara Luz went to work in a restaurant for part of the night with Maria, a young woman lodged by the family. Clara Luz rested in the morning, and went to school in the afternoon. Despite working, that year, Clara Luz successfully completed her second year in school. Matilda talks about her hopes for the future: *“Clara Luz would like to complete her sixth year, but it would be wonderful if she could continue afterwards to study the basic program. It will cost more, but she’s thinking of working to pay for her supplies and continue her studies.”*
- *Santiago.* When Santiago was eight, Matilda enrolled him in an institution which works with children with difficulties. The students can be day pupils or boarders. Santiago was a day student, arriving in the morning and going back home in the evening; he was in the first year

² The above outline of Doña Matilda’s story was prepared jointly with Kathy Lindert.

of his elementary school education. Matilda initially saw advantages with this school: it was free, Santiago would be in school and spend the entire day there, which would prevent him from hanging out in the streets. But slowly, things appeared less positive. It was not sure that Santiago would get an elementary school education certificate. Also, Santiago was not happy there: “*He didn’t like the school. He was often sick, he was losing weight.*” After three months, Matilda withdrew him. Santiago spent over one year out of school and a great deal of time in the street. Matilda was afraid he would get on the wrong track. Just before the beginning of the next school year, Matilda worked for three days in a village on the outskirts of the capital where the annual national holiday is celebrated. The good pay allowed her to buy uniforms, shoes and school supplies for her older children. She was able to enroll Santiago in his first year of school again. Santiago liked the school, even if it was not always easy. But a few months later, Matilda had trouble paying the costs of sending two children to school. Moreover, as school took up only half a day, she was afraid that Santiago would spend the rest of the day in the street. He dropped out of school again.

Wresinski used to say that the work of his organization always grew out of real life encounters with the very poor, not from a theory. The rationale for including the story of Doña Matilda in this report is to help the reader understand through a concrete example whom are the very poor and what are the constraints they face in their struggle to build a better life. Once we have a feeling for whom we are talking about, it is easier to discuss what can be done to help families emerge from extreme poverty, and how institutions can make a commitment to them. These are the topics of chapters 3 and 4.

Box 1: Telling the story of Doña Matilda: ATD’s Participation Observation Methodology

ATD insists on the importance of giving value to all sources of knowledge, including the knowledge of the very poor and those who work with them at the grass-roots level. This may seem obvious, but in practice, it is seldom done. The analysis of poverty conducted by international organizations remains dominated by academic research. While this research is necessary, it is not sufficient. While social scientists have forged powerful tools for the analysis of poverty, they live in a world that is very different from that of the extreme poor, and this makes it difficult for them to grasp the life experience of the poor and their aspirations, and to conduct research that leads to concrete actions in which the very poor can take part. To avoid some of these problems, ATD relies on a research method based on participant observation. In the case of Doña Matilda, this is the method that was used to provide the background necessary to tell her story. The method is characterized by (a) the daily writing of participant observation reports, (b) a long term commitment of staff members to the eradication of poverty, and (c) the interaction between these two dimensions (the method can be complemented with interviews to build a family life story, and this was the case for the story of.)

Participant observation reports. Each staff member of ATD is supposed to write every day about its encounters with low income households. Reporting what the poor did, said, and meant is of special importance. Because the organization has known some of the households for many years, these confidential reports form a chronicle of the life of the members of the household. Different points of view or rather sensitivities are represented in the reports because different staff members write either at the same time, or over time, on the same households. Finally, the reports are based on participant observation in that the writers are actively involved in their attempts to support the households in their efforts to emerge from poverty. From a scientific point of view, the collection of these reports provides a unique material to investigate the complex dynamics of the life of the poor. It should be no surprise that they led Wresinski and ATD to adopt a multidimensional approach to poverty.

Long term personal commitment to the poorest. Because of this commitment, the households share feelings and stories with staff members which they do not tell to other outsiders such as social workers. Beyond words, the households live events with staff members which provide insights into their lives of a quality which cannot be matched by the information that a social scientist would gather in an interview. From an ethical point of view, the proximity of staff members with the poor progressively enables staff members to perceive the requirements of social justice from the point of view of the poor rather than from that of the non poor. The staff members and the poor may also discover prejudices or discriminations which would not be perceived by outside observers.

Link between the daily reports and the long term commitment. The knowledge that emerges from the reports enables staff members to share the aspirations of particular households and to see hope beyond daily difficulties. This knowledge nurtures the long term commitment of staff members not only to the broad objective of poverty alleviation, but also to the support of particular households. In turn, the long term commitment of the staff members ensures that the observation reported in writing results from an active participation in the life of the households. As staff members are not in the position of power of social workers, this participation is freely agreed upon by the households rather than forced upon them or simply accepted by them. In practice, the poor end up trusting the staff members in virtue of their commitment to them (and not only to the generic goal of poverty alleviation.) As a side benefit, because of the history of the households with the organization, the legitimization of a new staff member among a group of households is easier than that of a newcomer.

Limits of the methodology. There are risks in the above methodology. Because of the commitment of its staff, ATD may lack impartiality and objectivity. The feasibility of reproducing the information and experience obtained by ATD's methodology is also open to question. Other researchers who do not share the same commitment may not come up with the same findings. In a nutshell, the method used by ATD is at risk of being emotional while science must, in the end, be critically cool. As far as participant observation is concerned, a researcher should certainly attempt to feel what the condition of the poor is like and see the world through their eyes. But after doing so, the researcher should stand back and pull away to sort out what it is that the poor are experiencing and doing. ATD does actually follow this principle when its staff write a monograph on the life of a family on the basis of the observation reports written over the years about this family. Yet, there is always the danger that in such a monograph, personal commitment may induce a bias in reporting and interpretation.

Strengths of the methodology. Despite its potential weaknesses, ATD's methodology has the merit to lead to new sources of knowledge on poverty based on the experience of the poor and those engaged at their side. These sources of knowledge should be complementary with more traditional scientific methods of inquiry. As noted by Fontaine³, it is through the use of our two eyes that our vision achieves its quality. It is also through the confrontation of different perspectives that we may improve our understanding of, and programs for, the alleviation of poverty. Among all these perspectives, that of the poorest is key, but the hardest to uncover.

Source: Wodon, Q., forthcoming, *Pauvreté et Justice Sociale: Essai sur Rawls et Wresinski*, L'Harmattan, Paris.

³ Fontaine, P.J. 1991. La double description : une vue binoculaire, in *Misère, science et démocratie : reconnaître l'autre comme chercheur*, Revue Quart Monde No. 140, pp. 31-35.

Reaching the poorest: What does it take?

How can we reach families such as Doña Matilda's? Chapter 3 of this report, written by Huguette Redegeld, discusses the efforts and the approaches that are needed to reach the very poor. The key message from Redegeld is that there is a fine line between reaching the poor and the poorest. The poorest are in such a state of deprivation that traditional policies which may be effective for the poor may not work for the poorest. Helping the poorest emerge from extreme poverty requires extra public resources and time. At the grass-roots level, standing by the poorest for sufficiently long periods of time also requires special commitment and faith in their ability to build a better life for themselves.

In the mid 1990s, Redegeld led a study prepared by ATD for UNICEF. The objective was to identify key factors which can enable development agencies to reach the poorest and allow them to be full partners in the agencies' programs. Seven grass-roots projects were investigated in Burkina Faso, Haiti, Guatemala, Thailand, Peru, Canada and Uganda. In her paper, Redegeld provides a synthesis of the results of this study. In so doing, Redegeld discusses topics which have not received much attention in the literature on poverty, such as how cultural and artistic programs may help in breaking the vicious circle of deprivation which prevents the poorest from fully participating in the life of society. Redegeld's starting point is that identifying the poorest members of a community is difficult. Moreover, even if the poorest are identified, there is no guarantee that they will actively participate in the programs which could improve their current living conditions and future prospects. Redegeld highlights several points that should be taken into account when trying to reach the poorest:

- *Building and sharing knowledge with the very poor.* Often the poorest are excluded and out of reach. This exclusion means that typically, the poor's situation and their own efforts to emerge from poverty will not be known to an outsider. For the outsider to acquire an in-depth knowledge of the very poor, tools are needed. For example, a close proximity for a long period of time may be necessary for acquiring a genuine knowledge of the aspirations of the very poor. But for proximity to work, the very poor need a clear understanding of the intentions of those who want to help them. That is, reciprocity and mutual understanding are basic conditions to establish trust on which knowledge can be built and shared.
- *Basing actions on the aspirations of the poorest instead of their problems.* The projects which are the most successful in reaching the poorest tend to be those which are based on their aspirations rather than their problems. An example from a village in Guatemala will help make the point. The poorest families of the village were the hardest hit by malnutrition and the death of children. A project initially dealing solely with malnutrition failed in part because it accentuated the parents' feeling of failure. Reorienting the project's objectives around a pre-school with a link with to nutrition rescued the project because it sent to the parents a strong message that others had, like themselves, faith in the future of their children.
- *Recognizing the value of cultural actions.* Human beings require beauty and creative expression as much as they require food, clothing and shelter. Artistic and cultural projects emphasize each person's natural creativity. Through them, the poorest may be able to discover their capabilities and potential. They may gain the confidence necessary to dare

speaking up and contributing to the well-being of their communities and to broader society. Cultural activities may also provide an atmosphere allowing people from different backgrounds, poor and non-poor, to express and share experiences as equals.

- *Strengthening the family.* Threats to family life are serious because the family is the first line of resistance of the poorest to deprivation and social exclusion. While extreme poverty is destructive to family as well as to social life, a poor person's family nevertheless remains a powerful means of personal and social identification. Because human beings tend to care first and foremost for the development of those closest to them, family life is also important for the poor to be able to assume their responsibilities (and to show to society that they can do so). Hence a basic question to be put forth when evaluating programs is whether this or that particular action is reinforcing the family or breaking it apart.
- *Providing a role for the poor in identifying others poorer than themselves.* People living in precarious conditions are well aware of the existence of others, around them, who are poorer than themselves. They can lead outsiders to the most hidden and most downtrodden families. They can act as the bridge that will build confidence and trust, leading to mutual respect and partnership. This role for the poor is unique, and it constitutes a key element in the development of actions aimed at reaching the poorest.
- *Building on the potential for communities to unite around the poorest.* Within each community, there are people who consistently express their solidarity with the poorest. These people are not necessarily leaders, but they are essential in establishing a consensus within a community to help those who are left out. They are also indispensable actors in the development of specific programs. One project with children living in the street in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, illustrates the role of those who already have relationships with the children. Rather than helping the children, the staff of the project asked them to whom they could rely for help. This led the staff to uncover an existing network of support upon which they later built their own project. Such existing networks of solidarity should be sought before starting new projects because they constitute a strength on which to build new projects.

Redegeld also highlights more general considerations in her paper. Reaching the poorest requires an investment in terms of time. Building trust and confidence takes time. This must be recognized at the onset by institutions aiming at reaching the poorest, and it implies that extra financial resources must be made available. Beyond time and financial resources, flexibility and the ability to question one's own actions, values, and knowledge are important as well. Now, recognizing the fact that reaching the poorest takes time does not imply that no time constraints should be introduced on projects. To the contrary, it is important to set intermediate goals which can be evaluated as the project moves along.

Another point raised by Redegeld relates to the implications for training of the importance of building projects on the values and aspirations of both the poorest and the communities they live in. Reaching the poorest requires a significant human investment not only from outsiders, but also from the poorest themselves. In the same way that outsiders require training, so do the poorest. As for the mobilization of local communities, it often begins with the detection of local

groups such as community centers and schools. The dialogue with the persons and institutions who will support a program for the poorest must make it clear from the beginning that partnering with the poorest does not mean entering a short term cooperation. Since the poorest have an important role to play, they must not only be reached, but also empowered. Hence project evaluations should be anchored in a very simple question: Did the poorest have, through this project, the opportunity to advance towards more autonomy and freedom rather than remaining in a cycle of deprivation and dependency?

Box 2: Reaching the Poorest in Haiti through New Schools in Rural Areas.

One of the projects analyzed in the ATD-UNICEF study summarized by Redegeld took place in Haiti. Describing the project will help to understand in more concrete terms how ATD gets involved in new development projects, and how the organization manages to progressively reach the poorest.

In 1977, in a rural community near Fonds-des-Nègres, a town of 40,000 people in Haiti, a Catholic priest established a small boarding school, Pemel, for 60 local girls of poor peasant families. Following the death of the head mistress in 1981, the priest requested assistance from ATD to help him develop the school. Three staff members or full-time “volunteers” of ATD came to Fonds-des-Nègres. In addition to the poor families living within the community, the volunteers soon realized that the families living in isolated communities scattered in the surrounding hills had no access to schooling. Some families were too far from existing schools. Others could not afford the cost of books, fees and uniforms. Still others could not send their children because they needed them at home or in the fields. The volunteers’ first objective was to meet these very poor and excluded families in order to assess how the school system could better meet their education needs. The volunteers found that the parents were eager to send their children to school, but even the Pemel school didn’t fully meet their needs.

The volunteers identified several girls from one isolated locality who were having trouble keeping up in school. They decided to organize a “library in the field” in that locality once a week to become more familiar with the children’s everyday environment. Participation by children and adults alike grew rapidly for the activities organized by the volunteers around books. After a few weeks, attendance decreased. Some very poor children felt ashamed of their clothes and did not want to be seen by others; others had to work in the fields. The volunteers decided to bring the library closer to the children, in the fields where they were working, on the roads, or even in their homes. Soon, even the most isolated children joined the reading groups. The simple approach to reach the poorest and most isolated children with picture books and reading aloud sessions implemented by the volunteers sparked a desire among many young men and women in the village to participate in the activity. Soon, motivated young villagers took over the “library in the field” project and the volunteers shifted their efforts to providing support and encouragement to these youngsters so that they could reach the most isolated and excluded children. Within several months, outdoor library sessions were organized in other nearby areas at the request of young people who wanted to help out and be involved.

The outdoor library initiative gave the volunteers the opportunity to take stock of the local educational infrastructure and the aspirations of the children and their parents. Changes in the Pemel school were geared towards fostering greater participation by poor families. Two years after the arrival of the ATD Volunteers, the Pemel boarding school became a day school. It was opened to boys, and it expanded its capacity by hiring new teachers. In addition, in the more isolated rural areas, “little schools” were established in structures built by local families. The schools managed to enroll many of the children who were too poor to attend previously, and they adapted their rules and policies in order to meet the needs of the children. For example, families with greater resources agreed to send only one of their children to the schools (since the others could go elsewhere), thereby making room for the children of the poorest families. Teachers and fellow students provided help and flexibility to poorer students.

In the beginning, there were no textbooks, no 'curriculum' and few qualified staff in the rural schools. Despite the scant resources, the teachers designed activities to prepare children for life and to improve their coping skills. The children were taught literacy in Creole first, and then in French. Basic arithmetic skills were also taught. The teachers were limited by their own educational backgrounds. Most had little more than primary education themselves. A lack of confidence and low pay (below the wages in the formal school system) caused many teachers to resign after only one-year. One of the principal challenges was to hire and retain motivated teachers. In the beginning, the new teachers were resistant to assistance and training because they feared judgement by their peers for inadequacy. They also lacked time to be trained. However, the teachers that stayed with the school and began to know the students and their families progressively developed a sense of pride in their social and professional commitment. The teachers began to invest more time and energy to improving their own teaching skills. The resources available to the teachers and students gradually improved over the years as other initiatives were implemented, namely: more formal training courses for teachers, addition of a small school library to allow book-based learning, two years of technical assistance from two French teachers, presence of a doctor among the volunteers for dealing with health issues, and collaboration with Center Labordes, a training center for parochial school teachers in Southern Haiti. Each of these initiatives improved the quality of the school and its ability to meet the needs of the poorest children.

In addition to the Pemel school, the volunteers gave particular attention to the "little schools" in the isolated regions. Two of the larger little schools had grown to 113 and 67 students with only one teacher per school. In these schools, the parents became particularly involved in the development of the school (e.g. taking responsibility for maintaining the structures and building extensions). In the beginning, parent participation involved providing food for school lunches or donating small change for school expenses. Parents with more resources provided the necessary back-to-school basics and bought or rented books, and those without resources benefited from subsidies. Twice a year the parents accompanied their children to receive report cards and meet with the teacher. The teachers held quarterly meetings with the parents for every class, and they contacted the parents if they did not come to the meetings. These home visits by the teachers were found to be particularly important for building a good relationship between the little schools and the families. Achieving the participation of the parents took an extended period of time. For many families, the idea to go to school was entirely new and the parents did not have a previous experience to draw on for making suggestions to the teachers. The involvement of the parents expanded as their children progressed and succeeded in school. Not only the children, but also the parents became more confident, which improved their participation in the educational development of their children. It took three years of trials and errors before the parents established a working committee which could collaborate with the schools on educational planning.

Twelve years after ATD volunteers arrived in Fonds-des-Nègres, the Pemel and satellite schools had expanded their capacity from 60 to 850 students, and the number of teachers had increased from 2 to 24. Two affiliated "little schools" had been created in the more remote areas. While these results are important, the main objective of the volunteers was to enable the poorest children who did not go to school to go, and to pursue their education as far as possible despite their family's constraints. The program was successful in training teachers to reach very poor families. In 1993, the ATD volunteers pulled out of the project because the cooperation between the school and the families was working well enough to continue on its own. The project succeeded, but many years of committed effort were necessary to overcome the social barriers and fully integrate the poorest families in the schools.

Source: ATD Fourth World and Unicef, 1999, *Reaching the Poorest*, Unicef Publications, New York.

Enabling institutions to reach the poorest: From impasse to reciprocity

Chapter 4, the third chapter in the part of the report dealing with reaching the poorest, was written by Jona Rosenfeld and Bruno Tardieu. The authors reflect on twelve case studies describing how friends and supporters of ATD working in various institutions succeeded in having their own institution connecting with the very poor. That is, the authors analyze how individuals working in various institutions convinced their peers to consider the reduction of extreme poverty as a priority for the institution. The twelve institutions used for the case studies are very diverse. They include a regional school system, a national electric power company, a small business, a major daily newspaper, a parish in a working class community, a hospital trade union, the European Commission, the French government, a court system, a city government, the United Nations, and a university. Although the case studies are all based on experiences in developed countries, the findings are broadly valid as well for developing countries, where the issue of how to make institutions pro-poor is also crucial and discussed in the section on empowerment in the World Development Report on *Attacking Poverty*.

At the point of departure of each of the twelve case studies, there is an impasse: *“the very poor are shut out; the social institution is shut in. Both live with a sense of defeat and mutual misunderstanding in a sterile ‘non-relationship’ leading nowhere.”* The very poor seem to have internalized this impasse. They don’t expect much from the institution, and this provides grounds for the institution to say that the very poor cannot be partners. Often, the institution also considers that dealing with the very poor is not part of its mandate: it is a task for specialists. Within the institution there may be individuals who take the plight of the very poor at heart, but they feel powerless to change the institution.

At the point of arrival, towards the end of the stories, all problems have not been fixed. The individuals involved insist that much remains to be done. But there is a feeling that things are progressing. A dialogue has begun, and both parties – the institution and the very poor – *“find it meaningful to invest time in a relationship that now appears as productive.”* The institution and the very poor have both undergone a transformation. Although the journey has just begun, concrete changes are occurring. There is pride on both sides at having started the journey, and this constitutes the measure of success.

In the journeys from the point of departure to the point of arrival, Rosenfeld and Tardieu identify four crossroads for the individuals who succeeded in making their institution responsive to the very poor:

- *First Crossroads: Yielding to Curiosity — Initial Encounter.* When they are asked to tell their stories, the individuals who helped transform their institution do not speak first about the impasse to which they were confronted within their institution. Instead, they evoke first a personal encounter with the very poor, in most cases through the intermediation of ATD. In this encounter, by participating in simple activities together with real people in extreme poverty — children, youth, and parents — the individuals realize that beyond their problems, the extreme poor are people no different from themselves in their aspirations. This invites the individuals to question theories about poverty which shield the non-poor from the suffering of the very poor by placing blame upon the poor. In other words, the individuals are invited

to figure out whether they can connect to the excluded, and why their own world and their institution is apparently closed to such encounter.

- *Second Crossroads: Putting one's Credibility on the Line by Taking a Stand.* Personal encounters with the very poor can give rise to tension between one's work within an institution and the reality of extreme poverty. Outlets where people can discuss such tension are needed. Without such outlets, it is difficult to make sense of one's experiences. The individuals were given the opportunity to remain in contact with ATD. The dialogue that ensued put the initial encounter in perspective, and it helped the individuals to see similarities between the impasse they were confronted with within their institutions and similar situations of exclusion elsewhere. This in turn helped the individuals to see and understand the impasse with which their institution was confronted. The individuals also realized that they belonged to many civic or professional organizations, networks and communities, most of which *de facto* exclude the very poor. They understood that at their level of responsibility, they could try to counteract the exclusion of the poor. The individual realized that they actually have a choice, a margin of freedom to take a stand. Taking a stand often meant putting one's credibility on the line, but it is precisely the individual's credibility within their institution which enabled them to challenge their peers and confront them with the reality that the institution was excluding the poor. Because taking a stand may force the individuals to travel a lonely (at least at first) and uncharted course within their institution, support from organizations such as ATD is crucial to provide a place where the individual's difficulties can be shared and reflected upon.
- *Third Crossroads: Awakening to Citizenship.* To make progress, the individuals must convince others in the institution to join them, and they must translate the aspirations of the poor into actions that match the institution's mission and values. A dialogue must be carried openly between the very poor and the institution, with respect for both. The conversation about the very poor within the institution may help it rediscover not only some of its core values, but also the knowledge that it already has regarding how to better serve the poor. Blaming the institution for what it may not have done in the past should be avoided, because this would likely shut doors, rather than open them. A common language has to be found so that learning takes place, and the dialogue does not humiliate any of the parties. Within the institution, both "workers in the field" and management should be involved in the dialogue. Ideally, "workers in the field" will confirm that what the poor say is true, and the management will give value to the experience of "workers in the field." One example of such dynamic is provided by the story of the French electric power company. At the point of departure of the story, the position of the management was that protecting poor customers from disconnection was not its business, but rather that of social workers. The utility company also argued that it had no way of knowing among its clients in default of payment who were the poor, and who were those who could pay their electricity bills but did not. However, as the small group of individuals who worked for the utility company slowly succeeded in convincing their management and their peers to launch energy assistance programs for the utility's poor customers (this took several years), the utility company discovered that it could in fact identify whom its poor clients were by checking for how long and how often its clients had their electricity cut off. The utility also discovered that its staff had substantial expertise in dealing with the very poor, which proved crucial for

experimenting with new initiatives. Finally, the utility's management realized that its mission as a public service did include the promotion of affordable access to energy for all. The implementation of a series of low income energy assistance programs (see Box 3) thereby helped the utility to reclaim its core values.

- *Fourth Crossroads: Daring to Become Political.* Should change within the institution be achieved purely from within, or should the very poor be involved in a formal way. One challenge here is to make sure that the poor do know about their role in changing the institution, i.e. that there be feedback. Another challenge is to secure a long term relationship between the institution and the very poor. As Rosenfeld and Tardieu put it, “*what is at stake is whether the distinct, free and autonomous voice of those most affected by extreme poverty becomes heard within the institution*” beyond informal exchanges of knowledge. For the individuals in the institution, seeking a public space for representatives of the poor is in effect a political act. For concrete actions to be taken by an institution, it is important to propose to the management of the institution to do “*something they cannot refuse.*” But there can be an additional step, whereby the very poor are given a voice within the institution. That is, the first small step taken by the institution, which can be considered as being part of the third crossroad above, will hopefully serve as a launching pad for a joint venture between the institution and the very poor. In the case of the electric utility mentioned earlier, this additional step consisted of launching formally a joint experimental project between ATD and the utility. As indicated in Box 3, the project turned out to be highly successful. Ultimately, as the collaboration between ATD and the organization was pursued, the culture of dialogue between the very poor and the electric utility was strengthened, and to some extent a joint history was created.

Rosenfeld and Tardieu describe how each institution became progressively committed to the very poor, but the stories suggest that the very poor were not the only beneficiaries from this commitment. By becoming involved with the very poor, the institutions themselves rediscovered their “*raison d’être,*” which enabled them to perform their mission better. In their conclusion, Rosenfeld and Tardieu insist that “*there would have been no chance of engaging social institutions to respond to very poor families on a long-term basis if, in turn, this had not resulted in the families’ contributing to the institutions... The encounter ... puts one in touch with one’s own frailty [... and] aspirations to ... contribute to the making of a more humane, less violent world. As Wresinski wrote: ‘The poorest are the very source of all the ideals of humanity, since it is through injustice that humanity has discovered justice; through hate, love; through contempt, dignity and through tyranny, the equality of all human beings.’*” Again, one of the most important contribution of the very poor to institutions that accept to change in order to serve them better is the recovery and promotion of the institutions’ highest values.

Box 3: New Services for Low Income Customers: An Electric Utility's Experience

Every winter the problem of electricity disconnection makes front page news in France because of the health and other hazards associated with the lack of heating and light. In recent years, EDF, the French electric power utility, implemented new low income energy assistance programs nationally after a pilot testing phase conducted in collaboration with ATD. The story of how EDF made a commitment to help its poor customers is discussed in one of the twelve case studies analyzed by Rosenfeld and Tardieu. Today, the EDF's board considers that «*the situation of our most deprived citizens remains one of the principal concerns of the country. This is why EDF considers that the fight against poverty and insecurity as an integral part of the mission of a modern public service.*» To implement this vision, EDF has created a series of new programs for its low income customers:

- (1) Person to contact in case of technical problem: during a visit or a phone call to a customer, an EDF employee gives the name of a contact person at the local service center who can answer technical questions.
- (2) Offer of a pre-payment meter: a pre-payment meter requires that the customer pays for his consumption at his home, either with coins or a credit card. The advantage of this meter is that it allows consumption to be measured, and its cost evaluated more easily. It encourages therefore sound budget management. The disadvantage is that when the client can no longer pay, he can cut the electricity supply off himself.
- (3) Invitation to a local meeting to discuss energy issues: EDF sometimes organize information meetings in deprived neighborhoods. These meetings can help poor customers to learn how to manage their energy consumption more efficiently. They can also improve the quality of the relationship with the local population, especially when EDF employees have bad press and are considered responsible for electricity disconnection.
- (4) Energy saving advice: advice is given by EDF employees to assist customers in making energy savings. This includes information on the consumption of different household appliances that the customer possesses.
- (5) Insulation advice: advice is given by an EDF employee, focusing on ways of improving insulation and thus reducing heating costs.
- (6) 800 telephone number: numerous deprived clients face difficulty in paying their phone bills (assuming they are connected, otherwise they must use public phones). An 800 number may improve EDF customer contacts.
- (7) Service limiter: This is a device that sets a limit to the amount of electricity that can be consumed by the household, as an alternative to disconnection. The limiter is available for a limited period, while waiting for social worker assistance or for a grant from financial aid funds.
- (8) Payment deadline flexibility: the poor receive irregular income. EDF accepts piecemeal, « à la carte » payments, coinciding with the timing of the customer's income arrival.
- (9) Monthly payment: EDF encourages monthly payment. This avoids large six-monthly bills which the deprived cannot settle in a single payment.
- (10) Cash payment at the local agency: deprived customers can pay a part or the entirety of their bill over the counter at their local EDF GDF service center.
- (11) Right price advice: an EDF employee informs the customer of the different possible monthly contracts (tariffs) and advises him on the subscription best adapted to his needs and financial means.
- (12) Assistance in reading and understanding bills: given that some deprived clients are illiterate, bills can be difficult to understand. An EDF employee can explain the bill to these customers.
- (13) Personalized contact at the agency: this service consists of a personalized welcome for deprived customers at their local EDF GDF service center (rather than an employee behind a counter).
- (14) Appointments at a time which suits the customer: EDF agencies remain open in the evening or on Saturday morning in order to facilitate the making of appointments with clients in default.

(15) Agency appointments held in private: a space is reserved in the EDF GDF service center to meet with customers in private, as it would be in a bank in the case of a request for a loan.

Taken as a whole, these new services helped in reducing the utility's disconnection rate by a third. Importantly, many of the new services were suggested by the poor themselves, and some of the services which turned out to be appreciated the most by low income customers were not the most expensive or sophisticated ones. For example, one of the most valued services is the possibility to be welcomed privately at the utility's local center to discuss issues related to the late payment of bills (service # 15 above). Finally, the utility now implements on a yearly basis a survey of its low income customers to measure their satisfaction with its services. Most of the low income energy assistance programs described above were introduced a few years after the period of slow institutional change described by Rosenfeld and Tardieu in their book, but the example shows how the seeds planted by a small group of individuals within the utility helped to improve its policies towards the poor.

Source: Wodon, Q., 2000, Public Utilities and Low Income Customers: A Marketing Approach, *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 13: 222-240.

EXTREME POVERTY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Brief presentation of the chapters on extreme poverty and human rights

The three chapters in the second part of the report are devoted to the relationship between extreme poverty and human rights. In this section, instead of reviewing the content of each chapter as was done in the previous section devoted to the part of this report on reaching the poorest, I will briefly present the chapters, and then go on to provide an overall framework for thinking about the relationship between extreme poverty and human rights. The disadvantage of this approach is that I will not be able to reflect on the message and specific contribution of each chapter separately. The advantage is that putting the various chapters into one overall framework will help the reader navigate through the second part of the report, which is perhaps more difficult to read because it is less directly operational.

Chapter 5, written by Joseph Wresinski, is a translation of a text originally published in French for the French Commission on Human Rights at the occasion of the bicentennial anniversary of the French revolution. Using examples from both developed and developing countries, Wresinski suggests that extreme poverty can lead to violations of human rights in their indivisibility. Since I will analyze in detail below the approach to extreme poverty adopted by Wresinski, I need not say much more here.

Chapter 6 was written by Charles Courtney, a Professor of Philosophy at Drew University in New Jersey. According to Courtney, Wresinski's claim that extreme poverty can lead to a violation of human rights poverty can be explored through the concept of indivisibility, and by giving priority to *who* (the individual within her community) over *what* (her material possessions and entitlements). Courtney distinguishes four potential levels of indivisibility in the human rights discourse. First, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms the indivisibility of humanity. But the poorest are excluded and their humanity is in question. Second, the Universal Declaration says that we are a "human family." So there is an indivisibility of community, according to Courtney. Each person, born helpless, needs the support of others. But

the poorest are denied support. Third, all of the articles of the Universal Declaration apply to the individual. So there is indivisibility of the person. Extreme poverty affects the whole person – it is not just a lack of income. Fourth, if all human rights apply to the human person, then there is indivisibility of human rights. A human rights approach to overcoming poverty must be comprehensive and coordinated. Courtney concludes by noting that the capabilities approach to human rights proposed by Sen and Nussbaum fits well with Wresinski's approach and all of the above because it gives priority to persons (that is, being able) over resources, and because it calls for cooperation among all persons of equal dignity, which refers to the indivisibility of the community and the humanity.

Chapter 7 was written by Leandro Despouy, a Former Ambassador from Argentina to the United Nations' Commission for Human Rights in Geneva. In 1987, Wresinski made an intervention at a session of the United Nations' Commission for Human Rights. In this intervention, Wresinski discussed the relationship between extreme poverty and human rights, and he called upon the United Nations to take into account the point of view of the very poor in its thinking and programs. Wresinski's intervention was instrumental in leading the Commission for Human Rights to adopt a series of resolutions on extreme poverty and human rights in the following ten years (the latest of these resolutions is provided in the appendix to this chapter). Following these resolutions, at the request of the Commission, Despouy wrote a report on the topic for the Commission in close collaboration with ATD. In his paper for this report, Despouy recasts his main findings in the light of recent developments. He also provides the reader with an insider's view of what it took for the United Nations to begin recognizing the link between extreme poverty and human rights.

Definition of extreme poverty

To help the reader go through the next three chapters, I would like to give some background on the approach to extreme poverty proposed by Wresinski and used by ATD. Although I will present an analytical framework, it is important to again state at the outset that Wresinski's approach was not the result of a theoretical investigation. Rather, the approach emerged from forty years of grass-roots involvement with the very poor in both developing and developed countries. To shed light on Wresinski's approach, one can start from the definition of extreme poverty presented in a report that he prepared for the French Economic and Social Council⁴:

“A lack of basic security is the absence of one or more factors that enable individuals and families to assume basic responsibilities and to enjoy fundamental rights. Such a situation may become more extended and lead to more serious and permanent consequences. Extreme poverty results when the lack of basic security simultaneously affects several aspects of people's lives, 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.”

⁴ Wresinski, J., 1987, *Grande pauvreté et Précarité Economique et sociale*, Rapport du Conseil Economique et Social, Journal officiel de la République française, Paris. See also De Gaulle-Anthonioz, G., 1995, *La grande pauvreté : Evaluation des politiques publiques de lutte contre la pauvreté*, Conseil Economique et Social, Journal officiel de la République française, Paris.

This definition is complex. It emphasizes the continuity existing between poverty and extreme poverty, and in so doing, it relies on three main references⁵. The first reference is that of a lack of one or several basic securities which may have a cumulative impact and lead to an insecurity affecting new dimensions in a poor person's life. The second reference is that of time: poverty is associated with the persistence of this insecurity over possibly long periods of time. The third reference is that of the inability of the (extreme) poor to exercise their rights and assume their responsibilities. Although the third reference is of higher interest for this report, I discuss all three references below because an understanding of the first two references will help for the third.

The multidimensionality of extreme poverty

The first reference is laid in terms of basic securities. According to Wresinski, poverty results from, and even consists of, a lack of basic securities which include not only financial resources, but also education, employment, housing, health care, etc., as well as in some cases civil and political rights. Beyond some threshold, the insecurity endured by the poor is such that the lack of basic securities have mutually reinforcing impacts. When the consequences of the insecurity are severe, they lead to deprivations in new life areas. The poor are then prisoners of a vicious circle. With no basic security left as a solid foundation to rely upon, they cannot emerge from chronic poverty by themselves. This cumulative deprivation does not refer to the juxtaposition of characteristics associated with the inhabitants of, say, inner-city ghettos, urban slums, and remote areas. It should not be confused either with the high incidence of poverty which can be found in these areas. The cumulative lack of basic securities is to be understood as expressing the situation of individuals and families who cannot emerge from poverty without the help of others because the pressure of deprivation is just too strong⁶.

The second reference is related to the chronic character of poverty, to its persistence through time. While a key characteristic of the so-called new poverty (a term used mainly in developed countries) is its novelty, a common feature among the extreme poor is the permanence, or at least the recurrence of their situation (this has also been referred to as chronic poverty). Apart from the plurality in areas of life affected, the chronically poor share a history of deprivation. As poverty is associated with social exclusion from mainstream society and, for the poorest, from their community in many cases as well, the chronically poor suffer from a high degree of economic, social, and cultural isolation which may be transmitted from one generation to the next. The longer the experience of poverty has been, the harder it is to emerge from poverty.

Together, these two references result in an approach to poverty which is multidimensional in that it does not consider financial deprivation as the only characteristic of the poor. Following

⁵ Wodon Q., 1992, *Logement, le droit des exclus*, Editions ouvrières, Paris; Wodon Q., 1993, *Marketing contre pauvreté*, Editions de l'Atelier, Paris; and Wodon Q., forthcoming, *Pauvreté et Justice sociale: Essai sur Rawls et Wresinski*, L'Harmattan, Paris.

⁶ There is wide agreement that poverty is multidimensional. The latest World Development Report 2000-2001 prepared by The World Bank on *Attacking Poverty* recognizes this multidimensionality. The multidimensionality of poverty is also at the core of the UNDP approach, its Human Development Index, and its Human Poverty Index. However, beyond the broad agreement that poverty is multidimensional, the issue of the operational relevance of this multidimensionality for programs and policies aimed at poverty reduction has received relatively little attention, especially with regards to the extreme poor who are most likely to suffer the most from multiple handicaps.

Amartya Sen's work on capabilities and functionings, there is now some sympathy for conceptualizations of poverty similar to that of Wresinski. Still, it could be argued that the assimilation of poverty to the lack of several basic securities results from a confusion. Poverty when conceived as a unidimensional monetary phenomenon may result from the above deprivations, or it may cause such deprivations. But this is no rationale for identifying the causes and/or consequences of poverty with monetary poverty itself. By lumping together people with various deprivations, such as the jobless, the homeless, the illiterate, etc., in the joint category of the poor, the resulting multidimensional concept of poverty would lose its precision and usefulness for policy, the argument would go. The concept of multidimensional poverty could also lead to the possibly mistaken impression that a vaguely defined and articulated concept of global or comprehensive policy for poverty reduction might be more effective in bringing an end to the various deprivations mentioned than more specific and targeted interventions by life area.

This objection is important, and it has some validity. Yet the fact that the multidimensional view of poverty might be misused as a catch-all but empty motto does not detract from its relevance to describe existing phenomena. To take just one example, there are clear relationships between homelessness and joblessness among the very poor, with both phenomenon reinforcing each others and leading to a vicious circle. That is, there is something fundamentally true about a multidimensional approach to poverty, and the adequacy of this approach is more evident when one considers extreme poverty rather than poverty. The multidimensional concept in which the cumulative lack of several basic securities limits the possibility for people to live decently and emerge from their condition of deprivation by themselves does provide a faithful representation of the situation of many very poor individuals and households around the world. If the situation of these individuals and households were one of financial deprivation only, it could be referred to as such, and dealt with through public transfers. But it is not, and the concept of multidimensional poverty enables the analyst/policy maker to capture what goes on in the life of very poor individuals and households beyond the lack of income. Beyond helping in designing appropriate safety nets, a multidimensional approach to poverty can also be used for prevention, that is for avoiding that extreme poverty repeat itself from one generation to the next.

Extreme poverty and human rights

The third reference in Wresinski's definition, and the most important one for the purpose of this report, is related to the concepts of human rights and responsibilities. I would argue that this third reference rests itself on two articulations.

The first articulation highlights, for each human right at a time, the existing link between the access to that right and the exercise of a corresponding responsibility. This link is broken when, due to a lack of access to the right, the individuals or families in poverty cannot fulfill their corresponding responsibility. In turn, because they cannot demonstrate their ability to fulfill their responsibility, the poor are not in a position to claim their right. Parents whose children are in foster care in rich countries have a hard time recovering their parental authority because once they have lost their parental rights, they are not any more in a position to demonstrate the benefits that could result for their children from a return at home. Another example is that of a jobless person who cannot acquire the credentials that would enable her to demonstrate an ability to work. In short, while economic and social rights are often needed to assume responsibilities,

these rights tend to be denied to the poor who, deprived from basic securities, are perceived as living short of their responsibilities toward their family or society.

The second articulation does not refer to each couple of right and responsibility, but to the interdependence or indivisibility between various rights and responsibilities. This is emphasized by Wresinski. Although it could be possible to examine three cases of interdependence (between rights, between responsibilities, and between rights and responsibilities,) it will suffice here to mention the interdependence between rights. A dichotomy has been established by the United Nations Human Rights Charter and other international conventions between civil and political rights on the one hand, and economic, social, and cultural rights on the other. The experience of the poor challenges this dichotomy. Not only does the absence of civil and political rights undermine the enjoyment or exercise of economic, social, and cultural rights, but conversely, the lack of economic, social, and cultural rights undermines the exercise of civil and political rights⁷.

Because of the variety of human rights, an approach to extreme poverty based on them is necessarily multidimensional in scope. The multidimensionality of human rights is a source of complexities. It is not easy, for example, to establish a hierarchy between different types of rights. Programs for the poor are implemented in many areas related to economic and social rights, including housing, education, job training, employment, and health care. While the programs in all these areas complement each other, they are also competing with each other not only for funding (both private and public), but also for the attention of law and policy makers, and the public at large. At the same time, this multidimensionality provides for the identification of issues which would not be revealed under an unidimensional focus on the lack of income on the part of the poor. In Belgium for example, the communication to the municipal social services of the names of the households in default of payment for their electricity bills was criticized on the basis that it constituted a violation of the right to privacy. This argument was rejected by a high court on the rationale that the communication of the names served, and was not disproportionate with, the purpose of the law by enabling the social services to protect the households in default of payment from an electricity shutoff. Still, this example shows how in practice, there may be interactions and trade-offs not only between economic, social, and cultural rights, but also between these rights and civil and political rights.

Once the debate on poverty reduction is framed in terms of human rights, the critiques of social programs based on negative incentive effects or on an assumption of undeservingness on the part of the poor lose some of their strength. Consider first negative incentive effects. In the U.S., with cash welfare benefits in mind, Murray⁸ has claimed that several “laws” pervert social transfers. The most important law is the law of unintended rewards which states that transfers increase the value of being in the condition that prompted the transfer, thereby creating a poverty trap. While this is true, does it mean that social programs for the poor should be abolished? Not if these social programs aim at implementing a basic right, because the principle of human rights

⁷ Within the French context which has influenced the work of Wresinski, this has been discussed in Pettiti, L., 1991, *Pauvreté et Convention européenne des droits de l'homme*, *Droit social*, 1: 84-87; Sudre, F., 1990, La première décision “quart monde” de la Commission européenne des Droits de l'homme: une “bavure” dans une jurisprudence dynamique, *Revue universelle des droits de l'homme*, 2: 349-353; and Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'homme, 1992, *Rapport Grande pauvreté et droits de l'homme*, Paris.

⁸ Murray, C., 1984, *Loosing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980*, Basic Books, New York.

would remain and take precedence over the difficulties associated with their implementation (this is not to say that the implementation should not promote the respect of specific responsibilities on the part of the poor associated to the granting of rights, which may help in limiting negative incentive effects). The same precedence of the principle of human rights applies to the issue of undeservingness according to which the poor do not deserve the support of society because they may appear as not willing to assume the responsibilities expected from all members of society. Under the assumption of undeservingness, the ethical duty would be on the part of the poor to improve their behavior. Redistributive transfers and social policies would be unjust when they reward reprehensible behavior and impose an undue burden on the non-poor members of the community respecting its core values. Again, the argument of undeservingness is weakened as soon as extreme poverty is conceptualized as leading to violations of human rights in their indivisibility because once rights are recognized as such, they may be granted independently of the potentially contradicting opinions of various groups in society as to the deservingness of the poor.

Extreme poverty and social exclusion

The issue of deservingness naturally leads to a discussion of social exclusion. In his paper on extreme poverty and the indivisibility of human rights, Wresinski highlights how the extreme poor suffer from being excluded. I would like to continue to present here my own interpretation of Wresinski's approach by explaining how, apart from distinguishing extreme poverty from a mere lack of income, it is also important to distinguish extreme poverty from social exclusion. While extreme poverty is a condition, social exclusion is a process which implies a dynamics: one is excluding others, or one is being excluded by others. More precisely, social exclusion includes a double dimension: procedural and moral⁹.

Consider first the existence of procedural exclusions. Literally, to exclude means to banish, to send somebody away from a place where she had the right to stay before. By extension, to exclude means to deprive somebody from any right previously granted, or normally granted, to the individuals recognized as members of a given community or society. Under this interpretation, social exclusion is directly linked to Wresinski's definition of extreme poverty in terms of human rights, where human rights may be understood in the sense of Freedén¹⁰:

“A human right is a conceptual device, expressed in linguistic form, that assigns priority to certain human or social attributes regarded as essential to the adequate functioning of a human being; that is intended to serve as a protective capsule for those attributes; and that appeals for deliberate action to ensure such protection”

Freedén's definition highlights the two requirements that candidates to the status of human rights must meet. Human rights must be recognized as such by others than their most direct beneficiaries. They must also be essential to our functioning as human beings. These two requirements are linked to each other as only key human attributes stand a chance to benefit from a consensus for their recognition as human rights. Of course, talking of attributes regarded as

⁹ Wodon Q., 1993 and forthcoming, op. cit.

¹⁰ Freedén, M., 1991, *Rights*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, p. 7.

essentials amounts to grounding human rights in cultural, historical, and perhaps even geographical settings. The ideal of human rights has been constantly revised over its two centuries of existence. The rights granted to the members of specific societies, or to all members of the international community, have been contingent upon time and space. Yet, whatever their content under specific circumstances, human rights have been judged as a necessary protection by contemporaries to function in a normal way, that is to be able to meet one's responsibilities toward oneself, one's family, one's community, and society as a whole. That is, it could be said that human rights are contingently necessary.

When human rights are recognized as above, only the community or the society can grant them. Conversely, the non-attribution of a human right should not be regarded within society's context: this non-attribution expresses a sanction, an exclusion, be it explicit or implicit, of some individuals by their peers. When it is explicit, the exclusion from the benefit of the protection granted by a human right is operated through codified procedures for the denial of the right. But the exclusion can also be implicit. For the extreme poor, a difficulty arises when they cannot perform the tasks needed to benefit from a right, these tasks being also regulated through procedures. In effect, the mechanisms for the attribution of rights are regulated by rules that are operational for the great majority of the citizens, while enabling the majority to reject those it feels unworthy of the same protection. The rules for the enjoyment and the exercise of human rights skim the beneficiaries, thereby ending in denials of rights for who cannot comply with these rules.

Beyond what could be referred to as the *procedural* exclusions that prevent the poorest from benefiting from or exercising their human rights, there exist other exclusions which do not take form through rules, but through prejudices and preconceptions which are all the more difficult to eliminate as they are more subjective. These are *moral* exclusions, that is exclusions relying on moral judgements with respect to the extreme poor. These moral judgements may result in the refusal by society to grant rights to the poorest, but they may also result in the granting of rights of a lower quality, especially in economic, social, and cultural matters. While moral exclusions have been present throughout history, they may have become more severe nowadays as the charitable, communal values of many societies' heritage have faded away.

Moral exclusions do not, strictly speaking, result in a denial of human rights. But conversely, the implementation of human rights does not necessarily imply the elimination of moral exclusions. If extreme poverty is conceived in terms of human rights, as in Wresinski's approach, its eradication requires the break down of those rules and procedural exclusions which act as barriers to the enjoyment and exercise of rights and responsibilities. Still, this progress may leave intact the moral exclusions which affect the very poor. In some cases, the implementation of human rights may even result in a worsening of moral exclusion.

To sum up, among the three references of Wresinski's definition of chronic poverty, the reference to rights and responsibilities is perhaps the most important one. While the conceptualization of poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon is not new, Wresinski's link between the absence of basic securities for the very poor and their inability to meet their responsibilities and to enjoy and exercise their rights is more novel. Again, when several basic securities are lacking, we may observe an insecurity which has three characteristics: it can be

more or less severe, permanent, and multidimensional in terms of affected life areas. Extreme poverty develops as a chain reaction when all three characteristics are combined. At that stage of deprivation, it becomes impossible for the poorest to regain by themselves their rights and to assume their responsibilities. At that stage, therefore, the poorest need the support of others in order to emerge from chronic poverty. Wresinski sees the restoration of the human rights of the poor as a universal mission, which requires the active intervention of all, rather than that of the Government only.

CONCLUSION

In this introductory chapter, and to some extent in this whole report, the issues of the relationship between extreme poverty and human rights, and of what it takes to enable the poorest to exercise these rights, are only discussed at the surface, so to speak. Much more should be said, but only so much can be said in one report. Apart from his paper reprinted in this collection, Wresinski has written a number of other papers and books in which he details his vision of extreme poverty. The reader who may want to deepen his knowledge of Wresinski's thinking is referred to these other writings, as well as to the writings of his organization, the International Movement ATD Fourth World.

There is however one more important feature of Wresinski's approach that I would like to emphasize. It relates to the possibility for the non-poor to learn from the poorest. In Wresinski's paper, this is an important theme. According to Wresinski, it is the poor who can help the most in understanding what the concept of the indivisibility of human rights actually means in practice. This can be discussed conceptually. But ultimately, learning from the poorest cannot be an intellectual exercise. It must be a personal experience. Wresinski lived this experience first hand because he was born poor. For the non-poor, going through this experience is not obvious. Thanks to my own work with ATD before joining the World Bank, I have had the opportunity of meeting very poor families in meaningful interactions that lasted through time. I hope the reader gets this opportunity as well.

APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 1**Resolution 2000/12. Human rights and extreme poverty
United Nations' Commission on Human Rights, 56th Session**

The Commission on Human Rights,

Recalling that, in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenants on Human Rights recognize that the ideal of free human beings enjoying freedom from fear and want can be achieved only if conditions are created whereby everyone may enjoy his or her economic, social and cultural rights, as well as his or her civil and political rights,

Recalling in particular that article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates that everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control,

Recalling also that the eradication of widespread poverty, including its most persistent forms, and the full enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights and civil and political rights remain interrelated goals,

Deeply concerned that, 52 years after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, extreme poverty continues to spread in all countries of the world, regardless of their economic, social and cultural situation, and that its extent and manifestations, such as hunger, disease, lack of adequate shelter, illiteracy and hopelessness are particularly severe in developing countries,

Bearing in mind the relevant provisions of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights (A/CONF.157/23),

Recalling in particular that the World Conference on Human Rights reaffirms that least developed countries committed to the process of democratization and economic reforms, many of which are in Africa, should be supported by the international community in order to succeed in their transition to democracy and economic development,

Recalling General Assembly resolution 50/107 of 20 December 1995, in which the Assembly proclaimed the United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006), and the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the first Decade (A/54/316),

Recalling also General Assembly resolution 53/146 of 9 December 1998, on human rights and extreme poverty, in which the Assembly recalls that the mandate of the independent expert shall include to continue to take into account the efforts of the poorest people themselves and the conditions in which they can convey their experiences,

Welcoming the Declaration of the Microcredit Summit, held in Washington, D.C., in 1997, which launched a global campaign to reach 100 million of the world's poorest families, especially women, with credit for self-employment by the year 2005,

Stressing that, in the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and the Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development, Governments committed themselves to endeavouring to ensure that all men and women, especially those living in poverty, could exercise the rights, utilize the resources and share the responsibilities that would enable them to lead satisfying lives and to contribute to the well-being of their families, their communities and humankind and committed themselves to the goal of eradicating poverty throughout the world through national actions and international cooperation, as an ethical, social, political and economic imperative of humankind,

Recalling the report of the Secretary-General on women's real enjoyment of their human rights, in particular those relating to the elimination of poverty, economic development and economic resources (E/CN.4/1998/22-E/CN.6/1998/11),

Noting with satisfaction the progress report submitted by the independent expert in accordance with Commission resolution 1999/26 (E/CN.4/2000/52) and the recommendations contained therein,

1. Reaffirms:

- (a) That extreme poverty and exclusion from society constitute a violation of human dignity and that urgent national and international action is therefore required to eliminate them;
- (b) That the right to life includes within it existence in human dignity with the minimum necessities of life;
- (c) That it is essential for States to foster participation by the poorest people in the decision-making process in the societies in which they live, in the realization of human rights and in efforts to combat extreme poverty and for people living in poverty and vulnerable groups to be empowered to organize themselves and to participate in all aspects of political, economic and social life, particularly the planning and implementation of policies that affect them, thus enabling them to become genuine partners in development;
- (d) That the existence of widespread absolute poverty inhibits the full and effective enjoyment of human rights and renders democracy and popular participation fragile;
- (e) That, for peace and stability to endure, national action and international action and cooperation are required to promote a better life for all in larger freedom, a critical element of which is the eradication of poverty;
- (f) That, according to the observations contained in the reports submitted by the independent expert on the question of human rights and extreme poverty (E/CN.4/1999/48 and E/CN.4/2000/52), the lack of political commitment, not financial resources, is the real obstacle to the eradication of poverty;
- (g) That special attention must be given to the plight of women and children, who often bear the greatest burden of extreme poverty;

2. Recalls:

- (a) That the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development and Programme of Action of the World Summit on Social Development provide the substantive framework for eradicating poverty by setting specific targets, drawing up plans and implementing programmes;
- (b) That, to ensure the protection of the rights of all individuals, non-discrimination towards the poorest and the full exercise of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, a better understanding is needed of what is endured by people living in poverty, including women and children, and that thought must be given to the subject, drawing on the experience and ideas of the poorest themselves and of those committed to working alongside them;
- (c) That, in its resolution 1997/11 of 3 April 1997, it requested the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to give high priority to the question of human rights and extreme poverty, to ensure better cooperation between the institutions and bodies involved, regularly to inform the General Assembly of the evolution of the question and to submit specific information on this question at events such as the special session of the General Assembly devoted to conclusions of the World Summit for Social Development, scheduled for 2000, and the evaluation, at the halfway point in 2000 and the end-point in 2007, of the first United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty;
- (d) That, in her report of 11 September 1998 to the General Assembly on the mid-term evaluation of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (A/53/372, annex), the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights proposes that the Second and Third Committees of the General Assembly should work jointly to implement the right to development by focusing on the elimination of poverty, with particular emphasis placed on basic security, which is necessary to enable individuals and families to enjoy fundamental rights and assume basic responsibilities;

3. Welcomes the increasing number of events associated with the celebration, on 17 October of each year, of International Day for the Eradication of Poverty and the opportunity which these events provide to people and populations living in extreme poverty to make their voices heard;

4. Expresses its appreciation:

- (a) That an integrated approach is being followed by the United Nations system in addressing the question of extreme poverty;
- (b) That the international financial institutions have developed new policies strengthening the human and social dimension of their action;
- (c) For the initiatives taken in many countries by national education authorities to raise awareness among all children and young people of the existence of extreme poverty and the urgent need for united action to enable the poorest people to regain their rights;

5. Calls upon:

- (a) The General Assembly, specialized agencies, United Nations bodies and intergovernmental organizations to take into account the contradiction between the existence of situations of extreme poverty and exclusion from society, which must be overcome, and the duty to guarantee full enjoyment of human rights;
- (b) States and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations to continue to take into account, in the activities to be undertaken within the framework of the United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty, the links between human rights and extreme poverty, as well as

efforts to empower people living in poverty to participate in decision-making processes on policies that affect them;

(c) The United Nations to strengthen poverty eradication as a priority throughout the United Nations system;

6. Invites:

(a) The treaty bodies monitoring the application of human rights instruments, especially the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, to take into account, when considering the reports of States parties, the question of extreme poverty and human rights;

(b) States, international organizations and non-governmental organizations to submit to the Secretary-General, by the fifty-seventh session of the Commission on Human Rights, their views and comments on the recommendations contained in the report of the independent expert;

(c) The Working Group on the Right to Development, in its deliberations, to take into account the report of the independent expert on human rights and extreme poverty;

7. Decides to renew, for a period of two years, the mandate of the independent expert on the question of human rights and extreme poverty:

(a) To evaluate the relationship between the promotion and protection of human rights and the eradication of extreme poverty, including through the identification of national and international good practices;

(b) To hold consultations, including during her visits, with the poorest people and the communities in which they live, on means of developing their capacity to express their views and to organize themselves and to involve national human rights bodies in this exercise;

(c) To consider strategies to overcome extreme poverty and the social impact of those strategies;

(d) To continue her cooperation with the international financial institutions, with a view to identifying the best programmes for combating extreme poverty;

(e) To contribute to the mid-term evaluation of the first United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty, scheduled for 2002;

(f) To report on her activities to the Commission on Human Rights at its fifty-seventh and fifty-eighth sessions and to make those reports available to the Commission for Social Development and the Commission on the Status of Women, as appropriate, for their sessions during the same years;

8. Requests:

(a) The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to organize, before the fifty-seventh session of the Commission on Human Rights, a seminar to consider the need to develop a draft declaration on extreme poverty and, if appropriate, to identify its specific points. In view of the need to take into account work undertaken elsewhere, an invitation to this seminar should be extended to government representatives and experts of the United Nations specialized agencies, the United Nations funds and programmes, the relevant functional commissions of the Economic and Social Council, the regional economic commissions, the international financial institutions, the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and interested non-governmental organizations;

(b) The Secretary-General to support this initiative;

9. Decides to consider this question at its fifty-seventh session under the same agenda item;

10. Recommends the following draft decision to the Economic and Social Council:

“The Economic and Social Council, taking note of Commission on Human Rights resolution 2000/... of ... April 2000, endorses the Commission’s decision to renew, for a period of two years, the mandate of the independent expert on the question of human rights and extreme poverty:

(a) To evaluate the relationship between the promotion and protection of human rights and the eradication of extreme poverty, including through the identification of national and international good practices;

(b) To hold consultations, including during her visits, with the poorest people and the communities in which they live, on means of developing their capacity to express their views and to organize themselves and to involve national human rights institutions in this exercise;

(c) To consider strategies to overcome extreme poverty and the social impact of those strategies;

(d) To continue her cooperation with the international financial institutions, with the view to identifying the best programmes for combating extreme poverty;

(e) To contribute to the mid-term evaluation of the first United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty, scheduled for 2002;

(f) To report on her activities to the Commission on Human Rights at its fifty-seventh and fifty-eighth sessions and to make those reports available to the Commission for Social Development and the Commission on the Status of Women, as appropriate, for their sessions during the same years.”

52nd meeting

17 April 2000

Source: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva.

PART I – REACHING THE POOREST

CHAPTER 2

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LIVE IN EXTREME POVERTY? THE STORY OF DOÑA MATILDA

International Movement ATD Fourth World¹¹

INTRODUCTION

This chapter tells the story of Doña Matilda who lives in Guatemala, where she met staff of the International Movement ATD Fourth World. The rationale for telling Matilda's story is to help the reader understand who are the very poor, and what are the constraints they face in their struggle to emerge from poverty. Full-time Volunteers of the Fourth World Movement arrived in Guatemala in 1979. They were introduced to the country by Caritas, a small organization created in the U.S. Caritas, which had been running programs in poor communities emphasizing the training of young people from Guatemala itself. When they arrived in the country, the first team of Fourth World Volunteers lived and worked in the small village of San Jacinto. In 1988, another team settled in Guatemala City, getting to know areas where poverty was worse. They met Matilda through their Street Libraries Program. One Volunteer described the first encounter between her team and the families of the neighborhood where Doña Matilda lived as follows:

Today, we are holding the first Street Library in a place called the “Ferrocarril,” along the railroad track, where hundreds of very poor families find shelter. We selected a location close to the large marketplace where people with no income come in hope of finding a little job...

The shelters, made of wood and sometimes cardboard, line the track on either side, with only a tiny space between them and the railroad track (in some places, less than one meter). The earth, furrowed by the rain and waste water, gives way to puddles in which water and garbage mingle. We come across lots of children. Some are playing, some working. Children carry water or wood back to their shelters. Some little girls of seven and over carry a younger brother or sister on their shoulders, wrapped up in a piece of fabric in the Indian fashion. There is one source of water, a small public fountain where women stand in line to fill their jugs. The plastic jugs are lined up on the ground. Waiting time is spent chatting.

While walking, we talk with a few adults and children. We speak with a man who has a little store, a little makeshift shelter like the others, opening onto the outside offering a few products of basic necessity. We explain to him that we would like to start a library and show books to the children. He initially thinks that we are looking for a locale. We explain that the

¹¹ This text is reproduced with minor editing from International Movement ATD Fourth World, 1995, *This is How We Live: Listening to the Poorest Families*, Editions Quart Monde, Paris. The report was prepared for the United Nations at the occasion of the International year of the Family. The text in this chapter is reproduced with the permission of the International Movement ATD Fourth World.

activity would take place in the street. A little further, there is a man pushing a cart. He is selling ice-cream. He is accompanied by his son of around ten who is helping him with his work. A small group has already formed. Someone shows us a place where there seems to be a little more space because the shelters are a little further removed from the track. "You can set up your library here."

I set up "shop" there and children come forward. They take the books I suggest to them. One mother comes out to offer me a chair. I tell her that I don't need one. Still, she comes back not long afterwards with a crate on which I place the books. For some time, another Volunteer continues to visit the families to invite other children. Certain children are well-dressed, others barefoot and poorly dressed. Some already know how to read, others obviously do not. But they gather around us, pleased to discover the books we brought to them.

"POVERTY FORCES US TO LIVE IN PLACES LIKE THIS"

Doña Matilda, 32, lives in one of the shelters on the edge of the railroad track, a single room measuring approximately 9 x 9 feet, with her five children and Maria, a young Salvadoran woman who has been staying with them for almost one year. At the back of the shelter, a mechanic's workshop can be detected by the noise of water leaking through the disjointed boards.

The earth floor is not level. Two beds occupy one half of the room: one in good condition, the other --which Doña Matilda will sell at a time when she is penniless-- has two broken legs, replaced by a large stone and a tin can turned upside down. A little table and a very rusty trough-shaped wood stove covered with a grill occupy part of the wall. Laundry basins are piled in a corner. On the wall, a few photographs and drawings from the Street Library are stuck between boards. During the daytime, a curtain fluttering in the wind is a makeshift door. There is neither running water nor electricity (on the other side of the track, some families have tapped the public electrical supply on the sly). A clothes line is tied to the pillars of the facade. A long bamboo pole planted in the middle holds up the line, forming an angle on which the clothes dry, swept by even more wind. When the train whistles in the distance, the occupants hurriedly pull up the pole and bring it into the house, preventing the laundry from being swept away by the engine.

The parents and elder children who are responsible for the little ones live in constant fear. This is why they often confine themselves to their houses. As Doña Matilda says,

The train makes you nervous and the children are not free to play unsupervised. We need a playground where they would be able to play freely without any danger.

This fear haunts all the parents, and it is easy to understand as we listen to Doña Olivia tell us about the accident which occurred on September 21, 1991:

It must have been eight in the evening. My four children and I were in bed. My husband had gone to work on the coast eight days earlier, the day after Joselito's birth. A very loud noise tore through the night. Dina, my eldest daughter, wanted to get up, but I told

her to stay inside because it was raining hard. Immediately afterwards, the house caved in on us. At the crossing, 20 meters from my home, the train had run into a police car driving without headlights. The train took with it the facades of eight houses and stopped its course inside our house. I felt the presence of death . . . Joselito, my eight-day old baby, could not be found. I was terrified because I heard him cry once and then heard nothing more. We were buried under sheets of metal. Later, people said they called out to me but I heard nothing, nor did they hear me.

The fire department, which had been alerted, managed to dig 115 people out of the ruins. The atmosphere was awful. Everyone was screaming. I was losing my mind because I still did not have my baby in my arms. A fireman found him under the rubbish, safe and healthy. He walked away to examine Joselito, but I screamed because I was afraid that he was taking my baby away!

Neighbors put us up for the night. The next morning, I realized that I had lost everything. All our belongings had disappeared during the night. We decided to occupy the other side of the track, where a man had taken shelter under a sheet of plastic. It was truly filthy, with rats and white lice.

I was the first to build my shelter. Neighbors helped me. I never felt abandoned. For eight days, Doña Matilda spent the night with me, until my husband came back from the coast. Two or three days later, other shelters were rebuilt. The police had been told of our "invasion." As I had been the first to invade, it was me they took away, with Joselito whom I had not had time to change. I explained the accident and the necessity of having another roof over my family's heads. The police let me go that evening. No compensation was paid to us by the railroad company or by the police. On the contrary we were blamed for living on land which didn't belong to us. But where could we have gone?

The Street Library and preschool are held just across from this row of rebuilt houses, and set four or five meters back from the track. But the area is not large enough to house the number of children who come, up to one hundred. Some sit on the rails to read and draw. When the train approaches, the children get up slowly and there are always two or three of them who can't resist hanging onto the cars.

The railroad track is a place of refuge for the very poor, including the Indians who have abandoned their high plateau. The poorest hope to find better living conditions in the capital, and others are fleeing regions of conflict. They meet up here.

Many people walk along the track, primarily people living along its edge who use it to go and look for water; to go wash their laundry at the washing hole; or to go to the marketplace to sell candy, cookies and fruit they have purchased from the trucks that arrive from the center of the country. Little groups of children play marbles or hop-scotch, turn tops, play cards, or simply play with the soil. Two or three ice-cream cars are parked. Men leave to push them through the streets, ringing a bell. One frequently runs into policemen doing their rounds, two by two.

Two areas, on very different levels, are bordered by the railroad track in this district: to the

northwest, zone 8, very steep-sloped, is occupied by low-income housing and businesses, primarily automobile repair stops; to the southeast, on a lower level, zone 4 covers the large marketplace district, then farther away, an extensive commercial and administrative district.

Thirty-second Street crosses the track and runs into the large “Terminal” marketplace. The streets which cross it are bustling with activity. They are crowded with stalls, most of them kept by Indian women from the “Occidente” province, sitting on the ground surrounded by their goods. On the edge of the market, trucks unload fruit and vegetables in categories: mounds of melons, pineapples, potatoes, onions, nets filled with avocados or oranges. . . . In the middle of this district is an enormous covered market housing a multitude of small shops on two stories. The Terminal’s name originates in the bus terminal serving the western part of the country, among other places “Occidente.” The Terminal is located on the other side of the market, opposite the railroad track. The Terminal, due to its market, the largest in the country, and the presence of buses which converge here from numerous inland localities, is an excessively animated area in which thousands of poor families ferret out myriad alternatives for surviving.

Beginning in 1930, approximately twenty poor families took refuge along the railroad track (state property belonging to the Railway Company). Other portions of land all along the line crossing Guatemala from the northeast to the south were invaded in following years, particularly in periods of crisis and following the earthquake on February 4, 1976, which left thousands of families homeless.

The land constitutes a sanctuary of last resort for the very poor, as do the other dwelling places chosen by the destitute (dumps, ravine flanks, etc.). Due to their location, no rent is required of the families, except in certain places by unscrupulous persons who introduce themselves as the owners of the land and claim rent. The families have always been more or less tolerated along the track, although on several occasions they have been threatened with eviction.

Three years ago, serious confrontations occurred in the Terminal district between railroad workers and the families occupying the track. The latter resisted, claiming other land if they were to be evicted. It was during the election campaign. Promises of re-housing gave them hope, but after the elections there was no follow-up. For a year and a half the families heard about a new re-housing project for them. The land along the railroad track would be sold to a company with city planning projects under way. In the early 1990’s, things came to a head, and the families were asked for a certain sum of money to be entitled to re-housing in the peripheral area. But not all of them were able to put together such a sum of money-although it was not large. Doña Matilda said:

I exaggerated my income. Otherwise I would not have been entitled to the land. What worries us also are the monthly payments we will have to make to repay the loan over 20 years. This month, we must come up with the money for housing entitlement. I don’t know how I’m going to do it, I have nothing to sell. I worry constantly and can’t sleep at night. I have my laundry basins which I could maybe sell for 25 Quetzales (ndlr: the local currency) a piece, but I need them to work

The families hope to obtain land which offers necessary utilities and a better environment.

Here, on the track, we aren't on our own property. Furthermore, the area has a bad reputation. Young people take drugs. I would be ashamed to give the address to my family if they wanted to visit me.

The other problem which would arise following re-housing in outlying areas would be the cost of public transportation for most people working in the Terminal. For the past three months, the families have had no news of the project. Some are talking about staying on the track whatever happens. Life goes on here, with people struggling more than ever from one day to the next.

“IT’S VERY HARD NOT TO BE ABLE TO COUNT ON A MOTHER”

Doña Matilda has not always lived in the neighborhood described above. When she was asked to tell her life story, she spoke first of her childhood memories. She told her story with a sense of modesty and suffering, but also with the hope that her children’s lives will be less difficult.

Chronic poverty constantly threatens family unity. Doña Matilda knows this because she experienced it from her very early childhood on, and she constantly reminds us that whatever she undertakes is done in the hope of keeping her own family together.

Matilda grew up without her mother; when she was six months old, her mother left home. Was life so hard that it became impossible? Matilda was of course too small to witness the tragedy of the situation, but it affected her entire life and even today she tries to understand. *“My mother was driven out by my father because he thought she had been unfaithful.”* This is what she was told.

My childhood was not a happy one. I didn't grow up with my parents, but with uncles and aunts, then with my father and a stepmother. I never knew the warmth of a mother. I was never kissed by a mother, comforted when I was sick. Perhaps my mother had reasons to leave home. There were two girls, she took my older sister, and left me with my father.

This absence haunts her. She would like to understand, but can understand only one thing: she does not want her children to be torn apart in the same way.

Matilda’s childhood was spent in a small village of southeast Guatemala. Here people lived off the land, a dry soil which required hard work. The family did not own much land, and it did not yield enough to meet the family’s needs. The entire family constantly had to seek some means of survival and even the children had to contribute to this endeavor. There was also a certain solidarity among the members of an “extended” family. Thus, after the departure of Matilda’s mother, her father was able to count on brothers and sisters to help him. Until the age of five, Matilda was raised by an aunt of whom she remarks today: *“She was good to me.”*

When Matilda was five, her father began living with a woman who apparently never considered her as a daughter. *“My father ‘forced’ a stepmother on me. She didn't love me, she beat me. I was afraid of her...”* She then had three half-brothers. But in front of their friends, they spoke of

Matilda saying: “*Oh, she’s not our sister.*” “*They,*” says Matilda today, “*had a childhood which was different from mine. It was beneficial to them.*” Matilda cannot talk without crying about the part of her childhood which followed her father’s second marriage. “*It was then that I really began suffering.*” She remembers having been treated roughly by her father’s wife and she attributes her damaged teeth and her poor sight to this painful existence.

For Matilda, the chronic poverty in which the family lived required that she do exhausting work. Before sunrise, she had to fetch a supply of fresh water, in other words go get water at the public fountain and bring it back in buckets to fill the house’s large stone tanks. When she used to get up, she would feel a certain fear in her stomach having heard so many stories about spirits wandering in the night. Today, she questions these old beliefs and says with a smile: “*I have never met any. God must surely have protected me!*” Then, the day was filled with a series of household tasks: cooking the corn, grinding it, preparing the tortillas (a hand made corn pancake). At mealtimes, she carried them to her father who was working in the fields, a good distance from the house. There was also the laundry to wash: “*It was my job to find soap!*” And Matilda participated in the work in the fields as well.

I worked from a very early age: I went to get water for the cows, I drove the pigs to the meadow, I took the goats out. I helped my father put fertilizer in the fields, or cut corn, watermelon and melon. We never stopped. He was just beginning to make ends meet, he didn’t have any hired help.

Matilda also remembers a time when she was around eight when there was no more income in the house. Her father went to the coast to buy bags of grain which he then resold in his village. This enabled them to open a little store. Matilda spent her time there serving customers. The family was more comfortable. Her father even bought a cow. The business was not profitable for long however and after a few years, her father transformed it into a bar.

The burdens weighing on Matilda as a child left her no time for school. Her father himself had never gone to school, “. . . *but he still managed to keep his accounts!*” Matilda’s work seems to have absorbed all her time and energy. Today, when speaking of this period of her life, she says:

I was not able to develop my mind. I didn’t have the freedom to think, I always had to work. If I were to learn a profession now, I would have a hard time because I didn’t have an opportunity to develop my mind as a child.

Today, Doña Matilda is able to talk about her childhood with much more perspective, and she sees positive aspects:

At least, I learned how to work and get along in the world. If I had not learned how to prepare tortillas, or to wash clothes, what would I do today to earn a living and raise my children? I live on what I learned.

When Matilda was 14, one of her aunts suggested that she go to the capital. For her, this represented an opportunity she did not want to miss. She fled from her village and accompanied her aunt.

“I GOT A TASTE OF FREEDOM”

Matilda’s aunt lived in a very poor area, not far from the center of the capital in the first shantytown spawned by the city’s expansion. Matilda spent three happy years with her aunt from the age of 14 to 17, during which she went to school for the first time: *“I did not lose a single year. I really wanted to learn and I retained everything.”*

These years marked Matilda’s life because at last she was able to get a taste of the freedom she had lacked so up until then. Freedom of movement, freedom of mind: *“My mind was free at last to develop.”*

To help her aunt and pay for her studies, Matilda worked from six in the morning to one in the afternoon in a little local grocery store. At two, she went to school. For Matilda, this was not too heavy a load. She also made friends in the neighborhood. She experienced a totally different life, until the day that a cousin of hers who was older tempted her with promises of an exciting future and proposed that she come and live with her in a working-class area on the outskirts of town:

My cousin helped me run away from my aunt’s house. She said to me: “Here you will never improve your lot in life” She turned my head around. I was full of illusions and I believed her.

As a matter of fact, she ended up working for her cousin who exploited her unscrupulously. Matilda became her maid and was no longer able to continue her schooling, working day and night, watching over four children and cleaning the house without earning a penny.

In front of people outside the family, the cousin introduced Matilda as a servant, refraining from mentioning the fact that they were relatives. This wounded Matilda enormously and reminded her of the attitude of her half-brothers who asserted in front of friends: *“She’s not our sister.”*

Matilda put up with this situation for almost one year. She often thought of leaving, but did not dare. She was afraid of finding herself alone in the street in this huge city. Naturally, she could not consider returning to her aunt’s house any longer. Where could she go? When her cousin accused her, without any grounds, of having an affair with her husband, that was the last straw. She decided to flee an atmosphere which had become intolerable. One day, her cousin gave her a little money to go on errands at the Terminal market. Matilda took the opportunity to flee and never returned to her cousin’s house. With the little money in her pocket, she decided to try to get along alone. She was barely 18.

Matilda was therefore alone in the Terminal district, an area she was not at all familiar with. She wandered through the narrow streets, undecided, seeking a job. She asked in several places and was rather rapidly hired for a trial period in a restaurant.

I told them that I had already worked in a restaurant so they would hire me. The first day I worked non-stop. I was ashamed of serving customers at their tables and I hid in the kitchen. The stone sink was green with moss and I began scrubbing it until it was pristine. But there was an older waitress and as you know, older employees want to “kill” the young ones. She sent me back to the dining room to wait on tables. But it went well. Our boss was very pleased with me. She soon gave me a raise. I worked there for two years.

Matilda was soon taken in by one of the restaurant's customers.

God must have put this older lady, Dana Rosa, on my path. She housed me. She came to the restaurant where I worked every day to eat. She lived in the area. We got along very well. Her daughter, however, was jealous of her mother's affection for me. I decided to leave in order to avoid problems.

Matilda rented another room in the area. That was when she met Christobal. They became friends and lived together. When she told him that she was pregnant, he took the news badly and left. This was a terrible disappointment for Matilda who hoped that she could create a family with the man she loved. Sorrow made her pregnancy difficult. She stopped eating.

Her boss at the restaurant took her in. She offered to be the godmother of Matilda's child if it were a boy. Matilda accepted. On October 23, 1980, a tiny little Clara Luz was born.

From that day on, her boss's attitude toward Matilda changed. Matilda had given birth to a girl; she did not want her as a god child. She hired Matilda to work in her own home, demanding a huge amount of work for a woman who had just had a child. She would not allow Matilda to nurse her baby to prevent her from doing it during working hours. When Matilda was scolded for work she had not finished, she decided to leave with her daughter.

I went to wash my daughter's diapers at the public washing house. My hands were bleeding because I wasn't used to washing. There was an eleven-year old girl there washing clothes. We began talking and she took me to her house. She lived with her widowed father along the railroad track. I told them about my problem and that I didn't know where to go. They took me in and I stayed with them for one year. During the day, I worked. I washed clothes, I also went to sell onions which I purchased in 100-kilogram bags. And I had a place where I sold charcoal-barbecued meat. Thanks to my work, I was able to buy milk for Clara Luz.

But Clara Luz fell ill and had to be hospitalized on two occasions. *"I sold my clothes, my dishes, almost all I had to pay for her treatment."*

Doña Matilda stayed at her daughter's side. Mothers of hospitalized infants were allowed to stay at their bedsides during the day, often in order to nurse. For Clara Luz, this was not the case, but her mother managed to stay without any problems. During the night, however, the mothers were not allowed to stay in the rooms. They could be seen in the corridors, lying on the floor or in the street close to the hospital entrance. After one month in the hospital, Clara Luz was allowed to leave. *"I thanked the Lord. I had succeeded in keeping my daughter, and she was again with me."*

When she returned to the railroad track, Matilda learned that the little she had kept had been stolen. In her despair, she was taken in by a neighboring family, in Doña Maria's shack. There she stayed for several months, until one of the sons in the family was married. After that he and his wife were given the room which Matilda occupied.

So I left. I didn't know where to go. For three nights, I slept at the Terminal bus stop. I spread out a sheet of plastic on which I put Clara Luz to sleep. I couldn't sleep. I was too ashamed to be there.

Doña Xiomara's and Don Domingo's family took her in with Clara Luz for a few days. Two families living in a single room rapidly caused tension. Matilda and Clara Luz went to live with Doña Xiomara's sister, Doña Esperanza, who lived with her husband along the railroad track also. Matilda stayed with her for several years.

At this time she met Carlos who lived in the same neighborhood. The conditions under which they were living never allowed a family life. Santiago was born on September 29, 1982. Carlos was a security guard in a factory. He devoted all his free time to his hobby, mechanics. He repaired radios, watches, etc. in the street. Santiago, very attached to his father, showed an interest in this work at an early age. He salvaged bolts, screws and nuts which he picked up in the street and kept as though they were a precious treasure.

When Santiago was five, his father was assassinated in the street by someone who wanted to get even with him. Matilda's relations with Carlos' family were not excellent. Her sisters-in-law gave false testimony bringing about the loss of an orphan's pension for Santiago.

And yet still today Doña Matilda speaks affectionately of Carlos, the attention he devoted to her, his fatherly love for little Santiago, the material responsibilities he took on, even if he did not live with them. At that time, Clara Luz, three, and Santiago, several months old, went to the "welfare" day-care center during the day. This center, reporting to the government, kept children for a negligible fee while their mothers worked. Clara Luz and Santiago went there for three years. Then the admission conditions changed; the parents' work permits, lung x-rays, and blood tests were required. Because she could not produce these documents, Doña Matilda withdrew her children.

At the outset of 1983, destitute families began occupying a large piece of land on the outskirts of the city. The "Metzquital" would become one of the largest shantytowns in Guatemala. Doña Matilda worked for a deposit bottle recycler. She washed up to one thousand bottles per day, and worked during her lunch hour to increase her pay. She decided to try her luck at Metzquital. She began occupying a tiny parcel of land, so little that neighbors teased her about it. When the parcels were distributed, she received one and built a makeshift shelter where she went every evening with her two young children.

Her schedule was exhausting. In the morning, Doña Matilda and her children mingled with the crowd pushing to get into the buses at the bus stop to travel to their work places in the capital. She left her children at the day-care center and then went to work. At 5 p.m., she picked up her children and spent an hour in the bus to return to Metzquital. During these trips, Clara Luz and then Santiago were slightly injured in the scurry of rush hour. After one year, Doña Matilda decided to give up her parcel of land given the danger she and her children were exposed to. She sold her rights to the parcel and returned to live by the railroad track.

Doña Esperanza's family took her in a second time. She lived with them for two years. Doña Matilda then became pregnant with her third child.

“AT LAST, I WAS IN MY OWN HOME, EVEN IF IT WAS JUST A SHACK”

At that time, the makeshift dwellings occupied only one side of the railroad line, the Terminal side. Neighbors urged Doña Matilda to settle on the other side of the line, where land was occupied by push carts and clothes lines. Doña Matilda hesitated for a long time because these parcels were also owned by the railroad company. Furthermore, a man who used the land for storing equipment objected to Matilda’s settling there, blaming her for having had children without being able to put a roof over their heads.

The people were on my side. They convinced me. One morning, three men helped me clear the land and build my shelter. That evening, I was in my own home at last. The rain leaked into the shack, and I remained awake to repair leaks and shelter the children.

After six years living on the edge of the railroad track, Doña Matilda had wanted her own house. She was aware however that her “own house” was an entirely relative concept, because the Railroad Company could evict the families occupying their land illegally from one day to the next. . . Benito was born several weeks later on May 26, 1986.

Other families very rapidly followed her and invaded the edge of the land on either side of her shack. Doña Matilda rapidly extended her hospitality to other persons living in the street.

Doña Olivia and Don Chepe, with their three children, stayed with Doña Matilda for two years before occupying another parcel farther down the track. Thanks to the presence of Doña Olivia who took care of the six children and cleaned, Doña Matilda was able to work outside and bring back money to live on.

Once I had my house, there were always people in it. One day, someone said to me, “With all the people your house, why don’t you put a sign out saying ‘Room & Board?’” I believe God is testing me to see how much heart I really have. I know that my children will receive a little food from someone. I’m not doing that for myself but for my children. I also know that perhaps one day my children will need a place to sleep. I hope that what I’m doing [taking people in] and what other people are doing also, will be repeated everywhere...

In 1987, Doña Matilda met Esteban, a man of her age, who worked as a laborer in a carpenter’s shop. They got to know each other. And Esteban often tried to meet with Matilda, for any reason he could find. *“Esteban also had a past of suffering,”* Matilda told us. He had a very painful childhood, living with his mother and a violent stepfather in an atmosphere of extreme poverty, to the point that he was on the streets at the age of nine. He worked to survive: he shined shoes and then worked in a “tortilleria.” He then decided to find his father and one of his brothers. He succeeded and lived with them for a long time, while continuing to work. He then had the opportunity to join a carpenter’s shop where he learned the basics of the craft. Doña Matilda knew Esteban’s father. They both were very fond of each other. But tragedy struck again: over a period of several months, Esteban’s brother was assassinated and his father died of illness.

Sometime afterwards, Doña Matilda did not see Esteban for several days, until one morning when a stranger came to see her on his behalf. He had had an occupational accident, and had to

remain immobile. He lived in Metzquital, far from Matilda's house, but absolutely wanted Matilda to be informed. She did not wait long before going to visit him. They fell in love and decided to live together. After his accident, as soon as Esteban was able to move on crutches, he joined Doña Matilda in Ferrocarril.

We lived together. He used to say to me, "This is the first time I've had a home." I gave him a new start in life.

For Matilda also, it was also the first time she had a home. A true family life began for her, with a father at home, *"He was a good person; all my children called him 'Papa.'"*

Esteban suffered the after-effects of his accident. He tried to resume his work at the carpenter's shop, but his wound caused him too much suffering. He did not lose heart. Gifted with his hands, he sometimes made stuffed animals or plastic flower arrangements and sold them on the street. Doña Matilda, who always worked a great deal to raise her three older children, was able to stay home more. This was very important for Esteban and his work was enough to feed the family.

Esteban's presence in the family gave Doña Matilda the time and opportunity to attend meetings of village "improvement" committees.

A committee for a fountain project was created. I was a member, and I liked it. We really made an effort, running everywhere to get signatures.

Afterwards, a nutritional project for children under six was set up. The children had to be weighed regularly. Don Domingo had gotten hold of some scales. Each child was entitled to a package of food for a mere pittance. But people didn't always take advantage of it. They had to be reminded. The project lasted six months. We were tired of having to run after people. Perhaps they were afraid of being humiliated because of their poverty...

Then a doctor declared that the warehouse where the food was stored no longer met sanitation standards. Things became complicated. We stopped. Nonetheless, I have always enjoyed being on committees. I like helping people, even if it means waging a battle.

Nicolas was born on October 17, 1988. Difficulties arose in the couple, particularly due to Esteban's tendency to drink. There were times when he left home, but he always came back. Esteban and Matilda tried to overcome these difficulties together and start over. *"If I hadn't suffered so much,"* said Esteban, *"I would not be this way."* Doña Matilda added,

When he's drunk, he calls me a beggar because I have no more contact with my family. He can also be very violent. When he sobers up, he says that he cannot remember his insults. "Maybe it is my nerves," he says, "I'm going to change."

This situation made Matilda suffer and she wondered, *"Does he really love me? Perhaps he only stays because of the children?"* Then doubt gave way to hope because both of them were trying to build the family life which they so desperately needed. Doña Matilda said:

He loves his children, and he treats the older children I had before just like his own. Nicolas loves him a great deal. When he's with his father, I no longer exist. Santiago loves him also. Sometimes he prepares a good meal for us. And I feel really funny sitting there doing nothing.

One day in January 1990, the police took Esteban away when he was drunk. A neighbor, who witnessed the events, warned Doña Matilda. She immediately left the house. She wanted to know where he had been taken. With the money he left her, she ran all over town, from one police station to the other, but in vain. Esteban was nowhere to be found. Two days later, she went to a prison and found Esteban. The next day, she brought him a meal.

Esteban had been sentenced to three years in prison for repeated drunken brawls. Matilda's life collapsed. She used up all her money and had to begin to work as soon as possible. She got a night job in a restaurant where she took Clara Luz who watched over Nicolas who was still nursing. This situation lasted for three months until the day a waitress accused Matilda wrongly of having stolen money. Doña Matilda, profoundly humiliated, preferred to quit. *"What made me suffer the most was the humiliation. People think because we are poor, we steal."* She stayed home with her children and didn't want to go outside. She had never felt so desperate in her life.

At that time, I was caught in extreme poverty. I didn't open my door any more. Dirty laundry piled up in a corner. I didn't have enough money to pay for water or soap. I prepared only one meal per day. My children went to bed without having eaten. Once they had fallen asleep, I broke down into tears, heartbroken at having to see them in such a situation. One night, I prayed to God from the innermost depths of my being: "I am your child. why are you abandoning me this way? You know that my children go to bed with empty stomachs." I don't know what happened, but the next day, neighbors brought me their laundry to wash. Life was about to change. For the past three years, my work at the wash house has put food in our mouths.

For two and a half years, Doña Matilda and her children visited Esteban in prison. Transportation was expensive. Their visits were not frequent, but each time, plans took shape for a new life together with no violence. Esteban said, *"We'll never fight again. I won't drink any more; we'll start our life together again."*

The prison was rather flexible for prisoners who were not dangerous. Visits were authorized almost every day. Inside the prison grounds, a small village had been formed, with stores and restaurants. The family could therefore spend some relaxed time with the prisoner. Couples were even allowed moments of privacy.

Doña Matilda became pregnant. Dimitas was born on January 12, 1991.

For the entire period of Esteban's incarceration, Matilda continued to struggle as best she could for her children. She enrolled them in school. It was difficult under such circumstances to complete a scholastic year successfully, but for Doña Matilda, this was important:

The only thing which will remain after my death is their education. It will enable them to go forward, alone.

Despite her tenacity and courage, Matilda had to face many moments of daunting poverty. Recently, she said:

Each day, I have to find something to eat. There are days when we have nothing. The people who give me their clothes to wash are poor also and can't pay very much. Yesterday morning, I went off to wash at 5 o'clock in the morning. When I came back, my children had still not had anything to eat. I asked them to go through the garbage! With the money, I was able to prepare them breakfast at 11:00 in the morning. That afternoon, a neighbor paid me for the laundry I had washed. That way, we were able to have dinner that evening.

In April 1992, Doña Matilda learned that Esteban's prison sentence could be reduced by six months. The family was overjoyed at the thought of having Esteban at home again. One month later, Esteban was released from prison. Doña Matilda found out that Esteban's former companion had contacted him again while he was in prison. It was she who apparently paid the fine for releasing him from prison. Esteban and Matilda both suffered due to this difficult situation. Esteban was torn between his companion and Doña Matilda. Finally, Doña Matilda made a decision:

I said to him, "I don't want to make you suffer. Go back to her if you want to. You can come to see the children every day. I am poor, but that's no reason. I'm not resigned to poverty. I don't want you to play with my feelings. I don't want to live an impossible existence. I want a little peace and quiet for my children.

"I WOULD LIKE MY CHILDREN TO HAVE A FINE FUTURE"

Whatever Doña Matilda undertakes, she does in the hope that her children will have a better future. During the many interviews we had with her to prepare this monograph, this hope was visible at each instant. At the same time, we felt how much the constant threat of chronic poverty weighing on her family dismayed her. Doña Matilda, who still bears the wounds of her childhood, is convinced that for her children, nothing can replace a family. She knows that she alone can provide this guarantee to her own children.

As a child, I sometimes thought, Why was I born? I should have died when I was little in my mother's womb. But later, God gave me children. My children have a mother. I cannot give them wealth, but I can give them my tenderness.

Even at the most difficult times, Doña Matilda does not give up:

Where do I find the strength to go on? In my children! . . . Who will struggle for them, if I don't?

If Doña Matilda used the term "struggle," it is because she is struggling against poverty. She's never absolutely certain that she will win the battle. In the end, will her children have the future she dreams of giving them?

Clara Luz

For the first two years of her life, Clara Luz did not leave her mother's side. She lived at her rhythm, carried on her back in a large piece of fabric tied in a knot over Doña Matilda's breast. This is a frequent sight among the very poor: they go to work – sometimes performing very difficult tasks – with their youngest child on their backs.

Doña Matilda had always been haunted by her desire to ensure access to school for her children. In January 1989, she enrolled Clara Luz, eight at the time, in the first year of elementary school in a school close to the railroad track. This was very difficult for Clara Luz. First of all, she was hardly prepared to enter school. She was put with children who had already attended pre-school. Then, she felt rejected. And indeed, it was a neighborhood school in a working class area, but one in which little girls like Clara Luz, who live on the edge of the railroad track, are pointed at. They were called “beggars,” and “down-and-out.” Clara Luz, of course, suffered from this and did not want to go to school anymore. Doña Matilda encouraged her to continue.

Other obstacles, however, arose. How could a child learn anything when she lives in a shack with no electricity, chair, table, or place to open a notebook to do homework? How could writing and reading exercises be done when one has to sit on the front doorstep to have enough light, surrounded by the noises of the neighborhood, the coming and going of little brothers in and out of the shack, and people walking by the door all the times?

And then, like all little girls – particularly the older ones from very poor families, Clara Luz had to help with household tasks: straighten up, wash, fetch water, watch over her little brothers. To preserve a very precarious family equilibrium, Clara Luz had to help her mother. But Doña Matilda tried not to ask too much of her:

If I say to Clara Luz, “Hurry up and straighten up this room!” she balks. If I say, “Come on, let's straighten up together,” the room is tidy in no time.

All these factors contributed to the failure of Clara Luz's first year at school. After having encouraged her daughter to persevere, Doña Matilda realized that it was to no avail, that her daughter was not learning. So she allowed her to drop out of school mid-year.

In 1990, the situation was different. In January, when one normally thinks about taking the children to school, Esteban was put into prison. The Volunteers were aware of the family's state of mind. Its survival was so threatened that school was out of the question. Doña Matilda worked at night, taking with her the baby she was still nursing whom Clara Luz looked after. After several months, due to the efforts made by Doña Matilda, the family situation again stabilized. But it was too late to enroll her children in school. Doña Matilda was already thinking about the next year. She constantly urged her children to learn. When she brought them to the Street Library, she said to the Volunteers, *“I would like my children to participate, it opens up their minds.”*

In 1991, Clara Luz was again registered in the first year of elementary school, but in another school. Classes were in the afternoon. These hours were better suited to the family's schedule. But above all, the atmosphere was different. *“In this school, we're treated well,”* said Doña

Matilda. *“Clara Luz feels good here.”* Doña Matilda still had in mind the failures of preceding years. So she attended to her daughter’s work. Since she knew how to read and write, she was able to help her daughter if necessary. The year went well and Doña Matilda proudly told about a parents meeting where she was congratulated by the teacher for her daughter’s behavior. She did not want to miss any meetings, even if she had to give up working hours. She felt it was too important for her children’s scholastic success. *“I don’t send Clara Luz out to make cornmeal, she doesn’t do laundry.”* In saying this, Doña Matilda expressed her wish that her children not be made to work. And yet, when she was alone with them, she could not always avoid it. She explained:

In poor families with many children, one income isn’t enough. I am both father and mother at the same time. A piece of wood by itself doesn’t catch on fire.

This is why, in difficult moments, Clara Luz did little jobs and brought in a little money. Thus, in 1992, Clara Luz went to work in a restaurant for part of the night with Maria, the young woman lodged by the family. Clara Luz rested in the morning, and went to school in the afternoon. That year, Clara Luz successfully completed her second year in secondary school and was beginning her third year in 1992. Her mother always talked about the future:

Clara Luz would like to complete her sixth year, but it would be wonderful if she could continue afterwards to study the “basic” program¹². It will cost more, but she’s thinking of working to pay for her supplies and continue her studies.

Santiago

November, 1991. The Volunteers went to get Santiago so he could take part in a theater workshop. He was nowhere to be found. They met Doña Matilda in the wash house.

I don’t know where Santiago is. He leaves in the morning and comes back in the evening. He hangs around in the street. I’m worried, I don’t like it when he does that. What can I do? I have to be here all day washing clothes, otherwise we have nothing to eat at home.

In a few words, Doña Matilda expresses all her anxiety and that of all families living in extreme poverty. Precarious living conditions and the ceaseless quest for sustenance prevent parents from taking care of their children as they would like to. Children do not have enough supervision. Doña Matilda lives with her anxiety and she knows that the best way of doing away with it is to maintain a warm family atmosphere no matter what happens:

Whether you’re rich or poor, bringing up children requires tenderness. A child must be given self-confidence. If there’s a problem, it should be discussed with him; hitting him does no good.

When Santiago was eight, Doña Matilda enrolled him in an institution called “Hogar para Todos,” which works with children with problems. Students can be day pupils or boarders. Santiago was a day student, arriving in the morning and going home in the evening; he was in

¹² The “basic” program corresponds to the first entry year of secondary studies.

the first year of his elementary school education. Doña Matilda initially saw the advantages of this school: it was free, Santiago would be in school and spend the entire day there, which would prevent him from hanging out in the streets. But slowly, things appeared less positive to her. First of all, it was not certain that he would get an elementary school education certificate. And Doña Matilda wanted her children not only to learn, but also to have a recognized certificate in their hands. She knew that this was a guarantee for the future. But what made her the most unhappy was to see that Santiago was not happy there: *“He didn’t like the school. He was often sick, he was losing weight. After three months, I withdrew him.”*

Santiago spent over one year out of school . . . and a great deal of time in the street. *“It worried me,”* said Doña Matilda, *“because I was afraid he would get on the wrong track.”* Santiago was a rather turbulent child, but he was nonetheless attentive to his little brothers, whom he baby-sat from time to time. He sometimes also went to the dump to salvage scraps of boards and wood which were used for the fire.

At the beginning of 1992, just before the beginning of the school year, Doña Matilda worked for three days in a village on the outskirts of the capital where the annual national holiday is celebrated. She offered her services to a little restaurant where there was always a lot of work. The good pay allowed her to buy uniforms, shoes and school supplies for her older children. She was also able to enroll Santiago in his first year at school in the neighborhood. Santiago liked the school, even if it was not always easy. His mother told the Volunteers:

He doesn’t like to miss school, but he also wants to go out and play. He’s getting attached to the street. He goes out even when he has homework to do.

Doña Matilda stimulated him and helped him to the extent that she could, as she did with Clara Luz. Santiago completed his first year of elementary school successfully at the age of ten.

At the very beginning of 1993, Doña Matilda did not have the same job opportunity as she had the previous year. She had trouble paying the costs of sending two children to school.¹³ Furthermore, as school took up only half a day, she was really afraid that Santiago would be tempted to spend the rest of the day in the street. So she thought about sending him back to “Hogar para Todos,” and of making a new attempt, given that this institution would keep him for the entire day. She hesitated, however, due to his unfortunate experience several years earlier.

In the neighborhood, the children were in constant contact with children and young people who sniff glue. *“My Santiago,”* said Doña Matilda, *“has never been seen carrying glue.”*

She did not say this with an overtone of victory, and even less to cast aspersion or to judge those who did take drugs. She was only too aware that these are signs of extreme poverty. She simply said it because she had done everything she could to see to it that her son *“does not get on the wrong track, which leads children to their doom.”*

¹³ In a public school in Guatemala there is no registration fee, but a parent must pay for an inexpensive uniform and school supplies

UNITING TO FIGHT POVERTY

March 17, 1992. A small group of adults meets for the first time in Matilda's neighborhood. Doña Xiomara opens her door to three or four neighbors. Doña Matilda, her friend, is part of the group. The Fourth World Volunteers know these men, women and relatives well because each week since August 1989, together with friends, they have operated a Street Library and a pre-school in the area.

The objective of the meeting is to prepare for October 17, the United Nations' World Day for Overcoming Poverty. Ideas are expressed by several participants. This date of March 17 reminds Doña Matilda of the commemoration of October 17, 1991 during which two of her children participated in a play with children from other underprivileged areas.

What if this year we presented a play by adults from various areas to show our life of grinding hardship? We could do it too, like our children!

And thus, on the 17th of each month, from March to August, a show is slowly put together thanks to the testimony of men and women from this area who are joined by other adults living in a garbage dump. The two themes which can be singled out are a life of wandering – experienced at least once by each of the members of the group, and the danger encountered in poverty-stricken environments.

Indeed, whether alongside the railroad track, on the edge or top of a dump or on the side of a ravine, the dwelling places to which the very poor are driven are endless sources of danger, particularly for children. How many children and adults have survived being smothered by an avalanche of refuse? How many makeshift shacks have escaped being washed into the ravine by floods of mud in the middle of the rainy season? How many shelters have survived the onslaught of the top-heavy loads carried by railroad cars?

From September 17 to October 17, the adults spend considerable energy at rehearsals, intent on sticking with their project, aware of the commitment they have made and of the value of the message they want to convey. This time is taken from their daily working hours which do not even suffice to make ends meet. They have to stop doing laundry, a means of earning a few "centavos." They must see to it that their children, who cannot be left alone because of the trains, are kept busy. Sometimes they even have to give up a meal because money hasn't come in at the usual hour.

Doña Matilda is at the heart of this enthusiasm. She reminds everyone of the rehearsal schedule. She spends time with neighbors disheartened by continual worries, while she herself hopes that the show will live up to the group's expectations. And indeed, the dialogue comes spontaneously to the actors' lips, for it is their own lives they are portraying. A choir of children who participate in the street libraries joins them. A refrain in praise of fraternity and hope punctuates the performance.

After months of rehearsal, backstage in a university auditorium, the group Doña Matilda brought together is panic stricken: "*Will we succeed?*" Many very poor families have come with them from various locations, including from the most destitute run-down areas in the capital. Matilda

says:

With a Volunteer and a friend of the Fourth World Movement in the province, we looked for families in one district of the capital called Eureka. Each time I enter this district, I have the impression of reaching the farthest limit of something, the impression that a more horrible, underprivileged district cannot exist. The same cardboard scrap metal shacks made of any salvaged waste, the same garbage piled up here and there, pieces of plastic drying on a clothes line, the same mess, the same mud, puddles of water which never dry up, the dump which stretches away into the horizon...

I merely followed this Volunteer who knocked on the doors of newly built shacks. A mother who was not going to attend the commemoration was going to the dump with two of her children. She left with an empty burlap bag and broomstick with a hook. Another child was pouting . . . All I understood was that his parents could not come and that he would have liked to accompany us. It seemed hard for him and he went off to hide...

In the silence of the room, which is almost full and in which 350 people are seated – families from the most underprivileged districts and friends from all horizons – the actors meet their challenge and give the best of themselves. Their message strikes a sensitive chord in this audience which has come to partake in the suffering and hopes expressed, the suffering which comes from always being on the outside, the hope for peace and justice for all.

Doña Matilda, the adults and the children's choir leave the stage, pride swelling up their breasts. Families who do not know them come forward to thank them for the testimony they have dared to bear. Their district still has a bad reputation; life there is still as difficult, but something has changed. A testimony brought before the world with strength and dignity remains engraved in the hearts of each and everyone.

CHAPTER 3

REACHING THE POOREST: WHAT DOES IT TAKE?

*Huguette Redegeld*¹⁴

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, international conferences and summits held under the auspices of the United Nations have included the issue of poverty in their agenda. The Declaration and Plan of Action adopted at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995 introduced a new perspective to the fight against poverty, namely that poverty prevents its victims from enjoying their fundamental rights and from fulfilling their responsibilities. Poverty concerns all aspects of life and, consequently, calls for coherent and comprehensive policies to eradicate it. Building on this evolution, the United Nations Development Programme's 1998 Poverty Report "Overcoming Human Poverty" examined how multidimensional approaches to poverty can be translated into improved policies and programs.

With this growing general concern, the question of extreme poverty and of reaching the poorest has gained significance. Two recent examples illustrate this. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights started working on the links between human rights and extreme poverty.¹⁵ In addition, UNICEF implemented its Executive Board Decisions 1989/8 and 1991/6 which asked to examine innovative ways to reach populations still excluded by undertaking a study published entitled "Reaching the Poorest."¹⁶

The focus of this study has been the following: Many actions are undertaken for alleviating absolute poverty, but these actions often fail to reach a portion of the population intended to be the beneficiaries. This phenomenon occurs again and again, whatever the size or the objectives of the actions. It is therefore crucial to find an explanation. Is it because of the living conditions - for example in the most exposed parts of a hill closest to the sea, or in the streets with a plastic cover for a roof, or between graves in a cemetery? Is it because this group accumulates, in a lasting way, the same hardships that affect others in a less pervasive manner? Is it because they are not perceived as credible partners? Is it because a sense of fatality still prevails, assuming that in any human group, there have been, there is and there will always be people left behind and abandoned from the good will of others?

It demonstrates, in any case, that the question "*How to reach the poorest?*" represents a genuine concern. It also acknowledges that this question is insufficiently documented. For this reason, it is difficult to get a factual understanding of the history of the poorest; it is hard to know them, their thoughts and their vision of the world; it is difficult to assess and to benefit from their first-hand experience of destitution. Without such an understanding, it will be nearly impossible to reach out to them. The study "Reaching the poorest" undertaken in co-operation with UNICEF's

¹⁴ Huguette Redegeld is Vice President of the International Movement ATD Fourth World.

¹⁵ United Nations, 1996, *Final report on human rights and extreme poverty*, submitted by the special rapporteur, Mr. Leandro Despouy, E/CN.4/Sub.2/1996/13, 18 June 1996.

¹⁶ ATD Fourth World and Unicef, 1999, *Reaching the Poorest*, Unicef Publications, New York.

Division of Evaluation, Policy and Planning represents an attempt to lead to rudimentary answers to this concern. Some of its findings and their implications, as well as further questions to address, are presented in this document

REACHING THE POOREST

This chapter starts with a brief presentation of the study in order to provide the background from which the findings, presented in the second part of the chapter, have arisen. It should be added that these findings also stem from other sources. In part three, implications deriving from the findings are grouped under four recommendations. They are, of course, not exhaustive and need to be confronted and complemented by others, as, from the start, the study was conceived as a process to be pursued.

Brief presentation of the study

The study was an implementation of the UNICEF Executive Board's request that research be undertaken in order to discover new ways to reach out to the poorest population groups. UNICEF has been one of the first United Agencies to express its difficulty in reaching 20 percent of its target population. The goals of the study were: i) to bring to light the conditions which are necessary to allow the poorest to participate in the planning, execution, monitoring and evaluation of programs; ii) to analyze the underlying basic conditions necessary to involve the poorest - over the long-term - in developing the knowledge which is necessary for any action concerning them; and, finally, iii) to identify a core series of principles that could help any agency wanting to examine and improve the efficiency of its programs and policies with regard to the poorest.

A special effort was undertaken to identify projects in which the poorest had been real partners in order to study, in depth, the necessary conditions for such a partnership. It was not a sufficient criteria for selection that projects had offered the poorest merely some benefit. Out of thirteen pre-selected projects, seven were retained for further investigation: in Burkina Faso, Haiti, Guatemala, Thailand, Peru, Canada and Uganda. They fit into different contexts and their main concerns were varied: education, culture, community development, health, or social mobilization. The actions had the common feature of being conducted in consultation with many partners, including very poor families and individuals. Another shared point was the determination to develop, on a long-term basis, a network of solidarity and of support among these partners.

For the authors of the study, the expression "the poorest" was not a theoretical idea; it was to be understood as a question: "who are the poorest?" It was the expression of an approach, more than a designation of a specific group of people. This approach leads to meeting poor people and, through them, to discovering the poorest who are being left out. Many experts have tried to define poverty and the Copenhagen Summit has given a new impetus to this search for an

appropriate definition. This study retained the following definition which is proposed by the Wresinski Report¹⁷:

“A lack of basic security is the absence of one or more factors that enable individuals and families to assume basic responsibilities and to enjoy fundamental rights. Such a situation may become more extended and lead to more serious and permanent consequences. Extreme poverty results when the lack of basic security simultaneously affects several aspects of people’s lives, 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.”

The reasons for this choice were the following: this definition affirms a continuum between the reality of extreme poverty and that of poverty in general; it links rights and responsibilities with poverty; and it recalls the necessity of a global approach. In other words, situations of extreme poverty must be examined taking into account the context of situations of deprivation which may affect larger groups in society. This definition thus puts the question, “How to reach the poorest?” in a wider perspective.

Major findings

The detection of the poorest members in a community or in a group as such does not guarantee their effective participation in a given action or program. The study has revealed areas that are decisive in the process of reaching the poorest. Through examples, six of such areas are presented below.

Acquiring and sharing knowledge

The question of knowledge is at the heart of “reaching the poorest.” What kind of knowledge is necessary? Who will build up this knowledge? With whom is it shared? When developing a knowledge-base, three points stand out: i) the necessity of enlarging and giving value to all sources of knowledge; ii) the necessity of reciprocity; and, finally, iii) the necessity of finding new ways to share knowledge.

Giving value to all sources of knowledge

Research, inquiries and surveys are well-trying tools of knowledge developed and used by social scientists, policy makers and development agencies and are constantly improved. For example, the question of the participation of the beneficiaries has been given more and more attention and has led to new practices. The study revealed that still other approaches or sources of knowledge should be used in order to acquire a more precise knowledge of the poorest. Most of the time, these groups are completely beyond the reach of statistical data gatherings. Furthermore, surveys are usually not conducted for a sufficiently long period of time and lack the necessary preparation to enable the poorest to express what they really want to share; as a consequence,

¹⁷ Wresinski, J., 1987, *Grande pauvreté et Précarité Economique et sociale*, Rapport du Conseil Economique et Social, Journal officiel de la République française, Paris. English version available: Wresinski, J., 1994, *Chronic Poverty and Lack of Basic Security*, Fourth World Publications, Landover MA.

their answers might simply reflect what they feel the surveyors expect to hear from them or might be completely mythical.

The documentation of the projects explored included other tools which have proven essential in the building of knowledge, such as:

- *Family monographs*: completed in co-operation with those concerned and checked by them in the final stage; these monographs were possible thanks to the information acquired and recorded daily, sometimes over years;
- *Interviews of “privileged actors”*: those people who have developed such a close relationship with the very poor that the latter perceive them as standing on their side; they could be neighbors, social workers, teachers, policemen, health workers, clergy, academics;
- *Knowledge gathered through actions*: reports and varied documents collected over years which describe the changes that occurred during the time of the projects represent another original source of knowledge; in this respect, many grass-roots workers expressed enough concern to be recognized as holders of a particular knowledge on equal footing with other holders of knowledge.

Establishing reciprocity

Implementing actions at the grass-roots level implies seeking to enter into a relationship with different concerned people: speaking with them of their common values, inquiring into their experiences of solidarity and their expectations for outside support and contributions. In order to acquire a genuine knowledge of the life of the very poor, a close proximity is vital. This can be realized, for example, by choosing living quarters in close proximity to the poor, by visiting people’s homes, by participating in small group discussions, by regular local activities. Such means are appropriate ways to elaborate a better knowledge of a poor population.

But these means alone are not sufficient. What is also essential is allowing the population to get to know those who come to meet them. The people concerned have the right to know their partners precisely, to obtain a clear understanding of their intentions and plans. Knowledge of a population can be gathered only through trust. Reciprocity and mutual understanding are basic conditions to establish trust. A young man from the project in Cusco (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?*”

Finding new ways for sharing knowledge

A working group in Canada illustrated the changes provoked in attitudes and actions which occurred when various people, including the very poor, joined together. Its participants came from different social and professional backgrounds: social services, community actions, religious groups, literacy programs, hospitals, welcoming centers for homeless, etc. In their daily responsibilities, they were facing similar questions, such as: How to build trust and develop projects with families trapped in a vicious cycle of survival? How to go beyond emergency

responses? How to detect families who do not approach the structures that could help them? The participants started the working group because they felt inadequately equipped to confront these questions on their own. The objectives of their group were to share one's doubts and questions in order to take risks at work and to learn how to decode (understand) together the strengths and the hopes of the poorest families beyond appearances and problems.

Each meeting became a training session based on the experience, thinking and know-how of the poor. By exchanging their experiences, the participants discovered the strengths and hopes of the poorest families and worked toward a comprehensive approach which treats them with dignity and takes them out of dependency. Through sharing their knowledge, they developed a new partnership between themselves and towards other partners in society.¹⁸ One health worker member of the group explained: “... *at the hospital, there is no place to talk about poverty. We're always in a situation of crisis and emergency. I'm caught between defending people's rights and the demands of the structure. I can't change anything by myself. I need support.*”

Developing actions based on the aspirations of the poorest, not on their problems

Many obstacles hinder the participation of the poorest in projects and services designed for their benefit. The preoccupation with daily survival requires all of their energy and attention, and perhaps what is most significant, it is often too shameful, too painful and too terrifying for the poorest to access services, especially those that address only their problems. Projects most successful in reaching the poorest are ones based on the aspirations they carry deep inside but often have difficulty expressing.

The project from Guatemala illustrated this point. The team in San Jacinto, a rural area in Guatemala, had the opportunity to participate in a health-care project to combat early childhood malnutrition. The project was conducted in partnership with the local health center and another organization. In that area, the death of small children was a reality which affected all of the families. However, the poorest families were the hardest hit by severe malnutrition. The fact that in spite of their long hours of strenuous work, they were not able to control the nutritional health of their young children, caused the parents great pain and shame. The team knew this from their years of contact with the community. It knew that a project focused solely on combating malnutrition would accentuate the parents feeling of failure; such a project would be perceived as a reproach.

After careful consideration, the team insisted that the project should be centered around a pre-school, because the community would be able to mobilize itself around their children's education. A nutritional program linked to a pre-school would enable the parents to engage themselves in a process of ensuring the overall healthy development of their children. Most importantly, a pre-school would send a strong message, especially to the parents who had already lost children to malnutrition, that others also had faith in the future of their children.

The story of Doña Maria illustrated some of the steps necessary to ensure the active involvement of families experiencing the greatest despair. Doña Maria brought her fifteen month old son to

¹⁸ See also ATD Fourth World (UK), 1996, *Talk With Us Not At Us. How to Develop a Partnership Between Families in Poverty and Professionals*, Fourth World Publications, London /Paris.

the health center. The small boy was seriously malnourished and suffered bronchi-pneumonia. For the child's recovery, the doctor suggested home consultations. During these visits at home trust developed gradually and, one day, Doña Maria confided that four of her children had already died at an early age, two from malnutrition. For her first child, she had walked an hour-and-a-half to a health center assuming that her child's illness could be cured. She learned there that there was no medication available to treat the baby's malnutrition. This was the beginning of the family's belief of being powerless in protecting the health of their children.

When her son's health improved, the doctor suggested that the family join the nutritional center and pre-school. The parents were afraid; they were not yet ready to face the community. However, they agreed to send their son and daughter to the center with a neighbor. After a while, they decided that their eldest daughter would accompany the two young children. The team frequently visited the parents to inform them of the children's progress. Little-by-little, the family started to participate more actively in the center's activities. In 1985, when Doña Maria gave birth to a daughter, she took full advantage of the services available at the health center and pre-school. As a result, this child never suffered from malnutrition. That same year, the pre-school organized a month-long Festival of Knowledge. Her husband actively participated with his children, and the rest of the community, in the workshops.

As Doña Maria and her husband began to believe again in their children's future, they regained their confidence as parents. Their story is not unique. It was necessary to re-adapt the project until they were able to find renewed hope for the future. Only when these families dared to hope again could they participate in community projects as they had always wished.¹⁹ This evolution was important not only for themselves but also for the entire community; without their participation, the community was deprived of an invaluable and unique experience from which it could learn. It should be stressed, however, that nothing is gained once and for all, and that an appraisal of necessary changes and adaptations has to be incorporated into the process.

The importance of cultural actions

Human beings require beauty and creative expression as much as they require food, clothing and shelter. The poorest remind us of this over and over when they say, *"I want to show other people what I can do, what I have in my heart. I want to share with other people what I feel. It does you good to create something, it is a great satisfaction."* or *"When I draw and when I paint it is like a tenderness which comes out of me. I no longer have any need to talk of my troubles, nor to cry to exist. With painting and drawing we create a new image of ourselves, one we can be proud of."*²⁰

Artistic and cultural projects emphasize each person's natural and innate creativity. Through them, the poorest are able to discover their capabilities and potential. They gain the confidence to contribute to their communities and to broader society. *"All people, and more than anyone else those living in the most extreme poverty, need beauty and poetry just as much as they need bread. Not before and not after bread. At the same time. Every man and woman needs beauty*

¹⁹Kabre, M.-B., and Beyeler, H., 1986, *Children Lead the Way in Burkina Faso*, Editions Science et Service and Unicef, Pierrelaye/Ouagadougou.

²⁰Hosset, M., 1996, *Clin d'oeil a l'ami Picasso*, Editions Quart Monde, Paris .

*and creative expression as the same time as they need food in order to maintain their dignity, to maintain within themselves this space of freedom where one can invent the future, and without which one might as well be dead.”*²¹

Cultural activities also provide a neutral atmosphere which allows people from different socio-economic backgrounds to share knowledge and experiences, become friends and build partnerships based on mutual respect. Because culture is an exercise in creation, it allows each person to place themselves on par with all others. Culture breaches the imprisonment of isolation. On the one hand it is necessary for culture to penetrate into very poor environments. On the other hand culture must allow itself to be impregnated with the experience of the very poor, with their suffering, hopes and courage.²²

The “Street Library”²³ developed in Guatemala City illustrates this. As its name implies, the activity takes place outside, right in the center of a poor neighborhood. There is no registration or pre-requisite for participation. This makes the activity easily accessible to the children and their parents. However, this does not guarantee the participation of the poorest. Outreach is still necessary. In Guatemala City, the “Street Library” took place on the edge of an enormous garbage dump where many children and adults worked scavenging for anything that could be washed and resold. One of the team members noted: *“We met very deprived families who have been driven from everywhere else. We planned to set up a street library there (with books and art material for children). A man told me: ‘We don’t want any books here. We have to fight just to feed ourselves. Children are dying of hunger. If you show books to the children, you will melt their hearts’. The activity happened nevertheless. And in the end, the man took a coin from his pocket and offered it to me. He said, ‘Here, this is for the bus ride. You’re doing a good thing. People do not live on bread alone’”*

In New York City, the “Street Library” run in two neighborhoods acted as a catalyst for re-establishing links between people. Parents, artists and crafts people were regularly invited to share their skills and talents with the children. Teachers, librarians, police officers and local officials were also invited to discover the potential of the community they had either lost touch with or given-up on. When these members of mainstream society visited the street library, the poorest began to be recognized as people who were capable of contributing to their children’s future and their communities. The parents of children who participated in the “Street Library” gathered regularly to discuss issues of special concern to them. These meetings prepared them to meet with officials of schools, community organizations and government services. In this way,

²¹ European Commission and International Movement ATD Fourth World, 1995, *Culture and Human Activity for Overcoming Poverty*, Publication Office of the European Communities, Brussels/Luxembourg (Proceedings of the European Colloquium on the Role of Culture in Combating Poverty. Brussels, 8-9 June 1995.)

²² UNESCO/NGOs, 1996, *Culture, a way to fight extreme poverty*, Unesco, Paris. Contribution of a group of NGOs to the World Decade for Cultural Development (1988-1997) and to the First United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006).

²³In the “Street Library,” books nurture the children’s curiosity and imagination through storytelling, poetry, theatre, puppet shows. The children participate in creative workshops such as drawing, painting, music, sculpture, woodwork or scientific experimentation. Where possible, street libraries incorporate computers into the activity: children around the world communicate with each other through the modem.

the “Street Library” served as a starting point for a comprehensive community project rather than being a goal in and of itself²⁴.

Strengthening the family

The experience acquired working side-by-side with very poor families shows that when the prospect of development is approached from their viewpoint, the improvement of the overall welfare of the family and the future of the children should be the objective. In this area, poor families feel they need outside help and support. It is a fact that extreme poverty is destructive to family and social life. Nevertheless, the family remains a powerful means of social identification since a human being feels himself first and foremost responsible for the development of those closest to him or her. Of course, when living conditions become too harsh, fathers do not hesitate to go away to sell their labor - this is documented by most in the projects of the study. Also, children will take the risk of living in the street. But everyone will still keep the hope of returning home with the few resources or belongings they have gained.

The UN report on human rights and extreme poverty²⁵ mentions that “*gestures of solidarity among persons living in extreme poverty can sometimes help to preserve family bonds.*” An account from Asia illustrates this: “*Sometimes one of the children goes out begging, which is an offence in the country. One evening, he is arrested by the police and sent to a juvenile correctional home. His mother goes to visit him regularly. She can’t take him home because she has no residence certificate. She will have to get the full support of other residents of the shantytown to have herself and her children put on the residence certificate of her own mother, who is herself registered on the certificate of a friend. Only then can her son go back to his family.*”

By contrast, assistance provided by official social services is sometimes seen as an obstacle to the assumption of family responsibilities. For example, a woman in North America states: “*I was in a shelter with my children. I was so closely watched by the social services that I did not dare do anything. I did not dare scold my children when they were naughty. If they heard us shouting, someone from the children’s welfare office would come to see what was happening... I was so afraid that my children would be taken away from me that I did not dare do anything.*”

Threats to family life are particularly serious, because the family is the first line of resistance and often the only defense against poverty and exclusion. Therefore, the questions to be put forth relate to the security of the families (resources, work, housing, health), their potential for carrying out certain projects and enabling one member or another to learn new skills. It is necessary to ask: Is this particular action reinforcing the family or breaking it apart?

The role of the poor in identifying others poorer than themselves

In Belgium, the city of Charleroi developed a large project in the framework of the anti-poverty program financed by the Commission of the European Communities, for a duration of four years (1990-1994). Several working committees were established for the definition of the program and

²⁴ Fanelli, V., 1990, *The Human Face of Poverty; A Chronicle of Urban America*, Bootstrap Press, New York.

²⁵ United Nations, 1996, op. cit.

the evaluation of its progress. One dealt with the issue of citizenship, with the objective of “*enabling the most deprived to express themselves and to ensure that their rights as citizens be respected; to promote the participation of the poorest in the elaboration, implementation and evaluation of the actions undertaken within this program.*” For this working committee, the challenge from the start was how to reach out to those most marginalized, those whose daily life is one of being uprooted, wandering and long-term dependency? How to know them, to meet them and to enter into a dialogue with them in a sustainable way?

The outcome of that process made it clear that it was thanks to the people experiencing hardships themselves that those most hidden and most downtrodden became progressively involved and were able to communicate their opinions and formulate proposals. A couple, for instance, living in a neighborhood where many very deprived families took refuge, introduced the committee members systematically to neighbors in more difficult conditions: “*They live very hard things, you must go and see them, they can teach you a lot.*” In turn, these people helped the committee meet others that nobody else knew. Nobody else could have been the bridge that builds the confidence and trust that leads to mutual respect and partnership.

The same process is documented in the “Art and Poetry” project in Bangkok. The team did not come with pre-conceived ideas about what should be done. Rather, they noted their daily discoveries trying to pay attention to the situation of the poorest. At the same time, they developed contacts with people and organizations concerned by this situation. Through cultural activities run in a poor area in Bangkok (Klong Toey) they 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 intermediaries.

These examples demonstrate that people living in precarious or poor conditions are well aware of the existence of others, around them, poorer than themselves. When a program clearly states in its objectives its determination to include everyone, the poor are the first ones to understand this and to recognize what is at stake. Their unique knowledge should be given its full value and treated as a key element of the process, so that it contributes to the development of actions.

Revealing and building on the potential within a community to unite around its poorest members

The “Courtyard of Hundred Trades” started in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso with the support of friends from the country.²⁶ From the beginning, the project director chose to develop natural relationships with the children and young people living on the streets in particularly difficult conditions. He met them while picking up his mail at the post office, shopping at the market, or paying his electricity or water bills- all places where these children spent their days trying to earn a living. 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 already had built relationships with the children and represented a real link with society: civil servants, small businesses, trade owners. These friends were often the only link existing between the children and their families.

²⁶ Aussedat, M., 1996, *La Cour aux Cents Métiers*, Editions Quart Monde, Paris.

At the same time, the project director established working contacts with people who, privately or in the context of their official responsibilities, expressed concern about the situation and the future of the children and who were willing to go a step further with them. In San Jacinto, Guatemala, the team encountered, in the community itself, men and women deeply concerned by the situation of those suffering the greatest deprivation. Without particular means, these people were on the lookout so that the poorest members of their community were not totally abandoned. The team wrote : *“We followed their footsteps to discover this side - often not well-known - of the history of a population: its solidarity with its poorest members. They led us towards people really hit by misery. They showed us how they shared the crop of corn. They taught us their own respect towards these persons. For example, in this community, everyone knew that it was possible to come and talk to Don Andreas with total confidence. A catchiest, he was deeply touched by the suffering of those around him. He always tried to find ways to help and when he could not, at least he offered his presence. Many could bear witness to what he did: for example, he gathered the men of his village to build the house of a women living alone with her children, with no roof over their head. This was part of his daily life and contributed to change the daily life of the community.”*

What lessons can be retained from these examples? First, an immediate response to the demands of the children in the street would have broken the solidarity already existing around them. It is essential to discover this solidarity, to respect it and to build upon it. Second, because the project director himself had few resources to help, the children themselves took initiatives to help him: giving advice on how to care for the trees in his courtyard, offering a hand by sweeping the courtyard, introducing him to their friends. They were in a position to help instead of being assisted; it made them proud. This spirit inspired the whole project and was present throughout its implementation. Third, within each community, there is the potential of people to refuse an unacceptable situation and to unite around its poorest members. Often, they are individuals belonging to the community, who are not necessarily considered “leaders” but whose daily acts express their solidarity with the poorest. These people are essential in the establishment of a consensus within the community to be on the lookout for those at risk of being left out.

IMPLICATIONS

The implications derived from the findings of the study can be summed up under four recommendations.

An investment over time

For everyone committed in the fight against poverty, at different levels and in different responsibilities, the necessity of long-term investment hardly needs to be stressed. Reaching out to the poorest, enabling them to become partners necessitates taking the time to know them. The obstacles are many; their living conditions, for example, isolate them, sometimes hide them. Taking the time to meet them and acquire an in-depth knowledge is indispensable. It has also been demonstrated that the poorest do not easily express what they really think. They lack the

means to do so and are too dependent on others. Relationships of trust and confidence must be established before they truly enter into a dialogue with others.

The same may be said of the non-poor. Establishing a relationship of trust between all concerned parties can take various forms, depending on the context. Right from the start, all partners must know that their investments require a lengthy time commitment. Duration is not sufficient in and of itself for changes to take place. Imagination, creativity, flexibility and the ability to question one's actions and knowledge are just as important. For this, time is required, and this naturally also has an impact on the planning and financial support of such action. Financial support needs to be secured in order to allow all partners sufficient time to enter into a mutual knowledge and mutual dialogue that will result in innovative actions. It must be stressed that duration does not imply a lack of time constraints. Setting realistic goals, which are constantly re-evaluated, remains essential.

Planning and evaluation

With regards to planning, the establishment and reappraisal of knowledge deserves particular attention. It is neither the drastic living conditions of the poorest, nor their needs and problems that must be known, for such knowledge could stigmatize them, re-enforce their feeling of humiliation and prevent other fellow human beings from identifying with them. It is, instead, vital that the project has the possibility to discover the values, aspirations and areas for which each person is willing to invest the best of himself. Such values and aspirations should constitute the basis for trust on which any action must be built. At the same time, it is just as vital to discover the values and expectations of the community, group and neighborhood with which the very poor are connected. Even if these links are fragile, they do exist. These surrounding groups have at their disposal members who invest their energy and their know-how to put an end to the sufferings of the very poor. These persons represent an indispensable asset for the action to be undertaken and should be identified.

With regards to evaluation, traditional criteria are necessary to determine if progress is made in relation to the fixed objectives. At the school in Haiti, for example, the evaluation criteria were: How many children attended school? How many finished the primary cycle? How many teachers took advantage of a training program to improve their professional skills? How many parents were involved in the parents committee? However, more subtle criteria were introduced in order to evaluate the participation of the poorest, such as: Did the participation of the poorest families in the school enable them to get out of their isolation and to take part in the life of the community? In Burkina Faso, in addition to the number of children and young people welcomed at the Courtyard and to the number of those who acquired a skill, the qualitative criteria introduced were: How and to what extent did the project enable the beneficiaries to feel more responsible towards other children still excluded?

Thus, the dynamic of evaluation should be anchored in a very simple question: did the poorest have the opportunity to advance towards more autonomy and freedom rather than continuing in a cycle of dependency and assistance? Nothing is gained once and for all. Progress which appears well-established might be compromised by external factors such as an unfavorable economic climate, decreasing interest on the part of the social interventions, or a change to staff less

inclined to confer priority to the poorest, etc. Paying attention to the positive and negative signs with regards to the satisfaction of the needs of the very poor and the changes necessary in action is a permanent exercise. In order to appreciate the need for evolution in objectives and to envisage modifications in the delivery of an action, periodical evaluations and adjustments in planning are essential.

Evaluation is a process to be included from the planning stage onwards in any action. It offers the opportunity to consult the population concerned and to enable it to contribute to the realization of the action in all its dimensions. It serves as reminder to be on the lookout so that the reality and the expectations of the very poor are taken into account. It is also a recognition of the poorest as indispensable partners.

Building global partnerships

The challenge is to build an agreement between the various partners, including the poorest, regarding a number of objectives. These goals should be aimed at reducing poverty and ending extreme poverty. The need for such mobilization must be identified at the start of any action. It should already be part of the planning process. This mobilization begins with the detection of local supports which will then lead towards larger services.

The setting up of the Art and Poetry center, in the Tha Din Daeng neighborhood in Bangkok, is such an example. It was made possible thanks to the collaboration between the ILO regional office, the Ministry of Labor and ATD Fourth World. Time is needed to achieve such collaboration. Each partner must have the time necessary to follow through with its own approach. The establishment of dialogue with persons and institutions able to offer support to a sustainable action against extreme poverty must be an objective present from the beginning.

At the same time, special attention must be given to the partnership of the poorest. Partnership does not mean obtaining a temporary co-operation in order to guarantee the success of a precise action. Partnership has to demonstrate that the poorest have a role to play - an important role - for the whole of the community. In that sense, they are not only persons "to reach," but people getting the opportunity to retrieve a respected position in their community which benefits others as well as themselves. During one of the workshops of the Courtyard of One Hundred Trades in Burkina Faso, for instance, the young people living in the streets fabricated toys and pedagogical materials for pre-schools which completely lacked such means. In this way, these young people could contribute to the realization of the expectations of their country and the ambitions elaborated by the public authorities.

Support for training

Goodwill is not sufficient for partners whose history and experiences are so far away from one another, to really meet, understand one other and dare to take risks together. Training appears a key issue. The objective of training those who intervene in the life of the very destitute is to enable them to be in the best position possible to meet and act with the very poor. The challenge of training the "poorest" lies in allowing the space, time and freedom necessary so that their partnerships can be the expression of their thinking and their points of view. The necessity of

training, in a very large sense of the word, must, therefore, be taken seriously. On-going training must be designed as a personal and collective responsibility. It must be updated according to the knowledge acquired, the setbacks experienced and the advancements realized. In that respect, learning from and networking with others (including the very poor themselves) should be recognized as part of the training process and financed as such.

An integral part of the training process is the recognition that “reaching the poorest” requires the commitment of determined individuals. As illustrated in all of the examples presented, the poorest were reached thanks to the significant human investment of the individuals participating in the actions. It is vital to stress that the poorest themselves are the first to make this investment, as demonstrated in their daily acts of resistance to poverty, humiliation and exclusion. The specific and unique contribution that the poorest can offer in the training process should be acknowledge, taken into account and made available.

CHALLENGES TO THE NECESSITY OF REACHING THE POOREST

Questions are often raised about the usefulness and the relevance of “reaching the poorest.” Why is it necessary to try and reach the poorest? Is it justifiable to invest large sums of money for the benefit of a small part of the population? Why should special efforts be made for the poorest since they should automatically benefit from programs designed for all? Another question often put forward is the following: can small-scale initiatives which at times reach the poorest really be useful on a larger scale? The study “Reaching the Poorest” did not address directly these types of questions. However, by approaching the problem from a grass-roots perspective and looking at a number of action-research projects, several points can be drawn from the study which partially respond to these questions.

- The starting point for the study was the acknowledgement by agencies, such as UNICEF, who make particular efforts to ensure the widest coverage for their programs, that a considerable portion of the target population was not being reached. In some cases as much as 20 percent of the target group not only was not reached but was, in fact, experiencing worse conditions after the implementation of their programs. The progress of the majority seemed to go alongside the deterioration of the situation of weakest. For example, in one community in Guatemala, the installation of a water supply system for the majority lead to further hardship for the poorest because the water they had previously used, was now being diverted away from their living area. Linked with this, is the generally accepted trickle down theory which supposes that eventually even the poorest will benefit from projects aimed to benefit the majority. However, this is far from guaranteed and these actions need to be corrected in order to reach these goals. Some projects described in the study gave indications of such adjustments, underlining for example the importance of cultural activities, or the necessity to rely on members of the community who are attentive to the weakest. If such adjustments are failing, the weakest members undergo worsened conditions. This is clearly in contradiction with all the efforts to establish a human rights approach whereby every person should live in dignity and be respected. The universal value of human rights as maintained by the United Nations agencies cannot be submitted to criteria of simple efficiency.

- Maintaining a portion of humankind in conditions of extreme poverty comparable to slavery or apartheid, represents a danger to peace and harmony everywhere, as nobody can be guaranteed protection from this evil. The example of contagious diseases such as tuberculosis illustrates this potential danger. The World Health Organization warns that tuberculosis is on the rise especially among vulnerable groups, such as the very poor. These groups do not have the possibility to protect themselves and can benefit only sporadically from health services. As a consequence, this disease is more and more impossible to cure, becoming in turn a risk for society as a whole. Therefore, the improvement of the standard of living of the poorest can lead to an improvement for the community as a whole.
- The question of financial viability should be considered along with that of sustainability. An example of this is the community development project in Peru, which was only able to secure financial support for three years. Despite the investment and commitment of the project team and the villagers, this short time allowed by the financial institutions was not enough time to fully establish the project and to ensure the participation of the poorest in a sustainable way. In other cases, in order to prove their efficiency, projects have to manage in a short period of time with an amount of funds that surpasses the immediate needs and the capacity to manage them. Projects are sometimes endowed with assets that they then have difficulty maintaining after this outside support stops.
- The significance of small-scale projects for policy making is often questioned and not taken into account. One of the reasons is that it is more difficult to measure the contribution of people and material aspects are given priority. In the evaluation process, more emphasis needs to be placed on qualitative criteria in order to have a more accurate assessment of this human investment. In all the actions explored by the study, the commitment of the people themselves has proven to be a key element in the success of the actions and their outreach beyond the initial targets. The “Courtyard of One Hundred Trades” in Burkina Faso addresses the importance of not judging the success of a project based only on the quantitative results which can be easily measured. What is equally important is to consider the multiplying effect which goes beyond just the children’s participation in the workshops. By participating in this project the children gained the courage to rebuild relationships with their families and others in the community. The significance of the multiplying effect that the people themselves can have is rarely given due consideration. When the poorest are enabled to live in dignity and solidarity with their surrounding environment they can make a real contribution to their community as a whole.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper has been to look at ways of responding to the growing concern about extreme poverty, based on the study “Reaching the Poorest” which explored action-research projects initiated in different settings. This exploration demonstrated that it is possible to design and implement actions with the goal of reaching the poorest and thus including everyone. It highlighted six points to take into consideration for that purpose, namely: i) sharing knowledge, ii) actions based on the aspirations of the poorest, iii) the importance of culture, iv) strengthening the family, v) the role of the poor in detecting people poorer than themselves, and vi) building on

the potential of others to unite around the poorest. From these points, four areas of recommendations were identified: i) investment over time, ii) planning and evaluation, and iv) partnerships and training.

Questions are often raised about the relevance of reaching the poorest and while this paper did not attempt to answer these questions, it has tried to look at them in light of the findings of the study. The findings of this study are obviously not exhaustive and the search has to be continued in order to gain a better understanding of what is needed to “reach the poorest.” It would be to the benefit of everyone if the Bretton Woods institutions tackle the question of extreme poverty and look at their input towards eradicating it. It would also benefit everyone if partnerships on this issue between these institutions and civil society be developed on solid grounds. ATD Fourth World and its network of correspondents of the “Permanent Forum: Extreme Poverty in the World” are wholeheartedly ready to contribute to this development.²⁷

²⁷Many of the projects described in this paper are discussed in the following issues of the *Revue Quart Monde* (Editions Quart Monde, Paris): No. 162, mai 1997, Bangkok, pourquoi la culture?, pp. 52-59; No.163, septembre 1997, Au Québec, ensemble pour casser la misère, pp. 52-59; No. 164, novembre 1997, Interroger les communautés paysannes du Pérou, pp. 86-93; and No. 165, février 1998, Atteindre les plus pauvres, Ouganda, pp. 64-71.

CHAPTER 4

ENABLING INSTITUTIONS TO REACH THE POOREST

*Jona Rosenfeld and Bruno Tardieu*²⁸

“Extreme poverty is not inevitable.
Human beings made it. They can unmake it.”
Joseph Wresinski

INTRODUCTION

This chapter, which is adapted from the second part of a book by Rosenfeld and Tardieu²⁹, tells the lessons learned from twelve case studies or stories of how citizens from different walks of life helped to establish a connection between the institutions in which they worked and the poorest of the poor. These citizens worked toward forming links where there had been none, and they succeeded in mobilizing their institution to join the most disadvantaged people in their struggle against extreme poverty. The institutions that became mobilized in the course of the stories are very diverse: a regional school system, a national electric power company, a small business, a major daily newspaper, a parish in a working class community, a hospital trade union, the European Commission, the French government, a court system, a city government, the United Nations, and a university. The case studies encompass six countries and three continents. Each institution came in contact with the International Movement ATD Fourth World which sees as its mission to invite all to contribute to the eradication of extreme poverty and social exclusion.

To create an alliance between their institutions and the excluded poor, the actors in the stories, as members of both their institution and the International Movement ATD Fourth World, recognized the existence of an impasse and sought to overcome it. They embarked on this venture in order to reverse the situation of institutions “fighting the poor rather than poverty” and deprived families being ignored and rejected. One common, unanticipated consequence of their actions became apparent in the stories: in the course of its attempts to change in order to be responsive to the excluded, each particular institution underwent a wider transformation. It became more caring, reclaiming or rediscovering its basic mission and “raison d’être.”

From this vantage point, the process of including the poorest benefited not only the poor, but also the institution. Since it is reciprocity that instigates and maintains connectedness, we tried to describe the craft of forging reciprocity as it appears in the stories during a seminar of reflection on action with all the actors of the stories co-chaired with our regretted colleague and friend the late Donald Schön, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The paper presents what we learn from these stories, which we call the craft of the allies of the Fourth World Movement.

²⁸ Jona Rosenfeld is Gordon Brown Professor (emeritus) and former Director of the Paul Baerwald School of Social Work, Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Senior Advisor, JDC-Brookdale Center for Children and Youth and JDC Israel. Bruno Tardieu is Co-Director of the US branch of the International Movement ATD Fourth World.

²⁹ Rosenfeld, J., and B. Tardieu, 2000, *Artisans of Democracy: How ordinary people, families in extreme poverty, and social institutions become allies to overcome social exclusion*, University Press of America, Lanham. This chapter is adapted from the second part of the book with permission of the University Press of America.

To help equip others to employ this craft, we looked at the stories as chronicles of a journey that moves from impasse to interaction to transaction, passing through four crossroads. An attempt is made to spell out what made it possible to travel from one crossroads to another. Then some additional lessons are drawn and questions raised — some personal, others having wider social and political implications. The lessons learned from the stories result from the joint reflections of the practitioners who lived the stories and of others, academics or practitioners, interested in the issue. Still others might have distilled other lessons, and we hope they will.

ITINERARIES : THE STEPS LEADING TO A PARTNERSHIP WITH THE POOREST

The twelve stories which form the basis of the analysis provided in this chapter can be found in the book by Rosenfeld and Tardieu³⁰. Here, we focus on the similarities between the stories. While the differences in the people, institutions and communities involved in the various stories were bound to result in different approaches, the heart of our endeavor was to identify the elements that seem to be common to all and are refuted by none. This has led us to start by describing the common traits of the points of departure and those of the points of arrival in all the stories, with some characteristics of the actual journey and its crossroads.

From impasse to reciprocity

Our initial request when interviewing the actors of the stories was the following: “Tell us the story of an action of yours that had a successful concrete outcome for families who are among the most isolated and hurt by extreme poverty.” We had little idea of the nature of these successes or the changes that had occurred. What we learned was unexpected, contradicting the general consensus regarding the types of goals to be reached in the struggle against poverty. To explain this, let us describe more precisely what differentiates the situations — the landscapes at the points of departure and of arrival of the stories: the impasse and the reciprocity.

1. The scene of departure: impasse and disconnectedness

What characterizes the beginnings of the stories is a total impasse — a gulf separating excluded families living in extreme poverty from a social institution purported to serve all, which could well contribute to the families’ well-being if only an effort were made to do so. This stagnant situation was the norm. The very poor are shut out; the social institution is shut in. Both live with a sense of defeat and mutual misunderstanding in a sterile “non-relationship” leading nowhere. To the extent that there are overtures from either side, these seem doomed to failure and make no sense to the other side. Nothing is going on, there are no surprises, no exchanges, no meeting points. There is no story to tell.

Despite any parallels in this description between the situations of the excluded and the institution that excludes them, it is clear that those on the outside bear the heaviest burden, with devastating impact for their very humanity. Some accounts allow a closer look at the way the very poor experience this impasse. They seem to have internalized it in such a way that, irrespective of

³⁰ Rosenfeld, J., and B. Tardieu, op. cit.

their paucity of resources, despite their needs and suffering, they seem to no longer expect anything from, or make demands on, the institution. They end up thinking that if something is wrong, it must be their fault; they are cornered into carrying alone the burden of guilt. “I don’t want them to go to school with empty stomachs; what would people say about us again,” one mother explains, in the story about how a school reached the poorest.

When the excluded families look at the public institution that purports to serve all, it is like looking into a mirror in which they cannot see themselves. Their situation and the failure they experience is never talked about by the institution, at least not in a way that they can relate to. Any attempts they make to reach the institution are never understood and are considered meaningless. They end up doubting their own capacity to make any sense, and this isolates them even further. Deprived of the opportunity to engage in conversation about this breakdown, they lose the use of language; words fail them. They cannot express their suffering, much less their demands. As any attempt to do so fails and adds to the suffering, whole population groups hide to survive and become invisible. As Michael Harrington wrote, “That the poor are invisible is one of the most important thing about them”³¹. They are left with the choice between silence, subdued speech or misunderstood outcries, leading to violence.

This provides the institution with some grounds for saying that the people in question do not speak out clearly. They are unintelligible interlocutors who could not be viable partners. To fill in that embarrassing void, each institution, in turn, creates an abundance of explanations and theories for the troubling reality of the families’ lives and of its own failure to include them, as a way to protect itself from the challenges that might arise from the unknown. The common denominator of these explanations and theories is that they explain away the impasse by putting the responsibility on the excluded populations who have no chance to refute them.

Another frequent trait of these defensive theories is to assume that the excluded poor do not actually suffer from their situation because they do not know any different or, indeed, because they want things this way. After all, they have the right to live as they do, this is their “culture”³², as if extreme poverty was another form of diversity to celebrate. As a school psychologist says in justification of school failure: “Their parents managed without knowing how to read; the children will manage, too.”

Another underlying belief is that the behavior of the excluded poor does not make any sense; it is too irrational to be dealt with by the institution. This has two far-reaching consequences. It leads the people thus judged to end up doubting their own capacity to make sense or to think. On the other hand, it casts devastating doubts on the intelligence of the poor. Too rarely does it lead to wondering whether the apparent irrationality of the poor might be due to the fact that the very reality they live in is complex, full of contradictions, “unthinkable” and a challenge to

³¹ Harrington, M., 1962, Rev. ed. 1969, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, New York: Macmillan.

³² The notion of a “culture of poverty” was popularized by Lewis, O., 1966, *La vida: A Porto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York*, New York: Vintage Books.. For reflections on the limitations of the notion, see Join-Lambert, L., 1981, Quart Monde, in *Encyclopedia Universalis, Themes et Problemes*, pp. 341-344, and Wresinski, J., 1987, *Interview, audio tape* (collection “Les grands témoins de notre temps”), Paris: Malesherbes, where he coined the phrase “a truncated culture.”

rationality³³. On the basis of their apparent irrationality, the institution considers that it does not have the competence to understand them, that there is nothing it can do, and it “doesn’t have the time,” meaning that devoting time to them is a futile effort. In the story of the parish in an English village, all the social workers said from the start that they had no time for the family. In the electric power company, the union, and the European Commission, the officials of the institution first affirm that such “cases” should be treated by specialists outside of the institution. Again and again, institutional representatives say: “We are not social workers.” This alibi of lack of expertise enables them to dismiss the question of their institution’s universal mission, of their duty not to discriminate. As the school social worker explains in the first story, if the institution pushes all “difficult cases” on to them, social workers end up as isolated as the excluded are. Their only chance for reaching the poorest is to succeed in engaging the institution as a whole, and not just marginal parts of it.

Whereas in the public arena of the institution the suffering of the excluded poor is explained away, privately — inaudibly almost — there are persons inside the institution plagued by frustration, even guilt, who express their doubts to others. In other words, there is some tacit sense of things being wrong, of the existence of real suffering. If the institution itself tends to ignore this, the people inside — through their own humanity which transcends their capacity to rationalize — have an intuitive sense that the persons who are excluded do suffer and that to let misery persist is unacceptable. Yet as is true of the families in poverty, the sense of culpability of the people inside the institutions also leads to shame, to cover up and to silence. In addition, when the people “included” in a community or institution envisage the depth of the suffering involved, they doubt that they, personally, can have any impact on it. Partly, this may be because of real humility or self-doubt; partly, it is due to fear of opening a floodgate that might drown both them and their institutions. They act as if the status quo were the only way to survive.

Thus, while individuals within the institution know but think they have no means to act, the institutions, which would have the means to act, behave as if they did not know. All these are facets of the impasse; nothing said, nothing going on, no story to tell.

2. The scene of arrival: the dawning of reciprocity

There are no revolutions at the ends of the stories. No one could report that the “problem is fixed”; far from it. On the contrary, narrator after narrator says that much remains to be done, that “nothing is ever won once and for all.”

If so, what constitutes success? Why did the practitioners consider that progress was made? In contrast to the impasse at the point of departure, there is now a general feeling that things are moving; time is no longer standing still. A dialogue has at least begun across the gulf; there are initial glimmers of understanding, of two-way learning and joint experimentation. Some concrete outcomes for the families in poverty show all participants that the laborious journey undertaken by the excluded poor and the institutions has been worth the effort. Both parties find meaningful

³³ Tardieu, B., 1999, De l’impasse à la réciprocité: Comment forger l’alliance entre les plus démunis et la société, in *Entre systémique et complexité, chemin faisant: Mélanges en l’honneur du Professeur Jean-Louis Lemoigne*, Paris: Presse Universitaire de France.

to invest time in a relationship that now appears as productive. Exclusion has thawed; a joint history is in the making; fatalism is no longer the rule.

The people, as well as the institutions concerned, seem to have undergone a transformation. Toward the ends of the stories, a frequent phrase is that “the poor became clients, citizens, parents, workers, families.” This is a paradox because, in fact, they have always been clients, citizens, parents, workers or families. The difference is that now they have become so not only in their own eyes, but also in the eyes of the institutions as well.

Similarly, in the institutional arena, politicians, teachers, lawyers, civil servants, engineers, priests, trade unionists, entrepreneurs, etc. are now, too, politicians, teachers, lawyers, etc., but somehow “more so.” “They found a new pride in their mission” is a sentence appearing in several stories. Institutions as a whole seem to have gained new energy and pride, a “refreshed sense of their mission,” said a director at the European Union Commission. All this comes as a surprise to people who, at the outset, feared that the journey might destroy them.

The most important characteristic of the point of arrival is that, on both sides, there is a sense of joy and pride at having made the journey. Actually, it is this common pride which breaks through the silence: each party can now tell its side of the story with less fear or shame, and the other party can actually hear it because it has had a positive stake in it. The exchange of stories that make sense to the other side is the basis for creating a language of useful public conversation that can strengthen democracy, and become the vehicle for joint public inquiry into possible paths to justice for all.

Indeed, we cannot say that the issue is settled, or that no further quests remain; in fact, the journey has just begun. The narrators of our stories often felt obliged to apologize for this fact, as if a credible outcome should have been quicker and more definitive; as if the fact that they were still engaged in the venture cast doubt on its significance. This tension reveals another frequent model of the struggle against poverty. It consists of looking at poverty as a only a material or technical problem to be solved, as a thing to be rid of, which the poorest often read as a desire to be rid of them.

When people learn to live together, to talk, to confront each other and to learn from each other, solutions are found to material problems. In our stories, concrete changes in the intolerable living conditions of the very poor do occur. But what does solve the material problem is not only technique. Fixing the problems in the stories really comes from what the very poor long for: living together in a fuller community, a truly democratic life, allowing the weakest to be heard. The reappearance of life where all was frozen, of exchange where all was separate, is what all the narrators judged to be true success in the struggle against extreme poverty.

En route: the four crossroads

We have noted the relative similarity in the points of departure and points of arrival in the stories. Less obvious is the commonality of the journey itself and the four crossroads. The roads were largely shaped by the travelers themselves and the institutional and social contexts in which they operated. As a result, the sequence and nature of the choices at each crossroads only

approximate the actual occurrences. Yet what emerges clearly is that there were choices, and these were probably the main common characteristic of all the itineraries. It could thus prove relevant and useful to describe the circumstances that allowed for these choices, the tensions and dilemmas that they represented, and the freedom that they provided.

1. The first crossroads: yielding to curiosity —initial encounter with a movement

In the stories, the actors do not speak first about the impasse as it has just been described. Rather, they first evoke the personal path which unveiled for them the existence of that impasse. They say they have been first struck by encountering a Movement that offered an experience and a vision dissonant with theirs. The encounter was through a person, a phrase, a book, an exhibit, a newspaper article, a greeting card or a public gathering. Some of these encounters were planned. Others seem to have happened by accident. But did they? “Chance favors only the mind that is prepared,” said Louis Pasteur. And the mediating objects that triggered curiosity resulted not from chance, but from carefully planned efforts to create and disseminate ideas.

Yet the impact of these encounters would soon have faded had it not been reinforced by a more personal encounter with a member of the Movement, poor or otherwise. The surprise of these encounters was their open-endedness: the meeting with the “expert” who seemed to have more questions than answers. This lent authenticity and credibility to the vision and aroused curiosity for further exploration of the Movement and what it stands for; namely, that extreme poverty and exclusion are made by people, are not irreversible, and that everyone can play a role in changing the situation.

Come and see for yourself

Those who chose to learn more were sooner or later invited to come and see, or they went on their own to meet the very poor within the context of some activities of the Movement. The actions cited in the stories included meetings with volunteers living in a poor area, Street Libraries, summer work camps, Fourth World People’s Universities, public rallies. They soon found that they had not come as mere spectators, but were encouraged to take part in the activities and learn whatever they could from actual experience. Even though they were more than likely to have seen poor people at close quarters before, these encounters remained with them as a major discovery — one that challenged their beliefs and changed their outlooks.

The stories offer two major reasons for this sense of discovery. Firstly, the people in poverty whom they met in this context seemed freer, “more themselves,” and on a more equal footing with others than anywhere else: they met “at eye level.” The families were able to welcome them on their own turf because the project freed them from the usual benefactor/beneficiary relationship. In addition, participation in the activity provided the outsiders with a definite role, an opportunity to be themselves and to contribute without being blinded by embarrassment or compulsion to help. It suddenly dawned on them that they were interacting with real people — children, parents, youth, human beings — not merely problems. They were even surprised to be surprised: “Elsewhere I would have seen only the undone hem, there I saw the woman,” says the Union leader recalling her encounters at a Poverty and Human Rights rally. It was the context that did it: a rally that both attended as equals, both as defenders of human rights. They realized

that behind extreme poverty are people no different from themselves. People who, like themselves, also have feelings, a sense of humor, sensitivities, an individual spirit, aspirations and a way of seeing the world. It then became possible to see the dissonance between the conditions people live in on the one hand and their aspirations and frustrated struggle to fulfill them on the other; all that remained was to guess the suffering it provokes.

This realization freed the visitors from seeking refuge in explanations and theories about poverty and the poor (they don't suffer, they don't understand), which are so tenacious because they shield observers from exposure to an all too real suffering. If there is nothing to explain the situation, what remains? Probably some joy to have made contact with those behind the fence, but also much difficulty in comprehending. "I could feel it; I could not understand it," says one of the storytellers, civil servant at the European Union Commission about his first encounters with very poor people.

The second reason for the sense of discovery generated by the encounter was the presence of the members of the Movement Volunteer Corps and their refusal to allow the very poor to be abandoned by society. The Volunteers' own obvious closeness with people who are otherwise totally excluded showed that contact is possible and social exclusion not intractable. Visitors were now left to figure out for themselves whether it was in their power to connect their universe with that of the excluded. Some stop their journey at this point. Others move a bit beyond their world to join the poor and others, still, are left to ponder a question: Can the different worlds connect? Is my world so closed?

2. The second crossroads: taking a risk, becoming an ally

Making sense of the experience: Reconnecting with one's own past

The forcefulness of these experiences gives rise to inner tension and dissonance. If the visitor finds no outlet to express them, no words to make sense of them, the experiences remain isolated, a brief episode destined to fade away. But the people in the stories are given the opportunity to share their experiences and questions with members of the Movement, be it in writing, in conversation or in the course of further encounters.

If they choose to take this opportunity and return to explore what they experienced, and to go deeper into what they did not understand, they will sooner or later find that this inquiry connects them with some earlier experience of their own: with previous encounters with the poor, with memories of exclusion (whether meting it out or being on the receiving end), or with a recollection of helplessness or suffering. How striking that in ten stories out of twelve, actors, without being asked to do so, reveal a personal incident from the past — often from childhood with its unfailing sense of fairness — that involves some nameless sense of wrong and indignation; at which point it had dawned on them that exclusion and misery are inhuman, but the realization remained wordless at the time and buried for years. After recalling examples of children singled out in school because they were poor, the journalist who transformed his newspaper comments: "At the time I did not make sense of these facts...; yet somehow they were there, in the back of my mind, like pieces of a puzzle that fit nowhere." Finding the words to bring it out into the open now, to be rethought and articulated, is a liberating experience. It is as

if the question of poverty is no longer relegated to a corner of their minds. Revitalized by the removal of these inner barriers, they can get back in touch with some spurned, hidden part of their souls. This is what lends credibility to the initial encounter so that it is not rejected as too foreign. “The Movement confronts you with things that you have always known,” says Harry Lennon, high ranking civil servant at the United Nations.

This reconnection leads our voyagers to turn their eyes toward their own world. They rediscover the fears, misconceptions and barriers that their world erected to protect itself from the poorest people, as well as the values of their world that are in contradiction with the exclusion of the poor. They also realize that all this is kept silent. Our voyagers now see the impasse. This presents them with a new choice: Is it useful — or even possible — to uncover and share these questions? Where will it lead me? Will this not be another burden on the poor, on the Movement? Will the people of that Movement understand?

Daring to espouse the hope of the poor: Recognizing one’s power

At the outset, the persons in the stories saw themselves as possibly lending a hand to an organization that helps the excluded poor, but not as able to play a significant role in improving their lot. Like anyone else they look for confirmation that they themselves can make no difference: there is nothing they can do; the situation is beyond their power.

Yet, gradually, if they choose to further the dialogue with this Movement, they learn to see the world through the eyes of the poor. At this point they become aware of the somewhat unreasonable hopes the poor place in them and in the society that excluded them. Their faith is troubling to comfortable cynicism. It is hard to refuse people who place hope in you. This hope helps them realize that they belong to many different civic or professional organizations, networks and communities, all of which de facto exclude the very poor. And as part of these collectives, they do have a certain credibility, authority or influence that might well enable them to take a stand. They *can* assert their responsibility to reject, and indeed, to counteract the exclusion of the poor from their midst. It is a painful realization. As the union leader admits, “I suddenly saw myself as someone of power.”

Suddenly, it becomes clear that there actually is a choice, a margin of freedom to take a stand or not. In any circle one belongs to, one may choose to act or not to act on behalf of the excluded. This, then, is another critical moment of choice, when each narrator carefully discerns and weighs the risks, and decides for him or herself.

“When I took a stand in the face of my community,” says the parish priest who defended an outcast family, “I had something on which to stand.” Over the years in the village, he had gained a capital of credibility and friendship. Indeed, to take a stand, the actors in the story have only one asset: the credibility and bonds they have in the community. It is this which enables them to challenge their peers and confront them with the reality that they exclude the poor. But by highlighting the consequences of exclusion — the suffering of the poor — by telling facts that others do not want to believe, they may jeopardize their credibility and run the risk of rejection. Not to do so, however — to remain accommodating and to muffle their indignation vis-à-vis the

suffering of the poor — may deprive them of the chance to touch others, to have an impact, and change an intolerable situation.

This dilemma is the very dilemma of the alliance with the excluded. It is the tension which no one can resolve for another. It forces each actor to pave an individual, original path. The energy to get out of this “impossible situation” pushes the ally to reject the status quo and to find the strength to act to transform reality and relationships.

From this point on, allies begin to travel a lonely, uncharted course. The stories show how important it is for an ally to establish a new kind of relationship with the Movement around some action or project inspired by the encounter and to benefit from its support networks. In this way, the path of invention, exploration, and solitude is balanced by the assurance that the adventure will always hold meaning for other members of the Movement, that the ally will never be totally alone. Allies know they will always be able to return to a safe haven, a place for dialogue, a network with which they can share difficulties, failures, and discouragement as well as success; with which they can find the means to learn together what the poorest people live through and hope; and with which they can plan and evaluate actions for their liberation.

3. The third crossroads: awakening to citizenship

Engaging in conversation

At this juncture, the actors in the stories have to decide whether to go beyond a personal stand and initiate long-term action to transform and mobilize their community or institution to fight poverty and social exclusion. In the stories, it becomes apparent that they knew what objective to pursue, but had no idea how to go about it. The first step is to try not to remain alone, but to find avenues for others within their institution to become aware of these objectives and of what the Movement has to offer. “I really did not know what to do, so I decided to talk to my group of friends,” says Robert Pendville, the European civil servant. The next step is to produce materials and devise means to present the suffering of the poor, or rather to translate it into the language and culture of their institution; that is, to formulate the aspirations of the poor in terms that have direct appeal to the institution’s highest values. This translation involves a careful effort to listen to both sides, to understand both worlds so that they will eventually understand each other. It is apparent in several stories — such as the one about the school, the electricity company, the European institutions and the university, that the effort of dialogue with various institutions enables the Movement itself to acquire multiple points of view, assume more complexity, refine its language and transform itself. In this way, what the allies contribute to the Movement is a true antidote to the dogmatism that often besets movements fighting for a just cause.

For this work allies first sound out a few colleagues in conversation, and try out on them the words that will respect both the unbearable reality of the poorest people’s suffering and the institution’s culture and ethos. With these colleagues, they experiment with public stands and events that can initiate conversation, and introduce new questions about the institution’s policies. As in a garden, they plant the seeds, loosen the soil and water the shoots.

All this happens out in the open — not behind the scenes, not in a clandestine manner and not by exerting pressure on key people. People organize exhibits, public lectures and press conferences, use bulletin boards, posters, make public sales of books and greeting cards, take a stand at public meetings or in front of the whole institution, publish articles. This is because poor people who do not yield to pressure do not have the means to wield it. Since it is more like the work of bringing to light those who have too long been hidden, it is done in the open, in public. Those who engage in it within their institution gradually become known as the local agents of the poor and of the Movement.

Rediscovering one's institution

Conversation inside the institution or the community about the population it excludes, leads allies to know their own institution or community better and to rediscover its roots. They soon find that the institution already has a history regarding poverty and exclusion, that it has already attempted to deal with these issues, and that there are persons within the institution who have experienced the impasse and know what it feels like.

This knowledge makes it possible to refrain both from attaching blame to the institution — a temptation that is likely to shut more doors — and from indulging in self-righteousness and smugness in place of discourse, particularly with those who may be grappling with these very issues day in and day out. Rather, they seek out the people in the institution who hold the key to acting against exclusion, in order to learn from their knowledge and their efforts — often unsuccessful — to connect with the poor.

All this knowledge is often unfamiliar to the institution as a whole and kept separate from its general operations, with no analysis having been made of it, covered up because of the sense of failure. Even successful efforts may have been ignored. Yet it is essential knowledge, because it shows that, informally, the institution has tackled the issue even if, formally, it has not acknowledged this. The clearest example is when the French electric power company EDF declared it had no means to measure how poor were the people whose power it cut while in fact its own practitioners, the local agents, did know, through their professional experience, who was poor among their clients: those who had their electricity cut for long periods of time and several time during the winter. Learning from its own staff enabled EDF to create an in-house indicator (length and repetition of cuts) that was later used to identify those clients and avoid power cuts.

This discovery is crucial: it reveals that the institution is not content with the status quo, and uncovers some of its hidden aspirations and retrieves its original roots in some often forgotten ideals and values, such as living up to its social commitment and not discriminating. Touching base with some of the higher institutional values that have been violated by the exclusion of the very poor, and acting instead to include them, is no longer a marginal issue but a means to reinforce an institution's core values, and strengthens it from within.

Experimenting with reciprocal learning

All these developments set the stage for joint learning for actors in different positions, some within and others outside the institution. There are at least three partners in this joint inquiry, bringing three different perspectives:

1. The excluded poor themselves. They contribute knowledge about how they live and see the impasse with the institution; they bring their reflection on the experience and suffering of exclusion, and what their expectations of the institution are.
2. The “workers in the field” inside the institution. Directly involved in the impasse in the course of their daily work, they contribute their ways of tackling it, their successes, their frustrations, dilemmas and aspirations.
3. The heads of the institutions. As makers of the overall policies and ultimate guardians of the institutions’ highest values, they contribute their understanding of how the impasse challenges and contradicts these values and the possible implications for policies.

For several reasons this kind of learning runs counter to most traditions:

1. People in extreme poverty are generally not seen as capable of providing knowledge and of advising on policies.
2. “Workers in the field” who bear the brunt of the dilemma are usually not asked to make their voices heard within their institutions, to share their experiences and to raise the questions arising from it.
3. Heads of institutions are reluctant to invoke the institutions’ founding values lest they be ridiculed as utopist, or criticized for not putting them into effect.

When taken separately, the different languages, frames of reference and types of knowledge that emanate from each of these perspective may seem hard to believe, meaningless or idealistic. However, when brought together in a joint process of inquiry, their respective credibility is restored as they gain renewed meaning and coherence. For example, “workers in the field” confirm that what the excluded poor say is true, the excluded poor are a living proof that the institution needs to live up to its highest values, and heads of institutions give new value to the experience of “workers in the field.”

To facilitate the encounter between these three resources, Movement allies learn to interpret from one language and frame of reference to another in order to produce a common language that will be humiliating for no one, will enable the different sides to start making sense to one another, and indeed to learn from each other.

At this juncture, the actors in the stories, each in their own way, create time and space for meetings and experimental dialogues to forge a common language on an ever-widening scale. The Movement itself provides events and spaces for encounters, as well as a wealth of successful and inspiring examples of dialogue occurring in other contexts.

This may result in a particular institution realizing that it cannot deal with the situation by itself, and therefore enlarging its scope and seeking out other institutions as partners. All the public utilities in France end up being involved in the government inquiry initiated by the electric company, and when the Swiss newspaper wants to change attitudes and practices to protect citizens, it turns to the court system, and it mobilizes other newspapers.

4. The fourth crossroads: daring to become political

A new interlocutor in the public debate

Eventually — more in certain stories than in others — the question arises of establishing formal contact with officials of the institution. For some of the people in the stories, this presents a new choice: whether or not to formally introduce the Movement, or a similar group, as an organization representing the very poor and their allies.

More frequently an institution chooses to change things by itself, “from within,” without the trouble of having a new player on the scene. Should real changes occur through such an initiative, the price would be that the excluded themselves, not necessarily knowing that they had contributed to it, could not learn how to repeat it. The institution, on the other hand, may solve technical questions in a number of ways. However, without a relationship being established with the very poor, no organic change occurs. It misses the opportunity to learn how to avoid excluding people.

What is at stake is whether the distinct, free and autonomous voice of those most affected by extreme poverty becomes heard within the institution. At issue here are the means whereby informal exchanges of knowledge as described above can become part of the public democratic debate. By seeking public space for the Movement within the confines of their institution, the actors take the risk of officially declaring themselves allies of the Movement. This transforms a private conversation with colleagues into a stand in the face of their hierarchy, into a political act with implications for the whole institution. It is therefore a difficult choice. On that choice depends the possibility of paving the way for the poor to be heard by the institution, not as individual cases, but as members of their collective.

Inviting dialogue

Meetings are then arranged with official representatives of the Movement. Somewhat unexpectedly, such a delegation is not made up solely of poor people. It is likely to include also people from within the institution, and others close to the poorest, who themselves live in poverty or are in daily contact with them. This mixture of people does more than represent the aspirations of the poorest, it also signals that dialogue is possible. It is a setting of the stage, an invitation to direct dialogue between all parties.

The institution may not immediately see the Movement as a partner to be taken seriously. Listening and understanding on the part of the representatives of the institution seem to depend on at least two factors. First, the questions raised by the delegation are taken all the more seriously when formulated in words that respect the institution, that refer to the institution’s own

expertise and action on the issues, and that are responsive to its values. Second, the representatives of the institution are more responsive if they feel personally respected. They will feel this if the delegation speaks in a human and forthright way about the suffering and expectations of the people excluded by the institution, with trust in the officials' capacity and willingness to understand and to recognize the human faces behind the issues. This affinity enables the officials to bring some of their own humanity, warmth and even tenderness into an impersonal, all-too-formal institution. Ivor Richard, the European Commissioner, described his first encounter with such a delegation as a deeply moving moment that remained present in his mind throughout all his mandate.

At best, this encounter intrigues the officials and makes them more curious about this unknown population — the very poor. Initially, however, it does not dawn on them that there may be a link between the very poor and the institution or that the institution can play a role in their lives. When the usual question of “What can I do for you?” is asked, the delegation must be ready to voice at least one request to which the institution officials can respond positively: “something they cannot refuse,” as the author of one story said, in order to make the relationship immediately useful. Clinching a first agreement is crucial to launching a joint venture.

The institution takes a first step: The expansion of learning

Initial requests often take the form of launching some joint inquiry to identify or clarify the nature of the impasse and of existing attempts to overcome it. Such efforts allow the institution to formally learn from its own members who know the issue from the inside, and to substantiate facts from the outside that it previously discounted. As we suggested earlier, these perspectives give credibility to one another and to the thesis that an impasse does exist. The interest raised by such a first inquiry, often limited to some parts of the institution, tends to lead to further inquiries, each more extensive and in-depth, and each involving higher levels and wider circles within the institution. Inquiry may even extend to other institutions, until a fuller picture emerges involving all the partners concerned. Then passing the buck is no longer possible.

In all the stories, in one way or another, this stage is reached when the question of the excluded is no longer separate from the general policy of the institution, or when conversations about the poor are no longer confined to a few specialists, but permeate the entire institution. It becomes more and more evident that the question at hand touches core values that underlie the foundation of the institution and bring people together. Grégoire, a child that has been excluded from all the schools, raises the question, “Is school really for all?” The electricity cuts in the poorest households evoke another question: “Are we a public service?” Maurice, the homeless man who hid his sickness to remain at work says to all the shop employees, “Are you rejecting the one who needs work most?” The Gypsy families that everyone wants to be expelled challenge the journalists who end up wondering, “Are we objective or partisans? Are we for the strongest against the weakest?” The families in a shelter who welcome the politician ask him, “What is the worth of human rights?” City Hall, the union, the European Union, the legal profession, the parish, the United Nations, the university — all at some point take the question to the top, because it touches on core values.

Joint action at last and new questions

Once the institution acknowledges and internalizes its own capacity to learn about the impasse, it is likely to see its responsibility to overcome it. At this point the Movement and the institution can decide on some joint experimental project, one that directly addresses the challenge of removing the impasse and will (at last!) have a direct impact on the lives of the families, by mobilizing the resources of the institution to reach everyone. Members of the Movement, and in particular the volunteers, keep their freedom of action to make sure that no one is left out.

Such an experiment sends a strong signal to both the institution and the excluded families and affects their working together. Experimental joint actions often lead to surprisingly successful results — such as the dramatic diminution of electricity cuts in one year or the rehousing of families living in a shantytown in the story of the partnership with the city government — and to new joint learning ventures in areas that, previously, could never have been explored, because the excluded and the institution had never tried to engage in common action. Having a positive impact on an institution is a new experience for the poor. It transforms their vision of that institution, of the world and of themselves. The same surprise and joy can be experienced in the institution, for which it is something new to successfully reach the poorest.

The new situation is likely to raise further questions and difficulties and to lead to a new need for inquiry and dialogue. The institution may then again call on the poor, which results in their organizations becoming increasingly visible and audible in the public arena as distinctive and intelligible partners.

Organizational transformations

As the process is repeated, it creates a tradition of mutuality and consultation, a culture of dialogue between the two parties, and, eventually, a joint history. When the institution understands the value of this process of regenerating its own internal democracy, when it understands the conditions and the price to pay, and the benefits emanating from success, organizational changes may occur. They will turn practice and tradition that guarantee continued dialogue with the poorest and most excluded groups into a covenant, such as the Movement's permanent consultative status at the United Nations.

Several stories show how an organization may transform and establish systems, organs and forums for no other purpose than to lend a permanent ear to the voice of the poor and excluded and to seek opportunities for meaningful dialogue with them. In fact, it appears from the stories that just to “give a voice to the poor”³⁴ does not satisfy the actors. For instance, Anne-Marie Toussaint, the Movement representative in the story of the school system refuses that the consultation remains at a level of testimonies from the poor. She is afraid that the poor might find themselves calling out in the wilderness. What does she want, then? She asks that very poor families and teachers come testify together of successful experiences of partnership. The organic changes that occurred in the regional school system reflect her wishes as well as those of Claude

³⁴ Much is said about having a voice or even “giving a voice,” but rarely do we ask who will hear. Democracy requires that everyone “has a voice” but also that everyone actually is heard; therefore, everyone must also “have ears.”

Pair, the head of the regional school system: What was needed was a new institutional organ whose mission was to constantly look for and learn from existing attempts at dialogue between the “excluded and included” as a point of departure for reciprocal learning and joint action. In several stories, institutions create new processes that will enable them to seek out and encourage these dialogues, just like “seeds of democracy,” in order to make them grow and to disseminate them.

A different view of democracy

This is a far cry from a vision of democracy in which only voting and elected representation count, or from the classic model in which a democratic society is shaped by people who organize around common interests to express their demands³⁵ and institutions emanate from the process to arbitrate between all the pressure groups. Institutions just have to wait for these demands to appear. The state and its institutions assume the inner conflicts and contradictions that individuals and groups do not want to³⁶.

So let us briefly outline the process that occurred here, which does not seem to be taken into account by political theories about democracy³⁷. One could say that first a tension and inner debate grows in the mind and heart of an individual, inspired by the encounter of excluded people and of activists able to establish a dialogue. This leads that individual to talk with other colleagues and eventually results in discourse that gains a foothold within the institution. Each new partner who enters the conversation contributes to creating a language and refining its quality until it no longer hurts, and is acceptable to all in the institution as well as to the excluded people. This crafted language will finally become a bridge over the previous silence and enable reciprocal learning.

The process seems to create the necessary conditions to develop a democratic conversation and create a public discourse to which all —the strong and the weak — can contribute and through which governments can learn from the people and people can learn from each other how to achieve justice.

This sheds new light on what nurtures democracy, and suggests new aspects of responsible citizenship: alliances across the frontiers of social exclusion with those who are silenced. Talking and forging a common language with those who might *not* have the same immediate interest nor belong to the same group can become a precious contribution to our institutions and a new resource for our democracy. And the democratic institution itself will become organized to seek out these contributions, these seeds of meaningful dialogues that can improve the language of democracy. We could even say that without this civic responsibility of all individuals and groups to create discourse with those who are left out and, more generally, with “the Other,” democracy has difficulty progressing beyond the laws of the jungle.

³⁵ Tocqueville, A. de, 1957, *Democracy in America*, New York: Vintage Books.

³⁶ Hobbes, T., 1996, *Leviathan*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

³⁷ Kahane, D., Struggles for Inclusion: Implications of the Arras Colloquium for Democratic Theory, in Tardieu, B., 1998, Including the Excluded Poor in Democracy: Constructing Dialogue Between All Parents and the School System, *Harvard University Center for European Studies Working Paper Series No. 68*.

SOME LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE CASE STUDIES

“Traveler there is no road, the road is made as you walk. Traveler there is no road, only your tracks, only the furrows on the sea,” said Antonio Machado. After having attempted to sketch what was common to the twelve stories, we would like to highlight some of the more elusive and surprising features of the work described in the stories, and draw lessons for future action, setting the stage for further inventiveness and innovation. These features will be presented from two different points of view that are constantly present in the study:

- The *point of view of the individual* or of groups who wish to act: This raises questions with regard to their ways of understanding, their choices of action, their civic responsibility, and the meaning of full citizenship.
- The *collective and institutional point of view*: that of a society that wants to be free of extreme poverty, and that of its leaders, who pose questions in the political realm on how public knowledge, discourse and action can mobilize society as a whole.

The tenor of action: beyond the infamy of exclusion

Before the allies could become effective, they had to mentally shift gears in terms of the nature of the tasks before them and the opportunities for action. They had to stop aligning themselves (or their institutions, communities and professions) on one side, and the families living in extreme poverty on the other. To draw such a distinction is to imply and reaffirm utter separation and stagnation.

Instead, they had to “metabolize” the idea of exclusion and its implications for action, interaction and reciprocity: if there are excluded people, there must be others — they themselves and the institutions, communities or professions to which they belong — who have excluded these people rather than sought ways to include them, as behooves their mission. The basis of their work derives from this understanding.

The transformation begins with insight into exclusion as a hallmark of extreme poverty, and with exposure to what it has wrought: When one encounters the poor as persons, as fellow human beings with infinite dignity, one also senses the dehumanizing way in which they have been treated. With this, a new understanding comes into play, an understanding of how it feels for people to be “despised and continuously reminded that one is an inferior and utterly useless being.” Manuel Castel puts it differently: “I see the emergence of a fourth world from Burkina Faso to the South Bronx.... People who are no longer exploited by the system, but are irrelevant to the system”³⁸ ... “It is there that the difference between poverty and misery lies.”³⁹ (Wresinski, 1984: 16-17).

This intolerable state of affairs is an onslaught on humanity itself, and to fight it is to reestablish honor not only for the poorest, but for all. All that is done by the allies — indeed, by any who

³⁸ In Schön, D.A., Sanyal, B. and Mitchel W., eds., 1999, *High Technology and low-income communities: Prospects for the positive use of advanced information technology*, Boston: MIT Press, p. 312.

³⁹ Wresinski, J., 1984, *Public Conference*, Archives in Joseph Wresinski House, 1J, pp. 28-33.

engages in the struggle against poverty — comes from this understanding. What is at stake is to take one more step towards becoming more civilized. The choice of actions and the test of their appropriateness is constantly subordinated to a quest to uphold human dignity. This is the context that lends coherence to each and all of the principles of action that follow.

1. Forging a language that initiates identity and learning

There is no lack of words to speak about poverty. Nor is there any want of labels for those whose name society does not know or whom it excludes. These labels, unilaterally minted, at best are incomprehensible to the people they are meant to refer to. Worse is when they are humiliating. Worst is when labeling people undercuts their capacity — already fragile — to think about themselves and their situation, and to put it into words. To be labeled when one does not have words seals off any opportunity to enter into dialogue, whether with oneself or others in one's community, let alone with the architects of exclusion. For those who practice exclusion, the labels are more of a definitive judgment than an opening for further inquiry. The story about social science says it, labels allow us to “file away” people. They allow us to turn real people into technical problems.

To transcend exclusion, one must be able to make sense to both the excluded families and the institutions that have excluded them. This is a real art, or rather a craft, to find words that neither deny suffering nor condemn anyone. The words must remain true to the gravity of the issue, yet humiliate no one. They must reestablish the dignity of the excluded while opening a path to those who exclude. This new language confronts without condemning, enabling each one to express oneself and learn from others. Thus, when Father Joseph tells Mr. Pendville, the high civil servant of the European Union commission who is late for a meeting, that “the poor can't wait,” he does not only relate to the indignities of their lives, which both can understand, but he also paves the way for change.

2. The best for the poorest, the best for all: an awakening of common dignity

There seems to emerge three main principles of action which we shall now describe.

Not for the poor alone, but for all

As we examined what individuals, communities and institutions were able to do for the poor, it transpired that in seriously engaging to free them from the dehumanizing trap of extreme poverty, the actors also freed themselves from being in a rut — from meaninglessness, boredom and stagnation.

Indeed, freeing the “non-poor” communities or institutions does not come only as an unexpected consequence of the work, it is deeply inherent to the action. Wanting the best for the poor means wanting the best for all. Establishing a relationship of tenderness, trust and high expectation with the very poor comes through acting with tenderness, trust and high expectation toward all others.

For the poorest people: Nothing shabby, only the best

This understanding provides the strength, confidence and daring to ask for only the best for the poorest people, and to dare reject those policies specifically “for the poor” that run the risk of degenerating into being considered “good enough for ‘them’” precisely because such policies are not the concern of the majority of the population.

Because of their history of exclusion and deprivation, very poor people are not always seen as having the same needs and aspirations as everyone else. Initially, institutions tend to ignore the hopes and aspirations of excluded families living in poverty and refuse to grant them what is seen as not belonging to their world. Hence, one immutable rule is never to accept anything offered them that is mediocre, and never to ask for anything for them that is less than, or inferior to, what anyone else receives: ask the best for those who have always been given the least. Wresinski strongly expressed this conviction, which has been described elsewhere as the only way to reveal the dignity of the poorest people and to help them move beyond the experience of humiliation and of constantly receiving society’s leftovers, as if they were human beings of lesser quality⁴⁰.

The stories we have studied here shed new light on this principle of action: it turns out that what was meant to restore the dignity of the very poor also awakens the dignity of the privileged.

This is best illustrated by Jean Andrieu, a French political figure telling how, at the Economic and Social Council, Wresinski recommended legislation for granting paid vacations for all, including those living in extreme poverty. At first, Andrieu could not believe his ears: “What next? They have no work, no money, no place to live and now they have to take a vacation?... This is totally mad.” But, he adds, the idea never left him. After all, he wondered, why not? Andrieu described this episode as a turning point when he grasped that people in extreme poverty have the same basic needs as his, such as having a break; the same aspirations as his, such as enjoying happy family times; and, finally, the same right to have them granted. And he concludes: “It was the thin red thread that you pull, the more you pull it the more the spool unwinds, and the more it unwinds the farther the path is opened.”

The stories contain other examples where the principle of “only the best” provokes changes: the Street Libraries, for instance, impress outsiders because they offer the children the best books, the highest quality paint, the most modern technology. In the same vein is the request that children of poor families visit the most interesting room at the electric power company, entering “through the big door,” which in turn will capture the attention of the company. The auditorium honoring Father Joseph Wresinski and the poor had to be large and central: “Rather nothing, than a shabby dead-end road,” writes a Movement representative to her mayor. It is the newspaper’s best art critic who is asked to write an article on a tapestry done by a Fourth World member. Robert Pendville is angry with a colleague at the European Commission when he does not receive the Fourth World delegation properly: “I refused to accept this and told the Director-General: ‘I am ashamed.... Such an affront to those who come on behalf of the poor, it is a disgrace.’” Finally, Annie Fifre, the union leader, refuses to rejoice that the least-paid workers get a raise, when the better-paid workers get an even larger one. She refuses to settle for what is

⁴⁰ Rosenfeld, J., 1989, *Emergence from extreme poverty*, Landover, MD; London; Paris: Fourth World Publications.

seen as “good enough for them.” This rejection of the “minimum,” of lack of ambition for the poor, is one of the features of the stories that has provoked thought and action.

All these examples are diametrically opposed to the common strategy of asking for the “minimum,” for “minimal rights,” or “rights for the poor.” This comes from a wrong calculation: that asking a minimum will be seen as a reasonable demand that is easier to meet. In fact, not only does this practice reinforce the humiliation of the very poor, but it fails to mobilize others. Asking “the best for the poorest” is breaking away from the idea that the very poor are a different kind of people; it is the realization that their claim for dignity is no different than anyone else’s. It is also a call for excellence, the mobilization of the best each person or institution has to offer, without which there is no chance to eradicate extreme poverty.

Authenticity

Asking for the best, however, is neither a slogan nor a calculated provocation to make a point. According to Jean Andrieu, Wresinski said what he said to be provocative. We think otherwise: he said it because the reality of people’s lives provoked him into speaking out. When he, and others in the stories, asked for the best, they were thinking of real people they knew and reacting to their concrete situations. If he asks for vacations for families in poverty, it is not a calculated provocation or manufactured surprise, but because he has in mind specific families totally exhausted by chaos and misery, and for whom a time of respite, of joy as a family, can be a way to survive as a family and not be totally destroyed. If electric company engineer chooses to visit the most interesting place belonging to the company and insists on asking for full authorization for the visit, it is not to be provocative, as he is a rather shy person, it is because he knows the children who are coming for the visit and their constant insecurity. As soon as they felt insecure, at the first hint that they might be unwanted or outlaw, they would be bewildered, their fragile ability to concentrate and therefore to listen and learn, not to mention to behave well, would break in pieces, and the whole visit might become a disaster. We could find in each story similar examples, similar explanations for action, rooted in actual situations. And, ultimately, that is what made the requests credible. The reality of poverty, once uncovered, is more surprising than any calculated effect.

Thus it is crucial to keep as a principle of action that any approach to an institution to create an alliance has to refer not to an ideology but to an actual knowledge of what specific people live, suffer and hope. Only that authenticity can open doors. To reach that knowledge and that authenticity, there are no techniques: nothing can replace the personal relationship, the human commitment to other human beings, true compassion.

Extreme poverty is harmful to people. Those who suffer from it are deeply scarred, and for them to heal — in both body and mind — only the best will do. Human dignity is at stake. It is not negotiable — not for the poor families, nor for anyone.

3. Opportunities for action: what margin of freedom?

The stories also reflect certain ethics of action, of which we will now mention three elements.

“With malice toward none”⁴¹

All our stories show that it is sometimes quite an effort not to give in to anger and condemn an institution or a community that seems to do little to alleviate the suffering of the poor and may even cause it. Beyond the shock of discovering the shortcomings of their own institutions or communities, allies find that if they can learn to understand the situation of these institutions instead of judging them, their purpose will be served more effectively. “If we had the patience for the rich that we pretend to have for the poor, if we would make the same efforts to understand them, there would be something changed in the world. We would love more, we would become more committed, and the world would change,” wrote Wresinski⁴².

Beyond power — a space for action

An essential feature in the stories is that, although the situations are intolerable and need urgent action, rarely, if ever, does anyone tell anyone else what to do or think: Wresinski exposes to Robert Pendville that the poor are not on the agenda of the European Union commission where he works. And in the court system story, a Fourth World Volunteer Annelise Oeschger exposes to her friend lawyer Myriam Grutter that a family is being judged without being heard by the court which is against their civil rights. They expose the situation to one who might be disturbed by it, but they never try to tell them what to think, what to do, or impose any ideas for action.

There are at least two reasons for that. First Wresinski, Oeschger, or anyone representing the interests of the poorest people, know very well that others have the power to reject them or to protect themselves from their requests. Forcing is useless. There is another, more subtle and fundamental reason lodged in the wisdom of “those at the bottom.” They know that they indeed don’t know what is to be done, or rather what the others can do in their position. They realize that they need the help of others but do not know what this contribution can be; only the others know what they themselves can contribute. The ethical choices of others and their compassion is “their business”⁴³. The challenge is not to curtail the others by defining in advance what they will do, to make plans that others will have to implement. It is rather to present the facts that create the dissonance, the contradiction in their model of the world, that will lead them to rethink and will open space where their actions and thoughts will unfold.

The principle of not thinking for someone else is an ethic that does not come easily. It is difficult because the intolerable situations that people live in, the indignation this inspires, and the ensuing urgency to change things, all tempt people to seize power to impose their own miraculous solution on other people. This leads to intolerance for those who do not submit and inevitably cuts into the other’s freedom, into the only space where the other’s indignation can grow, where exclusion and contempt of man for man can be eradicated. Having to live with these contradictions, the poorest people are masters in this wisdom. They know how urgent change is and that it depends on other people. Yet they also know that people are slow to change, and all

⁴¹ Abraham Lincoln.

⁴² Wresinski, J., 1983, *Les Pauvres sont l’Eglise*, Paris, Le Centurion, pp. 224-225.

⁴³ Levinas, E., 1985, *Ethics and infinity: Conversation with Philippe Nemo*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen, 1st Ed., Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

one can do is trust them⁴⁴. There is no other way. “Extreme poverty is man-made, only man can destroy it,” Wresinski said. It is not necessarily a desperate choice. As Martin Luther King, Jr., said and put in practice, “I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality.”⁴⁵

Interaction with the poorest, if it does not turn into indoctrinating them, offers the best education to learn how not to impose one’s views and solutions. It is that same ethic of non-power, in which one never utilizes or exploits the other, which also mobilized the non-poor in the stories. To the extent that there were strategies developed, they were always aimed at removing protection from dissonant and disturbing facts, removing barriers so as to put people face to face, and creating space for free people to learn and work together. People are not a means to an end, but agents of action. They want to be useful, not utilized.

Thinking about action and people together

During the seminar to reflect on these stories, as we were struggling with this aspect of the craft, Professor Donald Schön helped us to advance the description of this rather original way of thinking about actors and actions together. Schön asked: “Does your strategy consist of placing agents in the key positions of the institution, such as Robert Pendville in the European Communities?” “It is the other way around, Pendville came by himself and then we discovered together what he could contribute,” several voices answered. Francine de la Gorce, the first volunteer to join Wresinski illustrated this through a story she told from the early days at the camp of homeless families of Noisy-le-Grand near Paris where the Movement was founded in 1957. She told how amid the terrible despair of the camp, a beauty salon, complete with a beautician, was installed for the women. The families, who had been used to receiving only crumbs, were truly stunned. This simple act helped awaken their dignity, and the story became a symbol⁴⁶.

Less known is the way in which this action was “invented,” neither by chance nor by design, but by a clear vision of the deep aspirations of the people in the camp and true openness to anyone who wanted to help. A woman came to the camp to help out, and when Wresinski tried to find out more about her, her profession, or skills she could offer, she hedged. She was obviously embarrassed, saying only that her profession had nothing to do with the camp. Finally, yielding to his stubbornness, warmth and humor, she said she was a beautician. “That’s fantastic!” he shouted, “We will have a beauty salon.”

The installation of a beauty salon has been repeatedly admired and replicated, but few people know that was there no premeditated search for a beautician. It was the other way around. The

⁴⁴ It is worth noting here the contribution of children to the outcomes of the stories, the number of actions taken in their name and the number of references adults make to their own childhood. Indeed, children understand what is unfair without anyone needing telling them. To make change happen they do not impose, they do not use force (which they do not have), but they ask questions, and they place total trust in us to do all in our power to respond to them and to fix the world. These genuine questions and trust are hard to resist and are very effective to evoke engagement.

⁴⁵ King, M.L. Jr., 1964, *Speech accepting Nobel Peace Prize*, December 11, 1964, Oslo.

⁴⁶ de la Gorce, F., 1992, *L’Espoir Grande*, Paris: Editions Quart Monde, pp. 32-33.

idea is that people come first and ideas for action grow out of human encounter. “Everything was born from a shared life,” Wresinski wrote of that period, “never from a theory.”⁴⁷

In the stories, actions are “invented” within the tension between who each person is, and the ever-present ultimate goal of eradicating extreme poverty. Thus, no one is an underling; each becomes both founder of his or her action and creator of a piece of history that only he or she could have written.

Keep track: There is no path, “Only the furrows on the sea”

The actions are largely invented by people along the way. We do not deny that this freedom can be scary and warrants some safeguards, some landmarks, and a compass. New paths cannot be trodden, especially in a world as unknown and chaotic as that of extreme poverty, without once in a while plotting one’s position. The security the allies in the stories hold onto is the practice of reviewing past steps and reflecting on them⁴⁸. This process has personal and collective aspects:

- The personal writing of a story as it unravels, for the sole purpose of understanding the situation without needing to prove anything, helps “to make things more concrete, to become part of you; ... to see connections,” says one of the actors. In other words, it seeks to make sense of what seemed at first to be only chaos.
- Sharing with others who pursue a similar course, which offers the security of a non-judgmental community, helps people to refrain from self-justification and to confront reality, to look at the immense difficulties, the impasses, and the failures. This collective process helps them to better understand the situation, to discover landmarks on the road, to choose realistic goals and to discover and measure progress — as little as there may be — with the liberation of the poorest being the only compass for the journey.

Keeping track of the actions — personal as well as collective — as they develop enables people to keep track of themselves. It also allows a sum of experience to be constituted that can become a reference for others. As often seen in the stories, and most clearly in the story of the small business when the carpenter’s wife refers to Wresinski’s writing at the moment when she is most challenged by her failure to connect with their homeless employee, stories from the past of the Fourth World Movement and its founder are used by the actors in moments of confusion, discouragement and solitude as a means of widening their repertoire of ideas for action, and this provides them with the inspiration and understanding they need.

4. The meaning of reconnecting: the private and the public

The heart of the enterprise is to establish connections where there were none. This is borne out most clearly in the story of the regional school system involving the head of the school system, Claude Pair and the grassroots Fourth World volunteer Anne-Marie Toussaint. The story shows that when a teacher (or any other professional) excludes rather than serves children growing up in deprived families, he does not betray only them. He betrays also himself and, inevitably, his

⁴⁷ Wresinski, J., 1983, *Les Pauvres sont l’Eglise*. Paris: Le Centurion, p. 162.

⁴⁸ Schön, D.A., 1983, *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think on action*, New York: Basic Books.

profession and institution as well. Like any other teacher, he is able to ignore what this does to the children, to himself, to his profession, and to his institution only by ignoring and dissociating himself from the aspirations and suffering of the children and their families and by shifting the blame onto them instead of exercising compassion — that “fellow feeling” for their pain⁴⁹.

Only when Claude Pair personalizes the suffering of the children and their families, does he gain some freedom from the closed system of his institutional role. There, letting the tension grow, he made room for the dilemma between his acting as an individual and in his institutional role, and thus provided some freedom to rethink and transform. Only then does he make headway against this complex impasse. Only then can he help his partners to internalize the same tensions, dilemma and freedom to act. Let us have a closer look at the story.

Claude Pair hears the teachers say that families from the most deprived areas do not show an interest in school. This rings false to him: “I knew from my personal contacts that very poor parents did have ambitions for their children,” he says. “But I was not in a position to assert this.” The recognition of the distinction and finally the tension between his private self and his public role leads him to undertake two actions that result in the Arras Colloquium with parents in poverty and teachers that will trigger new understanding and policies: asking a colleague, a disinterested professional who represents the institution, to look into the question with all the relevant partners; and then suggesting that Anne Marie Toussaint be one of these relevant partners — someone who could be in a position to say publicly what he himself knew privately. His acknowledgment of the schism between his two roles, his affinity for both, his striving to reconnect them, and his decision to let the matter be publicly taken up by the institution was the motor of the whole action.

The same kind of driving force can be found in other stories: the tension between person-to-person, face-to-face understanding; human love; and the necessity for institutions to maintain professional rigor and laws that are safeguards of justice. As Jean Michel Aubry the carpenter says about Maurice, his homeless employee, who came to find him at the Commemorative Stone for victims of extreme poverty on the Plaza of Human Rights and Liberties where they had gone before as members of the same Movement: “He had not come to find the employer, but the human being, the citizen who, just like himself, refused to accept the existence of extreme poverty.” Nevertheless, even though it is as human beings that the two of them could reconnect, Aubry does not forget that he is an employer with all the opportunities, responsibilities and constraints attached to this role, and that Maurice needs these attributes as well to have employment and be recognized as a worker.

It is from this dilemma, this tension and this quest to reconcile the two poles that action emanates. It was put into words on October 17, 1987, at Father Joseph Wresinski’s last public appearance after having inaugurated this same commemorative stone, in his appeal to young people at the end of the first World Day to Overcome Extreme Poverty: “You will inaugurate this new route ... where justice and love will be reconciled at last.”

⁴⁹ Smith, A., 1759, *The theory of moral sentiment*, quoted in Himmelfarb, G., 1992, *Poverty and compassion*, New York: Vintage.

On the politics of action: context for success and public responsibility

1. What context, what resources for the allies?

In the stories, the actors succeed thanks to their personal resources, to the choices they made and to a certain ethic of action. But they obviously also relied on particular contexts, were supported by networks, and drew on other existing resources.

On the basis of the stories, there seem to be five resources that need to be at the disposal of individuals engaged in connecting an institution, community or profession with the poor families that it does not serve well or, indeed, excludes and ignores: the resources of time, of certain ideas about poverty, of places to meet with people in poverty, of opportunities for joint reflection on action, and of formal representation of the poor.

The first resource, time, is a private resource which mostly depends on the actors themselves. The other four were referred to during the seminar of reflection on the stories by Eyal Ben-Ary, professor of anthropology of organizations as the “infrastructure of action.” They are clearly external resources that do not so much come from any individual actor but are available in the public domain.

That these are needed can be understood from the particular experience of the Movement. As to *whether* and *how* they become available is a political issue with which each institution, and society as a whole, has to wrestle. Heads of institutions, political leaders, policy makers and opinion leaders have to wrestle with how to provide society with the infrastructure that will help it to mobilize its institutions, networks and members to combat extreme poverty and exclusion. More precisely, the question is how does one create the societal context, the support networks and public resources, to facilitate the actions of any citizen who sees it as his or her public responsibility to act against exclusion and extreme poverty?

Time as a Resource

A major resource, with which the allies were most unsparing, was time: the time they invested in their work and the time it took for them to see results. At the electric power company, for instance, it was about six years before “real action” was seen to have reduced electricity cuts to poor families. In terms of time required to see results, all the stories are similar.

This should not come as a surprise. It always takes time to change people, mentalities and institutions; it necessarily takes even longer to transform mentalities and institutions fashioned for centuries by certain attitudes toward extreme poverty.

But how can concerned individuals and groups understand that they should consider spending eight years to make some change in a given situation of social exclusion, when all the discourse about poverty only tells them about emergency handouts? How can they agree to take the time for reflection and training, when all they hear about are the urgent needs and when those who fund the action demand quick results? Why take on a long-term commitment that would enable them to see the signs of slow and real transformation on the part of very poor families as well as institutions, when they are told that only programs and policies with fast results are fundable,

because they will immediately satisfy the political constituency or the potential donors? How can they not be discouraged if they cannot find any long term vision, any lasting support, or any encouragement for their small yet real step, when the media mostly report and value dramatic rescue intervention? Is not the short-term investment in time made by our society a sign that it is more interested in showing what it does than in the real effect of what it does?

Let us repeat: no significant change can occur without a serious continuous investment of time. Haste has no place in reconnecting strangers and the estranged, in re-establishing severed human relations. The allies in all the stories attested to this: change took a long time — but it was time well invested. When they also took the time to write down what they learned on the way, they discovered how full, rich and rewarding the time invested had been.

The lesson for the public, the policy makers, civic leaders, and scientific evaluators is thus to give up the popular idea of “quick fixes.” Of course it is urgent to change and there should be no doubt about that. But emergency aid, soup kitchen, service to the poor and similar emergency aid have existed for thousands of years without challenging fundamentally the culture of accepting the persistence of poverty, nor transformed the relationships between benefactors and beneficiaries. Instead public discourse has to offer a vision that places greater value on less conspicuous, more painstaking efforts and steady progress by excluded and included individuals as well as institutions towards initiating interactions and establishing relationships. It means rethinking many of the ways our society evaluates and define success.

External resources: The infrastructure of action

The allies actively deployed at least four preexisting resources at their disposal, all part of the infrastructure of their action. These resources varied, of course, with the contexts of the stories. But their common denominator is that each fulfilled a distinct function essential to the allies’ work at a particular phase. Let us describe these function:

1. *Creating and disseminating ideas, knowledge and vision about poverty.* The initial awakening of the actors was to specific messages or ideas that reached them through different media and modes of dissemination. The messages included the idea that extreme poverty is a challenge to humanity and that they could play a role in its eradication. These ideas were pre existing their action and conveyed to them in different formats, emanated from different sources, and were supported by different media: publication of life stories or action stories, public campaigns, art exhibits, research findings, lectures, movies and public rallies are among those cited. Some had been created beforehand, they created more in the course of their work.

2. *Providing space for meeting on an equal footing with families in extreme poverty.* Another need was a meeting space where one could interact with the families on a free and even footing, where people could enter into dialogue, engage in common activities and enter into free association. Whatever the setting (public rallies, Street Libraries, Fourth World People’s Universities), each served the function of providing an opportunity to span the gulf of exclusion and discover the humanity of the people on the other side. It also allowed dialogue between very poor people and others that helped them articulate and gave credibility to their own thoughts on their situation. Any organization bringing together very poor people and people from all walks of

life can provide such space. Many such organizations exist, especially at the grassroots level; too few are known and valued for the particular role described here. The Permanent Forum on Extreme Poverty in the world is one example of an effort to seek out such small NGOs and individual initiatives and make them better known.

3. *Creating support networks for joint reflection on action and sustainable commitment.* Once the actors' involvement with the struggle deepened, they could and did avail themselves of opportunities to know that they were not alone, to avoid the usual activist burn-out, to exchange experiences, to train, and to learn from one another and from past experiences. The availability of some sort of host setting for any of the actors which fulfilled the function of support, reflection and learning is quite apparent in all the stories. Such support networks are based on experience, telling about actions and reflecting on them, actions which have been written down and made available for learning. Let us note here once again the prominent role of young people and children in many stories as engines of action. They are the ones who particularly need opportunities to put their generosity and ideals to work, and to participate in joint action, networks and learning about issues related to extreme poverty and social exclusion.

4. *Creating bodies for formal representation.* Finally, when it came to the phase of representing the aspirations of the poor more formally to an institution, the allies did not have to act alone but could rely on a formal structure that undertook the task of representing the cause of the poorest people.

As it happens, each of the resources — the means to disseminate the vision, space for association with the excluded, networks for support and learning, and a formal framework for representation — corresponds to one of the crossroads of the journey. Interesting as it might have been to explore this further and discover other functions, it seemed more significant to consider how, throughout the stories, each of these four major functions was taken on by a variety of organizations. The fact that so many organizations played a major role in facilitating action sets the stage for exploring further how the infrastructures needed by engaged individuals led these various organizations to refashion their roles, to provide these infrastructures for action and, in this manner, to engage the struggle against poverty.

An example of this is the evolution that took place in the city government of Bordeaux, in France. From financially supporting Fourth World actions, to asking a Fourth World member to stand for deputy mayor and, eventually, participating within the Euro-City network, Bordeaux became the leader in the struggle against inner-city poverty. These processes constitute what we shall now refer to as the "politics of action."

2. *The politics of action: who creates the context?*

On the face of it, it might seem that all four elements of the infrastructure that provided the context for success were provided by the Fourth World Movement under whose auspices the work proceeded. However, it is more complex than that. Exploring the question of who assumes the task of creating the context will lead us to the last, but not least important, discovery of our study.

A more focused look at the stories shows that from the outset some of the functions were assumed by other groups or organizations. For instance, in the English village, it is the Scottish Institute for Human Relations that first provides Paul Arnesen the priest with a support group. There, he could share his puzzlement after meeting a family that had been chased from everywhere, find sustenance, engage in joint reflection, and crystallize initial ideas for action. Indeed, many different organizations or affiliations — professional, civic, cultural, religious — are mentioned by the actors as having been part of their support networks along with the Movement.

Equally important is still another phenomenon: in the course of the stories, several of the functions initially assumed by the Movement or by private groups are taken over by the institution towards which the actor directed his or her action. For example, at the beginning of the school story, the Movement provides group support and the opportunity for teachers who are concerned about poor children failing in school to reflect on their practice. At first it is informal, then in a more organized format through the “Fourth World Education Group.” This group provided space for teachers to share their questions and frustrations, to learn from one another’s experience and, through Anne-Marie Toussaint, the Fourth World volunteer, to hear the families’ point of view. By the end of the story, these functions are largely assumed by the school system itself, whose head has decided to introduce a new curriculum for teachers that includes courses on the lives of very poor families and on how to create partnerships with parents for the education of their children, as well as spaces for teachers to share their experiences with children who had a hard time connecting with school. Furthermore, the institution established a permanent body responsible for seeking out and disseminating experiences of successful interaction between schools and very poor parents.

Similarly, in the story of the United Nations, making available a vision of overcoming extreme poverty is a function assumed first by the Movement. Then it is taken over by the United Nations itself when it discovered that it was its own mission to do so. It resolved that extreme poverty is an insult to humanity, published a major report on extreme poverty and human rights (Despouy, 1996) and promoted first a Day, then a Year, and now a Decade for the Eradication of Extreme Poverty. It also provides the means through numerous publications and distribution networks for extending that vision to all corners of the earth.

3. Revisiting the institution’s political role and discovering its generosity

The stories show that with the change in policy toward inclusion, some institutions introduced significant changes in their modes of operation. These changes, induced and stimulated by the work of the allies, were adopted in order to serve and consolidate the new policies. For some stories, like that of the school system, the Economic and Social Council, the hospital or the UN, one might speak in terms of institutional transformations. These transformations appeared when the institutions took over certain infrastructures that had been useful to the actions of the allies, in order to make them available not to a handful of activists but to anyone, and to give all the means to act for the same purposes.

The important point is that they did more than respond to the initiative of committed individuals. The ensuing transformation had some far-reaching, unanticipated results. The institution not only

became increasingly aware of and responsive to the plight of the excluded, but it also discovered that this humanization of its approach and policies contributed to its own institutional ethos, vision and modes of operation.

The importance of these developments warrants learning from the “craft” that brought about these significant changes — that employed by the heads of the institutions, the architects of the changes. There can be no doubt that, however laudable the achievements of the allies, without the engagement of their top executives, the institutions would not have widened their responsibilities to become important players in the fight against poverty and exclusion in the political arena.

In the spirit of this research, we shall now present certain of the “crafts” employed by the heads of institutions as the prime movers in institutional transformation. We shall describe first what it was that triggered their initial involvement in the field, and then how they learned from and with the allies to appropriately introduce the families into the lives of the institution.

What “caught the eye” of institution heads who became responsive to the allies was their realization that the allies truly have the interests of the poor at heart, do not use them as pawns, and succeed in establishing fruitful relationships with the poor that also enhance some of the institution’s core values.

Indeed, once they had seen how the initial bonds had been established, the heads of institutions looked for ways to make these bonds last. In our stories, heads of institutions understood that, in a democracy, it is the institution’s role to help create permanent conditions — components of an “infrastructure” — that are conducive to initiatives such as those of the allies. To pinpoint the areas in which the heads of institutions provided such conditions, and had the finesse and vision to understand the institution’s role as one that would encourage individual initiative, we might focus on the four elements of the infrastructure for action as described above that contributed to the allies’ success.

1. In terms of the *message* that initiated the work of the allies, once heads of institutions discovered how important they were to the poor as guarantors of societal values challenged by exclusion, they felt encouraged to use their authority to publicly acknowledge that extreme poverty and exclusion have to be overcome. In so doing, they responded to the appeal of the families and at one and the same time reaffirmed some of the core values of their institution.

2. With regard to the *provision of space* for dialogue with the families, heads of institutions came to accept that this could not occur within the confines of the institution because it could not provide the freedom that such dialogue requires. Not wanting to miss the opportunity to learn from these unknown families, they had to scout for meeting places outside the institution. This led Claude Pair, the head of the school system, to discover the existence of a local Fourth World Movement group as a resource and a partner in the transformation of his institution. This quest for successful dialogue between teachers and very poor parents was later institutionalized. In that sense, the institution can improve its capacity to be open to the outside and to learn from it.

3. To avail themselves and members of the institutions of opportunities for *sharing their experience* and learning about exclusion, institution heads saw that the creation of an internal group for discourse about social exclusion and reflection on their practice toward families living in extreme poverty would contribute to institution policies. The impact which the existence of such groups or opportunities for discourse had on the culture of the institution is illustrated in the story of the newspaper. The daily discourse initiated on poverty and poor people induced the newspaper not to publish the names of defamed families. This policy eventually was extended, and the newspaper instituted what has since become a law — the protection of the identity of all private citizens from publicity when allegations are made against them. Through the creation of such internal groups and learning networks, heads of institutions reinforce their internal communication, the dignity of all their members, and the institution's capacity to learn from the experience of its own members.

4. Finally, heads of institutions acknowledged the need to provide opportunities for *representation* to their least powerful constituents or clients. To do so they went beyond responding to those groups able to exert pressure on them: they sought out opportunity for dialogue with the weakest by giving special value to any efforts on their part to make their distinct voice heard in the democratic debate. Introducing such formal representation opens the door for all to be better heard and represented. This was the case in the story of the union, when André the cleaner became the first to represent the lowest-paid workers in the union. In that sense the institution strengthened its formal democratic processes.

Indeed, in learning from the experience of interaction between people living in extreme poverty and their allies, heads of institution became better architects for their own institutions, which essentially is one of their goals. As Jean-Michel Baer, a commission director says about the European Union, it refreshes the institution's mission, reawakens its founding values, makes it more of a learning body from without and within, and makes it more equitable. In this way, it discovers its own capacity to regenerate itself, and its inherent, often untapped, institutional generosity⁵⁰.

4. Any institution?

The question of how far these elements of action can be generalized has concerned us all through this study. Can this type of action — alliance building, sometimes also referred to as non-profit, public and private partnership — be done with any type of institution or organization when it comes to the poorest of the poor? Or to put it differently and from the perspective of the people in poverty: Can any institution or organization be a potential ally in their struggle for justice and dignity?

⁵⁰ While the compassion is defined by Adam Smith as “the fellow feeling for the other’s pain,” generosity could be defined as “an ever-present readiness to act for the sake of another’s pleasure or contentment without any expectation or reward...” (Rosenfeld, 1999, *Social work and social exclusion: From impasse to reciprocity*, 18th Annual Helen Harris Perlman Lecture, School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago.) To some extent, this is reminiscent of what Titmus described (Titmus, R., 1973, *The gift relationship*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.)

The twelve cases included in our research were chosen for the availability of the data and for their relevance to poverty: they are about education, work, unions, hospitals, public utilities, family courts, media, community life, research, and civil rights at the city, national and international level. The wide array of institutions involved in these themes points to the fact that most institutions and organizations in a democratic society are in one way or another involved in issues of poverty.

Yet the central aspect of the method is to call on the highest, often forgotten, values of serving all without discrimination. It seems then that only public institutions committed to the principles of inclusion and universality can be affected by the dialectic described here and engage in an alliance with the poorest of the poor. Indeed, public schools, a national public utility, the European Union, a national assembly of France, a city government, or the United Nations are all public institutions with universal commitments. Nevertheless, half of the institutions involved in our stories — a small business, a newspaper, a parish, a union, a law firm, a university — are private institutions, some of them for-profit enterprises or with targeted rather than universal scope. Yet, they too seem to have found in their association with the excluded poor a way to regenerate some of the highest values of their profession or mission. Indeed, whether private or public, all these organizations have numerous and conflicting values: norms of inclusion, non-discrimination, universalism are weighed against other norms such as short-term efficiency, abiding by majority rule, procedural fairness⁵¹.

Once again, it seems that no a priori characteristic can rule out an organization's potential for becoming an ally of the poorest of the poor. We should add that although an alliance with the excluded can revive and better balance healthy conflicts of values in any institution, some organizations openly preach discrimination and social exclusion and despise democratic values, and reaching them may prove too difficult. Others seem to have lost any sense of civic responsibility and appear to have as their sole goal profit-making. One may argue that interaction with the poorest of the poor may show them that this will make them lose out in the long run. Yet, it may be just as well not to look on them first as likely allies in the struggle against extreme poverty, but instead to start with those who show some attachment to civic responsibility and democracy, and who can understand that it is in their interest to make an alliance with the poor. Later it may be possible to join forces with several such institutions to confront more adversarial institutions.

CONCLUSION

There would have been no chance of engaging social institutions to respond to very poor families on a long-term basis if, in turn, this had not resulted in the families' contributing to the institutions. But what can excluded families living in extreme poverty offer to persons and institutions of the so-called "establishment"? In each of the stories reviewed in this chapter, there were moments of encounter with the families that triggered a lasting commitment to them.

⁵¹ Kahane, D., 1999, *op. cit.*

The essential features of the lives of extremely poor families — as the Fourth World Movement’s founder Wresinski often wrote, and all who came to know them felt — are their pain and suffering, the insecurity of their existence, their powerlessness and frailty. In most of the stories, learning these realities about the lives of the very poor families is what constitutes the moment of truth, that turning point on the road to working together with them.

The question is, why does the recognition of the suffering of the poor spark an alliance with them? One answer that comes to mind is that those who have spent their lives within the protection of established communities and institutions, conferring status and power, have been more or less insulated from their own powerlessness, frailty and suffering. It is as if the encounter with families in extreme poverty and the recognition that their human dignity remains intact in spite of the dehumanizing condition of their lives puts one in touch with unacknowledged, unexplored and fragile areas of one’s own soul. This reconnection with one’s own frailty unveils hidden aspirations and a rarely-examined “raison d’être”: to become more civilized, to find new ways of fending off brute force, and to contribute to the making of a more humane, less violent world.

Beyond these factors is the realization that an established organization can continue to function fully and effectively without insulating itself from frailty, its own and that of the families in poverty. Admitting this aspect of its existence opens the way for a journey of discovery, inaugurating an encounter with essential values that opens up a capacity for tenderness and real communication. It is in these terms that the journeys recorded by each of the persons and institutions could be undertaken by those who wished to recapture their humanity. Contact with the Fourth World Movement enabled them to see that the maps for the journey lay with the families in poverty, and that by contributing to and connecting with them, they would have a chance to be what they had always wanted to be. In fact, the relationship of continuous reciprocal contributions established between families living in poverty and the individuals and the institutions in each of these stories was sustained by these mutual exchanges, under the auspices of a civilizing Movement that took all sides under its wings.

The more numerous the institutions whose policies and structures reflect their firm political commitment to the eradication of extreme poverty and exclusion, the greater the chances for society as a whole to overcome them. As Jean Andrieu, the human rights leader, explains, only a “solid social base” can face up to a challenge such as poverty. It cannot be left solely in the hands of one or another private organization. “Everyone must join in.” The reason why everyone must join is not just for the benefit of the poor, but for all of us. We might need them as much as they need us. As Wresinski wrote: “The poorest are the very source of all the ideals of humanity, since it is through injustice that humanity has discovered justice; through hate, love; through contempt, dignity and through tyranny, the equality of all human beings.”

PART II – EXTREME POVERTY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

CHAPTER 5

THE VERY POOR, LIVING PROOF OF THE INDIVISIBILITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS

*Joseph Wresinski*⁵²

INTRODUCTION

Today more than ever before, human nature and destiny are the center of attention. For aren't they the real subject of all debates and struggles that focus on human rights throughout the world?

Yet forty years after the United Nations' Universal Declaration on human rights, achievement is more limited than many had hoped; more limited, too, than we had long imagined in our Western democracies. The world is not, as we had thought, divided into countries where human rights prevail and countries where they are less fully, or not yet, respected. The extreme poverty which has resurfaced in rich countries where its existence had been forgotten is now understood as a systematic violation of all fundamental human rights. There are therefore serious infringements of human rights in every country, which are not accidental but inherent in the way people organize their lives in the national and international community.

It is understandable that the National Advisory Commission on Human Rights, which was set up to examine a great variety of specific situations and laws, was not prepared to have it at that. Moreover, reflection on the very foundations of rights said to be inalienable was called for since it had not been attempted in present times, either in France, or anywhere else. I would like to try to contribute to that effort by setting out the main lines of what the poorest have taught me. I have had the privilege of sharing their lives and their struggle in Western Europe, in Africa, in the Americas and in the Far East, both as a man born to a very poor family and as a priest of the Roman Catholic Church. What follows is a sketch of a lifelong inquiry prompted by people deprived of all rights.

The very poor revealed to me the day-to-day realities of life which unite them across cultures and continents and which mean that they all live as outlaws, everywhere. These realities led them to choose the term «Fourth World» to designate themselves as a people outside all the worlds that others have fashioned for themselves. I also wish to bear witness to the active refusal to accept

⁵² Joseph Wresinski (1917-1988), a Catholic priest, is the founder of the International Movement ATD Fourth World. This chapter was originally prepared by Wresinski for the French Commission on Human Rights at the occasion of the bicentennial of the French revolution (Wresinski J., 1989, *Les plus pauvres, révélateurs de l'indivisibilité des droits de l'homme*, in Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'homme, 1989: *Les droits de l'homme en questions*, La Documentation Française, Paris, pp. 221-237.). The chapter was translated by Kathleen Fingleton and Charles Courtney. The text is reproduced with the permission of the International Movement ATD Fourth World.

that situation, demonstrated both by its victims and by those who have chosen to stand with them. This refusal is based, in all parts of the world, on a concept of the human being endowed with the right to responsibilities and to the means of carrying them out for the good of all. It is a concept of the human person who is indivisible and thereby bearer of indivisible rights and responsibilities. And it is a concept of the human person who is indivisible, and part of an indivisible humanity, whose members cannot be dissociated and in whose mission and destiny the poorest must participate.

As Michel Mollat pointed out, all major advances towards a greater degree of humanity have been achieved, through the centuries, by turning back to the very poor. I would add that, unfortunately, what is owed to the poor from age to age is soon forgotten. Today we seem to have forgotten that it is to the poor that we owe the concept of the human beings born equal and free and therefore entitled to participate as an equal, free and indispensable partner in the life of their community.

This conception seems to be acceptable to all people, whatever their cultural or spiritual allegiances. In the view of the very poor, all human beings are invested with the same mission, namely to advance the right of all to receive the means to be and to act in accordance with their true grandeur.

A PEOPLE DEPRIVED OF THE RIGHT TO INHABIT THE EARTH

From the very earliest time in my childhood to the present day, the poorest have always seemed to me to be families - a whole people - who were forbidden to inhabit the world of others, to inhabit cities, countries, the whole earth. For could we really use the term "inhabit" to describe the way they were obliged to huddle together, to dig themselves in, to find whatever shelter they could in a slum on the edge of which my own family lived in a hovel? These were people relegated to down-town Angers, occupying attics, a few rooms around a courtyard that never saw the sun, to a windowless alcove at the end of a hallway, to a basement never intended to serve as a home to human beings. By virtue of the very misery of their accommodation, they were regarded as unworthy to ever inhabit the neighboring community of somewhat less unfortunate families. "*Shut up. How do you expect anyone to take you seriously, living the way you do?*"

Later on, as a rural priest, invited to Sunday dinner with one of the more prosperous farmers of my parish, I saw seasonal laborers also invited to a meal but seated at a different place. They came from the rudimentary lodgings lent to them only for the duration of their contract, to sit at the foot of the main table, where only soup was served, while the guests at the farmer's side were getting a full meal. These were laborers whose housing, wherever they went, was always temporary and whose very identity as Sunday guests was in line with their identity as poor people, to be accommodated and fed at the least possible cost, for just as long as they were useful. These were men and families who, in winter, had to seek refuge in a cabin somewhere out in the woods, in a shelter of earth and branches dug into a hillside to keep the water out, or in an abandoned barn.

I finally arrived at the camp for the homeless at Noisy-le-Grand, a forgotten outpost where several hundred families with over a thousand children between them lived in “igloos” of asbestos cement which, elsewhere in France, were reserved for pigs. Even there, they were allowed to live only temporarily, for how could these “lepers” be authorized to reside so close to the city of Paris for long? There, too, I found families treated as objects of official measures of assistance and control, rather than as people endowed with rights. They were families identified only in negative terms: “*asocial*,” “*maladjusted*,” “*difficult*,” “*problem families*”; even the more or less neutral label “*homeless*” had finally been taken from them.

Then came the years when the ATD Movement began to spread around the world, and my travels took me across Europe and to other continents. Everywhere I found the same denial of the right of the poorest to inhabit the earth and to exist in the eyes of others: homeless families in major North American cities who had their identity as a family wiped out by being crowded together in «Welfare hotels», mothers and children on one side, and fathers on the other. Families in Latin America who had fled the countryside and famine to cling to the edge of a ravine near the capital. In some of these cases, births and deaths were not even recorded, since people should not dwell in these places where no residence was allowed. When tropical rains swept a cabin into the abyss, the children in it would have lived and died without ever having existed officially. Nor did the families living on marshland on the edge of a bay somewhere in the West Indies exist in national records or international statistics. They were committing an offence by being there at all, and when the bulldozer showed up to prepare the site for another purpose, nobody would ever know how many hundreds of huts and humble possessions were being reduced to dust. Nobody would know where these families, unwanted anywhere, were now roaming or hiding.

Nor would anyone ever know what had become of the poorest and sickest inhabitants of sub-Saharan villages ravaged by river blindness. Disabled for life by the disease of onchocerciasis, they were temporarily forced into exile with their neighbors onto more arid land which could not provide enough to feed them. What had become of the most fragile among these families who, unlike their neighbors, were unable to return to their villages, once these had been freed from the disease by a vast international sanitary program? We know that some were pushed farther into the bush, that others sought refuge in town: blind men asking for alms on Friday at the mosque, children living on the street.

What do we really know about these children who in all developing continents earn their own living, beg or steal their subsistence or sometimes that of their entire family? What do we know about the children who spend the night on the edge of a slaughterhouse and at dawn comb the city’s refuse? Should we not admit that they represent the inevitable, final outcome of the inhuman refusal to let the very poor inhabit the earth, an outcome for which we, in rich countries, are perhaps not always willing to recognize our joint responsibility?

Is there any fundamental difference between the extreme poverty of those who are deprived of their rights in distant countries and the deep poverty endured by a family in Ile-de-France (Paris’ region)? I am thinking of a family who in 1987 had spent the last four years huddled under the ruins of a derelict house in an abandoned, isolated village at the edge of the airport at Roissy-en-France. They had no recognized address, no work, no voting cards and no possibility of sending their children to school, yet they were hounded for squatting and the airport was demanding

10,000 francs in damages. The family was on record with the police, but did not even exist on the records of the school or housing authorities. In an effort to hasten their departure, the local authorities cut off their only water supply, which was in a nearby cemetery.

In short, the poorer people are, then the smaller is their hut, the flimsier their shelter, the more cramped and unhealthy their shack in the most vermin-infested part of a shantytown, the farther they are from any source of water, however stagnant and polluted, and the lower they must bend in order to enter the crowded living space where over-population rules out any possibility of a harmonious existence. Insecure living conditions generate unstable relationships; friendship among neighbors, love between couples and between parents and children become equally insecure. This is how disorder and violence spring up and how, little by little, through their misery, families become undesirable, a source of repugnance and fear for the surrounding society. If they haven't already taken flight, they are hounded down and they have no chance of gaining any right of occupancy, however temporary or precarious.

For the poor who have become homeless, at the end of the road lie the wastelands, the woods, the temporarily unoccupied city fringes where the bulldozer may well arrive tomorrow. At the end of the road we find squatting, illegal occupation, and for children, nights spent under the stalls of a market or in a cinema entrance and days devoted to surviving on the streets, in the car parks, or on the beaches of the big cities.

The end of the road is, above all, this slipping from an identity that is already negative to a kind of non-identity, an administrative non-existence, the disappearance from every register, every set of statistics. Human beings, whole families then take on the appearance of ghosts: they have been seen somewhere, but nobody remembers where exactly nor how many they were. For them it is the end of all hope of still being among those who once proclaimed themselves to be « We, the peoples of the United Nation, » that international community which chose the achievement of human rights as its ultimate goal. The loss of identity also sounds the death knell of any hope that, because one exists in the eyes of the world, one may join forces with others, in order to fight for one's rights together. The poorer people are, the more they are deprived of the right to inhabit the earth, and the more they need to join forces across continents. Yet, unfortunately, the poorer they are, the fewer rights they have, the less free they are to unite in common struggle. Without identity, they are deprived of a history of their own and excluded from the history of their people. They are prohibited from belonging to any group which, in the name of its past and present history, would have a common goal to pursue in the future.

These are the facts; but what is most important is the suffering that lurks behind these facts. Extreme poverty, since it cuts out all human rights, is an unbearable waste of human intelligence, inventiveness, hope and love. It means throwing away an incalculable capital of men, women and children who are banned from all justice, all administration, all communities and all democracy. And above all, behind the silence of our records and our statistics lie children mutilated in their heart and spirit, young people condemned to despair, adults driven to doubt their very humanity and human dignity.

For the very poor tell us over and over again that man's greatest misfortune is not to be hungry or unable to read, nor even to be without work. The greatest misfortune of all is to know that you count for nothing, to the point where even your suffering is ignored. The worst blow of all is the

contempt on the part of your fellow citizens. For it is that contempt which stands between a human being and his rights. It makes the world disdain what you are going through and prevents you from being recognized as worthy and capable of taking on responsibility. The greatest misfortune of extreme poverty is that for your entire existence you are like someone already dead.

PEOPLE WHO STRUGGLE TO CLAIM THEIR DIGNITY

It was in rich countries that we rediscovered the extreme poverty which humiliates people, destroys their identity and turns their existence into unending heartbreak. It is true that for several decades, the West had seemed not to have recognized that extreme poverty still existed within its borders. The very poor had apparently become so insignificant a minority that society at large had wiped them out of its memory. Yet it is also true that during the same period some men and women have continued to bear witness to a Fourth World, trapped at the bottom of the social ladder. They were the ones who refused society's forgetfulness. As citizens of their times they have brought about progress in two ways. First, we owe them the redefinition of poverty in terms of human rights. Second, they forged new links with the poorest, based on the recognition of both their hardships and their hopes.

It is obvious that our countries can no longer claim the success they thought they had achieved in ensuring inalienable human rights. Yet, in recognizing their failure, they have made significant progress in understanding the link between extreme poverty and the indivisibility of those rights. Let us recall here the definition adopted by the French Economic and Social Council in its report, "*Chronic Poverty and Lack of Basic Security*," on February 11, 1987: "*Situations of extreme poverty result from of a series of insecurities which persistently affect several areas of existence, jeopardizing a person's chances of reassuming their responsibilities and regaining their rights independently in the foreseeable future.*"

This definition is a milestone and, while there is still a long way to go before it will be reflected in political thinking and policy-making, its very existence represents an advance which cannot be undone.

Moreover, the establishment of more and more ties of solidarity and partnership with families who had ceased to count in the eyes of their country also seems to represent a remarkable step forward. Without it, we could have gone on for a long time ignoring both the suffering caused by the absence of all rights and the obstinate refusal of individuals and families to be deprived of an honorable identity. By continuing to reduce them to silence, we would have failed to understand that their very existence is a cry for help. The renewal of these special links, even if for the moment they are maintained only by ordinary citizens and their non-governmental organizations, means that our renewed efforts to establish human rights must begin with the poorest. We are bound to do so because they, who have been cheated of their identity as human beings entitled to rights and liberties, are the ones who have most to teach us. Furthermore, we now realize that they themselves are our most important allies in this new struggle, because they are the first to resist their exclusion and to understand the conditions under which it can be reversed.

In the member states of the European Community, when families are deprived to the point where they can no longer buy shoes for their children or detergent to wash their clothes, their acts of resistance often remain invisible to our eyes. How many times have I met men who no longer dare to present themselves at the employment agency because even their appearance precluded them from obtaining a job? I have seen them working for a pittance at filthy, illegal jobs (cleaning, digging, carrying loads far beyond their strength, rat-extermination...), crying with shame unknown even to their families. And do we realize how much courage it takes to endure the inspections and the unending question about one's own and one's family's private life which dependence on social assistance entails? Who, among the poorest, has escaped feeling that no one believes him? What man in deepest poverty has never been accused of playacting, what woman has never been told that she was making up a story when going through the inevitable administrative process to receive aid? What parents have never been suspected of having ulterior motives in not sending their children to school, when in fact they could not give them the breakfast they needed to walk the four kilometers to school from their rundown housing estate deprived of a school bus service? What children from the Fourth World have never been called liars for telling the teacher that they stayed home to mind the smaller children because their mother was sick? What children in poverty have never been overcome with shame, because a teacher took it on herself to hand them clean clothes in front of their classmates?

Yet, sooner or later, the children return to school, the men go back to their distasteful jobs and the women turn again to the social services or the parish aid society. Even if nerves occasionally crack, or if some turn in despair to violence or drink, in no other section of society have I ever witnessed such an urge to do the right thing, so many failures for want of knowing how to do things right and so many efforts not to remain beaten for long. How can these families, with their obscure existence, devoid of any outward sign of dignity, owning nothing and finding it impossible to maintain any family or community life, avoid resigning themselves to despair and hatred? Knocked down and humiliated to such a degree, why do they not give up altogether? Yet every day in the run-down apartment buildings, the streets, the housing estates of the underclass, we see people get on their feet again, families take a new lease on life and parents face up to their difficulties again. To the rare onlookers who express admiration, they say that they do it "*for the children.*" In a lower voice some will add: "We are human beings after all."

Are things any different for the very poor in developing countries? So much has been said about apathetic populations who could not see where their interests lay, imprisoned as they were in cultures opposed to change. On our part, we have been witnesses to the contrary far too often to believe that human beings anywhere, however poor they are, would be capable of resigning themselves to extreme poverty as their natural lot. True, we have seen families and entire villages hanging on to their ancient farming tradition which exhausted the body without providing enough food to eat. Yet, they did so not because they were opposed to change, but because no one guaranteed them that change would not plunge them even deeper into irrevocable poverty. We have seen mothers in sub-Saharan shantytowns fill the mouths of their newborn babies with pap early in the morning to last them through the day, while they walked barefoot for miles themselves to find some sort of work in town. These mothers refused outright to leave their children in orphanages, because they knew only too well that they would never get them back again.

As one woman told me, *“The poor have to work without skills or trades. And they live only because they don’t want to die. But that isn’t really living life, for life isn’t like that...”* So what does she think life ought to be? *“Life is never having to beg; it is being respected and being addressed with dignity. When my boss insults me, I don’t say anything. I just remind myself that the hand that gives is always above the hand that receives. I stay quiet for my children’s sake. But my boss isn’t God. For God knows who I am.”*

The international seminar on *“The Family, Extreme Poverty and Development,”* held at UNESCO in June 1987, asserted that the poorest around the world stayed alive essentially through their own efforts and through the support of their fellow citizens and small local NGOs who were on their side. It was this, perhaps clumsy, ineffective, empty-handed but infinitely persistent refusal to give up, which was proclaimed before the major inter-governmental agencies. The same seminar proclaimed the absolute necessity of respect for all human rights and the extent to which they are all interdependent in the lives of the poorest everywhere in the world. Even if in theory they have political freedom, the illiterate, the long-term unemployed and families entirely dependent on welfare are politically helpless in industrialized countries. Similarly, freedom of opinion, of expression and association are a dead letter for families who live on the edge of deserts in developing countries, overwhelmed by sickness and poverty and getting a meal only once every two or three days.

The existence of the poorest on all continents proves that to grant civil and political liberties without providing the practical means to exercise them may well be worse than to deny them altogether. To grant them simply means to deepen the isolation of the poorest and to humiliate them for not behaving like free citizens, when that is what they are entitled to be. It is a way of binding them hand and foot to the whims of those who have the wherewithal to exercise their freedom. Similarly, to see oneself arbitrarily allotted from above a meager income, any kind of unpleasant work, any miserable housing, without being in a position to voice one’s opinion, to make one’s own choices, to negotiate or to refuse an offer, means being reduced to the status of a second-class citizen. In one capital city in Western Europe all families who are without employment, without resources or who are receiving the minimum guaranteed income from the State are relegated to the derelict quarters of the city. Elsewhere, authorities automatically split up homeless families or force them to move into apartments without proper sanitation which are unfit for family life. What is the meaning of the freedom to choose one’s residence or the freedom of movement for people in extreme poverty, whether they live in the North or the South?

Judging from what these groups teach us, the very poor pay for the rights which are accorded to them piecemeal with an increased load of humiliation, dependence and contempt. *“Could they not maintain the wells and tractors that we provided?”*; we ask, forgetting that in regions ravaged by famine we also need to provide the people with the adequate means of making new ways of agricultural development their own and to offer them the chance to make their own choices. We readily think that *“those people have no political sense,”* when inhabitants of the poorest parts of European cities abstain from voting. This is an accusation that the people themselves cannot answer, for in their areas the schools have been under-equipped and overcrowded for generations. Many adults cannot read the political platforms; in any case, their opinion is not asked for when these platforms are being drawn up.

For the poorest, it appears that only a campaign to have all human rights respected can safeguard their human dignity. Is it not precisely our preoccupation with the achievement of now one category of human rights, now another, that has made us lose sight of what ought to be the very purpose and *raison d'être* of all these rights, namely, the recognition of the inalienable dignity of every human being? What other reason or excuse can there be for our societies allowing some of their members to be exposed to a destructive misery beyond poverty and life's uncertainties and failing to mobilize all their resources to put an end to that disgrace?

A VISION OF HUMANITY AS THE SOURCE OF RESPONSIBILITIES AND RIGHTS

Presenting extreme poverty as an issue to be taken up by the defenders of human rights was, as we have said, an innovation. It did not fail to surprise the public in our democratic, Western countries. The experience of the French Economic and Social Council made that clear to us. In line with its terms of reference, the Council chose to consider and give the government its opinion on an economic and social reality which the nation was finding increasingly disturbing. Logically, its analysis led it to ask whether the inalienable rights guaranteed by the Constitution were actually being applied; of necessity, the existence of extreme poverty called into question the proper functioning and even the very authenticity of our democracy. The Economic and Social Council therefore called for further consideration of the matter and an improvement of the guarantees offered. Today, we can see just how profoundly that demand upsets certain well-established ways of defining and defending human rights.

In France, no doubt, as in the rest of the European Community, we were entitled to feel reasonably satisfied with our achievements in implementing the 1948 Universal Declaration. In the field of civil and political liberties, in particular, we felt we had successes to our credit which were above all reproach. And then out of the very heart of our democracies these questions suddenly arose: For whom had these liberties been recognized? Why not for everybody? How can we explain the outlaw situation of the very poor? And if they continue to be excluded, have we really moved on from a society of privileges to a society of human rights? The Economic and Social Council affirmed, proof in hand, that the poor were still with us; but it also demonstrated that the most deprived of our fellow citizens, because of what we were putting them through, were witnesses to all our deviations from our convictions, our ideals, and our declarations.

Here was a disconcerting conclusion which raised another disconcerting question: Had we been right in asserting that there existed a certain hierarchy among rights which had all been declared equally inalienable? Was it reasonable to distinguish civil and political liberties as having priority and being in some way nobler than other rights? Were they really easier to implement than economic, social and cultural rights, the state supposedly merely having to abstain from interfering in order to allow every citizen to enjoy them? Had we taken the right line in creating a division within a set of rights which our governments in the United Nations' General Assembly had declared indivisible and interdependent?

In the face of these questions, which were disturbing even for the most sincere defenders of human rights, we could not expect rapid changes. How could we change the course of history which had led countries to cross swords in the United Nations' Commission on Human Rights on

the priority some wanted accorded to civil and political liberties and others to economic, social and cultural rights? In that forum, as in our national and European bodies, a consensus on dealing seriously with the topic of “extreme poverty and the indivisibility of human rights” remains difficult to achieve. At the rally of defenders of human rights held on the Plaza of Human Rights and Liberties in Paris on October 17, 1987, nearly one hundred thousand men and women, poor and better-off, from all backgrounds, did indeed declare that extreme poverty was a violation of human rights. Some fifty non-governmental organizations, of a variety of allegiances, came together that day to back the very poor, for whom October 17 is now a date which gives real significance to their sufferings and to their struggle. It was certainly a step forward, perhaps a new departure; yet, after this event, everything still remained to be done to strengthen awareness and translate the alliance with the unemployed, the illiterate, the indigent, and the homeless into concrete action.

This slow progress, inevitable as it may seem, is perhaps due in the first instance to our lack of experience of what life is really like for those whom excessive poverty reduces to inescapable dependence on the goodwill of others. Our society as a whole has lost contact with that experience and perhaps we no longer know what it means to have no concrete means of making oneself heard, of proclaiming one’s existence, of demonstrating one’s humanity and defending one’s cause.

But if we were able for so long to ignore the experience and thought of an entire segment of humanity, including citizens of our own country, are we really serious about knowing the true basis for human rights? In the name of what definition of the human being does a person have absolute rights? On what basis can those rights be withdrawn? Are these not the basic questions addressed to our declarations and conventions by those who have nothing but their humanity and not a single visible supplementary achievement to offer in return for the rights granted? Why are we declared to be born equal and free? Since the rights recognized on that assumption are systematically denied to some, is it our opinion that there are sub-humans among us, human beings born or progressively led to be less equal, less free, less human than others? Does humanity produce its own refuse, as we have heard it said in some countries?

During the International Year of the Child, we raised a similar question regarding children’s rights. No doubt, it was necessary to reaffirm that children have inalienable rights. But was it not even more necessary to remind ourselves of the reasons for that? Is the notion of the child we wish to defend unequivocal and carefully argued? Do we know the child, do we respect the child as such, for what children mean to humanity, today and tomorrow? Doesn’t the everyday reality of children’s lives in the Fourth World oblige us to ask that question, since our attitude and our behavior sometimes give the impression that for us such children, to take the extreme view, should perhaps not come into the world at all?

“Seeing how our children are treated, what respect do you have for them, what respect do you have for us as parents endowed with rights?” That was the question later put by Fourth World families at the seminar on *“The Right of Families to Live in Dignity,”* organized at the Council of Europe in 1984. To go to the heart of the matter, what is our concept of the human being? That is the first question which people overcome by misery put to us. Furthermore, through their life experience, they challenge the concept which apparently enables us to ignore the

indivisibility of their fundamental rights. We have seen how they demonstrate the interdependence of those rights. Yet, their anguish does not come so much from the mechanisms of that inter-dependence which imprison them in an existence virtually interwoven with unbearable deprivations. Their suffering, as we have said, stems far more from the indifference of the world around them which does not care to know or understand, although the fate of flesh and blood human beings is at stake. *“Aren’t we human beings too?”*

That is an unsettling question for those who are prepared to listen, for it is dictated by a concept of the human person which the poor themselves refuse to relinquish. If we would only listen to them, they would remind us of what we appear to have forgotten : that «every man is a person», as our African friends put it. «Zo kwe zo,» and therefore human rights are to be defended not in the name of some principle of law but in the name of the human being.

We have seen how, against all probability, the refusal to be treated as something less than human springs up again and again in areas of extreme poverty. *“It isn’t fair”*... How many times have we heard those words repeated like an age-old lamentation! *“Father, is it fair that they refuse me housing?”*... *“Father, it’s true that I can’t read but is it fair that at school they don’t want to hear my views about my children?”*... *“Father, is it fair that they put me in the orphanage, because our shack in the shanty town burned down and because my mother has no place to live?”*... And far too often that question is followed by the heartrending observation: *“We are not dogs, after all.”*

Is it not because we have forgotten that «every person is human beings » that we have left part of humanity without the means to demonstrate its dignity, its capacity for thought and its usefulness for others? In any case, it is in those terms that, as a priest, I am forced to put the question to myself and to my Church. My role is not first of all to find out whether or not the world is true to its declarations on human rights. My first duty is to do my share to ensure that our declarations and the way we apply them are in line with God’s view of humanity. I need to ask myself if, for me, someone rendered unrecognizable by misery remains a full, intact human being, a child of God by birth. I must know if the way I try to uphold the rights of the poorest in my own life, in my priesthood, in my Church and in the world at large contributes to enlarging their liberty, their freedom to think, to believe, to act for themselves but also to act for the good of all. Are my life, my actions, my words conveying to them the message that they are free and that they are capable of choosing to be privileged agents of divine as well as of human justice?

A Christian cannot conceive the human being other than as free, unique, and indispensable to the common purpose. For a Christian, there can be no such thing as losing your rights because you lack the resources to show yourself equal to others. A Christian’s and the Church’s first duty is not so much to defend human rights, much less to defend them in the name of the law. Our duty is to defend the human being by restoring their rights to those whose very humanity has been called into question.

The Gospel tells us that God has the right to know that all His children are loved by their brothers and sisters. And this is where the essential question comes: Whom should I love before all others? To whom should I first offer that overflowing love which will restore his condition as an equal child of God? In the view of the Gospel, there is no doubt whatsoever that it is to that

man, that woman, that child, that family in the deepest deprivation, lacking our education, our culture and therefore our way of worshipping God. Those are the people whom we must treat as another self. For it is in them that the rights of God are violated because we no longer recognize them as our brothers and sisters. Dare I add that all the declarations of human rights made in modern times seem to me to be an interpretation, a reflection of what Jesus Christ lived and continues to live to fully? The Gospel, perhaps better than any of our treaties and declarations, teaches us the indivisibility of rights in the name of that indivisibility of humanity itself, which at certain points in our history we called fraternity.

Moreover, couldn't all churches, all religions, all people of goodwill be unified around this mission of recognizing every person as a brother or sister, defending each person for the sake of his or her human condition, and restoring the rights to the poorest simply because they are human? Who would not adhere to the exhortation: *do unto others as you would have them do unto you*? Is fraternity not what all people seek and what all people equally need?

All people of goodwill are brought face to face with their God, with their convictions and beliefs, when they come into contact with extreme poverty. Who can accept that the father of a family should be unable to read and write or that a poor man, especially a young one, should be condemned to unemployment for lack of education? No one can admit that the mother of a large family should be without the resources to take real care of her health, that she should not have the money to feed her children herself. No one with a heart can allow children to be humiliated in school because of the poverty of their home; nor can one accept that whole families should be obliged to live as if happiness was withheld from them forever.

Here we touch moreover on another aspect of our concept of each person as the holder of responsibilities to which he aspires and which confirm his quality as a human being. Isn't it precisely in order to carry out these responsibilities with dignity that a person claims rights? The indivisibility of rights and responsibilities is also something that the poor of the world remind us of in practical, irrefutable terms. Surely it is by taking the poorest as partners and allies that we would have the best chance of advancing in our understanding of this indivisibility, not just in the life of each individual person but also in the overall existence of the whole of humanity. They truly demonstrate that it is not just the individual person but humanity as a whole which is indivisible, linked by one and the same destiny.

A new and unprecedented application of human rights would be achieved by taking the very poor as our partners. Beyond that, it would surely be a way of returning to the deepest sources of all our declarations which always remain only a provisional expression of humanity's never-ending effort to understand itself better, a conceptual approach which is destined to go on developing. No people, whatever its culture or history, can be excluded from that endeavor.

RESTORING HUMAN RIGHTS TO THE VERY POOR: A UNIVERSAL MISSION

Experience in the field on every continent has taught us that trying to rediscover the sources of human dignity comes naturally to men and women of all cultures and beliefs. Wherever people are defenseless against the anguish and suffering of extreme poverty, wherever they are living in despair, unable to make themselves heard, there are other men and women prepared to put themselves at their service, ready to listen to their outcry, ready to respond to it and to make others listen too. Wherever there are entire populations gnawed by hunger, ashamed of their own ignorance, humiliated by unemployment, worn down by illness and weakened in body and soul by poverty, I have seen others join them in their struggle to obtain redress.

I am not talking here about government support, for it is precisely where that support is lacking, where official ties have been broken and people are excluded from both the national and international community, that fellow citizens rise to their feet, and local associations are created. These signs invariably appear when people have been excluded from our policies or budgets, when they only have one another to depend on. To disown human beings, families, a whole neighborhood or village in this way is intolerable, and when the public services have given up, ordinary people take the lead. This is a fact to which I have been witness since my childhood, in every country, rich or poor, and in every culture. When I ask people, be they Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Animist, Hindu or Buddhist, what makes them refuse to accept extreme poverty, their answers are not necessarily those dictated by their religion or precepts inculcated by tradition. Tradition throughout the world, generally regards alms or assistance as the proper response to those whose appearance has been altered beyond recognition by poverty.

The answers that I hear throughout the world are of a different nature: *‘Human beings weren’t created to live in such abjection’... ‘That isn’t what God would have wanted’... ‘I cannot accept that they should have to live in shame’... ‘As a woman, I cannot allow other women to live in such poverty.’* The mother of a Muslim family somewhere in Africa told me: *‘Have no fear, wherever people seem to have been completely abandoned, you will always find someone who comes to their aid.’* She added: *‘When there is no one else left, there will always be a nun.’*

Why this persistence on the part of individuals, when the community has abandoned people who seem to have lost all signs of humanity? *‘Because they are human beings’...* This is what I was told by the state social services in Poland: *‘They have no jobs, they don’t educate their children properly, and they take to drinking, but everybody can be saved.’* One may certainly question the severity of the measures taken by these services in order to *‘save’* families living across the river in a run-down area of Warsaw, but at least we didn’t hear the words *‘beyond redemption,’* so often used in other places. The idea that people could be *‘beyond redemption’* has been expressed in richer countries, perhaps in desperation. For is it not in these countries that aid has been attempted in all of its most constructive forms, both public and private, without ever managing to eliminate extreme poverty? However, it is in these countries too, that when all other bridges have broken down we find fellow citizens, often families hardly less poor than those they try to help, who will not accept that society should condemn any household to such an inhuman existence.

Indeed, in our experience, it is mainly the poorest themselves who are that last rampart, refusing to see one another sink into despair. But there are always people in the neighborhood who will support this refusal. These efforts, it's true, usually meet with little success, for how can abject poverty be combated simply by personal goodwill? What does count, however, is the idea that poverty "*isn't fair*," that people weren't created to be dehumanized in such a way. The universal feature of poverty is that people are deprived of the responsibilities and the fundamental rights usually acknowledged in their particular culture. And in every culture, on every continent, there are men and women who find it both abnormal and inhuman that entire segments of society remain defenseless against such extreme poverty, or even worse, that they should be excluded because they live in such deprivation. There are people everywhere who echo the feeling that the poorest have about themselves: "*It's not fair, for I'm a human being too.*"

This feeling explains the birth in the 1960's of what has become the "*Permanent Forum on Extreme Poverty*," founded by the ATD Fourth World Movement. It brings together people from all over the world, allowing them to learn from each other's experiences. Nobody gives lectures or expounds theories. Each member tries, within the framework of his culture, his individual situation and his religious convictions, to support children, young people or families living in extreme poverty in his own country. People acting individually, soon are no longer alone. In the Forum they discover ways of establishing small non-governmental organizations within the community they are trying to serve. That, too, is significant. We are not dealing with exceptional people here, but with ordinary citizens, capable of bringing together others who share their views as to what constitutes a human being.

One may certainly ask in what way this approach relates to human rights as we know them in our democracies. It is an approach which is making its way, quietly no doubt, and without so far provoking any spectacular changes in the national or international communities. Yet, UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and the European Commission are represented at all the meetings where these defenders of humanity have a real voice. That does not mean that these major bodies are all at once automatically in a position to reach the poorest and change their situation. Yet they are all involved in a process which I believe is essential for real progress in the field of human rights. For it signifies a return to the source of all rights, a rediscovery of mankind, in particular of people deprived of the means to show that they too are human and capable of partnership in the context of the culture of their time and place.

It is true that in the Western countries we tend to regret the often limited importance attached to declarations and treaties in other parts of the world; but have we not been rather hasty in our desire to see all nations adhere to them, no matter what their history or their culture? Have we forgotten the time and experience that have been required in our own countries to build up nations sufficiently united to create democracies and thus embark on establishing equality and liberty for all? Was it wise to believe that only economic reasons could justify certain denials of human rights elsewhere, just as we take the view that only economic reasons could explain obvious failures to achieve full human rights in our countries? Could not the discovery that extreme poverty denies all rights, because it denies the human person, be used as an opportunity to take up the ideal of inalienable rights at its very source again, through co-operation between rich and poor nations and between all cultures?

Is this not the chance the very poor offer us to help re-focus all our struggles and to ask ourselves the real questions once again? They bring it home to us that the question is not what economic resources are available for the implementation of our declarations, but whether we believe that every person is worthy of assuming responsibilities for the good of others. That brings us to the issue of a person's right to share the responsibilities and the rights which the society he or she lives in confers on most of its members. Then the question of inalienable rights for all clearly arises. However, it is only at the end of an examination of the lives of the poorest that human rights can be fully recognized. Is that not an approach worth adopting, since history tells us that imposing human rights as a prerequisite poses a real problem in many cultures throughout the world?

This was the line of reflection followed at a seminar of the Forum meeting at UNESCO in 1987. The delegates underlined, in the very first place, the right of all people, in particular the very poor, to be recognized and to have proof that they are recognized as human beings, the right to have others join them to show fraternity by sharing their life and their struggle. This is what we call "*human beings investing in humanity*": "*If you have lost faith because you have experienced so much neglect, I will come to your side and show you that you are my brother, my sister, worthy of confidence and responsibility.*"

It would seem that no culture can truly deny this investment by committed men and women in others whose confidence in their own abilities, in their identity and in the support of people around them has been shattered by extreme poverty. The extreme poverty which I myself have witnessed throughout my entire life is a slow and painful progression, where confidence in oneself and in people in general is ever more undermined, day by day. Every-where, North and South, the very poor are people with a long history of erosion of their self-confidence and their expectations of others, a history in which hopes are dashed, ever more suppressed with each passing year. Over the years, I have seen this experience gradually better understood all over the world.

Everyone can understand that if the humanity of the poorest is to be redeemed, the ultimate price must be in terms of our own human investment. Whoever believes in humanity can agree that the poorest have an absolute right to call on others to come personally to their aid. "*Humanity is a human being's own best cure,*" as our friends in Africa would say. In the light of this perspective, all people, whatever their philosophies and beliefs, have a vocation and a mission to help the very poor. Could not such an awareness give new vigor and direction to our reflection and experimentation with regard to human rights? On this basis, rich and poor from the same country, and rich and poor people among all nations, would have the chance to meet on a more equal footing, and to discover the common heritage which justifies the great international declarations and conventions, and which alone can ensure genuine, common implementation of them. It is not so much education about human rights that the world needs but rather a joint inquiry into what makes for the indivisibility of human beings not only as individuals, but also as a body, necessarily united and jointly responsible for the human rights they grant one another.

For my part, I can say, in conclusion, that the poor have taught me an invaluable lesson about this comprehensive indivisibility. First of all, they taught me that we will not get anywhere in improving our understanding of extreme poverty by dividing it up along geographical lines.

When we allow them to speak for themselves, they are much more concerned to tell us what unites them, namely the impossibility of being proud of their identity, of their history, the ban on belonging to any group which is not negative or even shameful. On every continent, they tell us that it is impossible for them to live as equals with other people, as long as these people continue to be unaware of who they are. The inexorable concentration of deprivations which makes life as a person and as a family impossible is, to my mind, the clearest indication of the indivisibility of the fundamental rights that must be attributed to them if we want them to be truly free.

More important still: people living in extreme poverty in all countries express their conviction that living as a person, as a brother or sister, as a citizen implies being able to take on one's responsibilities. For them, fundamental rights have their true meaning and are truly achieved only when they enable people to be responsible beings, that is to say, workers re-cognized as such, parents capable of rearing their children, useful members of a community, men and women playing their part in the destiny of their country. The poorest teach us not only about the indivisibility of rights and responsibilities but also of the co-responsibility between individuals and between peoples which this indivisibility signifies. For the poorest in all countries, everyone has a personal share in the single mission of building a national and international community "*where our children can live,*" "*where people would go hand-in-hand*"..., a mission which is conceivable in the light of every one of the faiths and beliefs represented in the United Nations.

Could it not be that, in the end, the future of human rights will depend on the poorest and the mission they wish to take on with us? To achieve these rights, a new alliance and new partners are offered to us. What a gift it would be to the world, if we were willing to accept them!

CHAPTER 6

EXTREME POVERTY AND HUMAN RIGHTS: INDIVISIBILITY FOUR TIMES

Charles Courtney⁵³

INTRODUCTION

The main subject for this paper, as for the others in the volume, is Joseph Wresinski, the founder of the Fourth World Movement. But my paper deals with the subject in a different way. The other papers begin with his ideas, then show how they were applied to programs of action and go on to suggest how those ideas and programs could have wider application. My approach is to highlight some of Wresinski's ideas about poverty and the extremely poor and relate those ideas to some recent work on the philosophy of human rights. This might seem to be an unpromising approach since, although the philosophical literature on human rights is large and lively, one could read for a long time and not find a serious discussion of the relation between human rights and poverty. But I do not worry over a possible gap on the philosophical bookshelf. My strategy, rather, is first to listen to the philosophers to find out what problems they *do* wrestle with. Then I suggest that Wresinski the thinker may have something important to offer to the discussion.

The paper consists of two main sections. The brief survey in the first section reveals that on two basic issues, (1) the very conception of human rights and (2) whether human rights can or should be grounded in a concept of human nature, philosophers take widely divergent positions. The second section attempts to show that Wresinski has some insights that bear on those issues. In particular, I explore what he has to say about the indivisibility of humanity, community, the person, and human rights. Although indivisibility by itself does not provide a complete answer to the question of the nature of human rights or the relation between human rights and human nature, it can function (1) as a rule for exposing flaws in philosophies and the social policies that are derived from them and (2) as a goal for both thought and action. Because both the philosophers and Wresinski make constant reference to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, it is the *basso continuo* for the entire discussion.

BRIEF REVIEW OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL LITERATURE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

After a long period of specialization in which academic philosophy lost touch with the public, it has in the last generation begun to take public issues seriously and to attempt to influence public opinion and policy. One example of the disconnection between philosophy and the general public is the January 1966 *Time* magazine essay entitled, "What (If Anything) to Expect From Today's Philosophers." The unnamed author says, "In a world of war and change, of principles armed with bombs and technology searching for principles, the alarming thing is not what philosophers say but what they fail to say." Philosophers have become "relatively obscure academic technicians" and "contemporary philosophy looks inward at its own problems rather

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than outward at men [sic], and philosophizes about philosophy, not about life.”⁵⁴ A sign of the tide turning was the founding in 1971 of the journal, “Philosophy and Public Affairs.” This journal, which deals with a broad spectrum of issues, has now taken its place among the most widely respected philosophy publications.

It is not surprising, then, that the philosophical literature about human rights is vast and growing rapidly. The wide interest in the subject, however, has not been matched by the emergence of a consensus concerning the justification or implication of human rights. One can agree, however, with Richard Rorty who, borrowing the term from Eduardo Rabossi, says that, “One of the shapes we have recently assumed is that of a human rights culture.”⁵⁵ Philosophers from many different schools and traditions are attempting to make sense of this theme that has come to define our time. This situation makes it possible to appreciate Hegel’s famous image for philosophy: “the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk.” That is, philosophers, rather than creating institutions and meanings, reflect on and offer a conceptual understanding of what is already there to be thought about. In the next few pages I offer a brief sketch of some among the many ways that philosophers have thought about human rights in recent years.

Since everyone would agree that the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948, of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (hereafter, Universal Declaration) is the single most important event in recent human rights history, I will organize my sketch of philosophical approaches to human rights around responses to that document. In a recent article, Michael Ignatieff, drawing on the book of my colleague Johannes Morsink,⁵⁶ notes that early in the drafting process delegates argued so fiercely about “the philosophical and metaphysical bases of rights” that the whole project was salvaged only when Eleanor Roosevelt, the chair, determined that they would be silent about those matters. The result is that “The Universal Declaration enunciates rights; it doesn’t explain why people have them.”⁵⁷ Some subsequent philosophers have attempted to provide philosophical and metaphysical justifications for human rights; others have taken the Universal Declaration as a starting point for reflections about the relations among the rights and about their practical applications. I will give examples of each approach.

Michael Perry, in his book of that title, argues that “the idea of human rights” is ineliminably religious. Perry holds that the Universal Declaration’s recognition of “the inherent dignity . . . of all members of the human family” (Preamble) and its declaration that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (Article 1), embodies “the idea that *there is something about each and every human being, simply as a human being, such that certain choices should be made and certain other choices rejected; in particular, certain things ought not to be done to any*

⁵⁴Time magazine, January 7, 1966, p. 24.

⁵⁵Richard Rorty, 1993, “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality” in *On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1993*, Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley, editors, New York: Basic Books, p. 115.

⁵⁶Johannes Morsink, 1999, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Origins, Drafting, and Intent*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

⁵⁷Michael Ignatieff, 1999, “Human Rights: The Midlife Crisis” in *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. XLVI, No. 9 May 20, p. 58.

human being and certain other things ought to be done for every human being."⁵⁸ For Perry this "something about each and every human being, simply as a human being" is that each human being is sacred. He goes on to contend that, if it is not to be left hanging, the idea of human dignity must be linked with a religious tradition which includes answers to such questions as "Who are we? Where did we come from; what is our origin, our beginning? Where are we going; what is our destiny, our end?"⁵⁹ His review of many such traditions leads him to the conclusion that "real moralities—the moralities that various human communities have actually lived—have always been cosmologically embedded."⁶⁰ He finds wanting the attempts to find secular alternatives to the concept of "sacred," for example, Ronald Dworkin's "inviolable." Such concepts provide no compelling reason to protect dignity with a set of human rights.

All this being said, Perry acknowledges that he has made only half a case, a negative one, namely, that secularism cannot provide a justification of human rights. The positive case for a religious grounding of human rights still needs to be worked out. Perry's claim is that the full meaning of "human dignity" is encompassed only in a religious view.⁶¹

Jack Donnelly, one of the most prolific and respected writers on our subject, takes a different approach in his book, *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice*.⁶² He does not see the need "to provide a direct philosophical justification of any particular list of human rights" because "there is a remarkable international normative consensus on the list of human rights contained in the so-called International Bill of Rights."⁶³ Nor does Donnelly construct or defend a theory of human nature. He says that "we can go a long way in dealing with most of the dominant contemporary theoretical and practical controversies connected with human rights before issues of philosophical anthropology intrude decisively."⁶⁴

Donnelly contends that the International Bill "is based on a plausible and attractive theory of human nature,"⁶⁵ the core of which is an affirmation of the inherent dignity of the human person. He thinks it is possible, and sufficient for his purposes, to develop from this affirmation a concept of a human right. He says that "human rights are a special class of rights, the rights that one has simply because one is a human being."⁶⁶ No empirical assessment of needs is required as the basis of human rights. Human rights have their source in our "moral nature."⁶⁷ For Donnelly

⁵⁸Michael Perry, 1998, *The Idea of Human Rights: Four Inquiries*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 13. Italics in the original.

⁵⁹Perry, *The Idea*, p. 15.

⁶⁰Perry, *The Idea*, p. 16.

⁶¹Ignatieff, commenting on Perry, points out that religions have often provided sacred reasons for violating human rights. He prefers making moral reciprocity the heart of a secular defense of human rights. See "Human Rights," p. 60.

⁶²Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989.

⁶³Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights*, pp. 22-23. "The International Bill of Human Rights" consists of three documents: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966). The International Bill entered into force in 1976 upon ratification of 35 United Nations Member States. The United States of America is not one of them.

⁶⁴Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights*, p. 23.

⁶⁵Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights*, p. 23.

⁶⁶Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights*, p. 12.

⁶⁷Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights*, p. 17.

this nature is not fixed once and for all. It is “a *social project*” which emerges from “the interaction of natural endowment, individual action, and social institutions Human rights specify a structure of social practices to achieve a particular realization of human potential.”⁶⁸ Any given definition of human nature is, according to Donnelly, “a moral posit, a moral account of human possibility.”⁶⁹

Donnelly says that the concept of human rights that he has drawn from the Universal Declaration “is compatible with many but not all theories of human nature.”⁷⁰ Which ones would be incompatible? Those that, although they may have an venerable and honored view of human dignity, define the individual in terms of status or role rather than simply as a human being. His examples, discussed separately, are traditional societies, communism, corporatism, development dictatorships, and communitarianism. He concludes this chapter-long discussion by saying that “only liberalism, understood as a regime based on the political right to equal concern and respect, is a political system based on human rights.”⁷¹

John Rawls is an interesting counterpart to Donnelly because as a representative of political liberalism he proposes an interpretation of human rights which he thinks can be shared by hierarchical societies. His seminal book, *A Theory of Justice*,⁷² defined justice as fairness and portrayed a just society as one that is constructed by a set of formal procedures, not requiring first principles or a theory of human nature. But since the theory of justice as fairness is worked out with reference to “a hypothetically closed and self-sufficient liberal democratic society and covers only political values and not all of life,”⁷³ the question of human rights lifts the discussion to a more general level which Rawls calls that of the law of peoples, law which applies to “international” relations. The constructivist view holds at this level as well, for, according to Rawls, “human rights as we have described them . . . do not depend on any particular comprehensive moral doctrine or philosophical conception of human nature, such as, for example, that human beings are moral persons and have equal worth, or that they have particular moral and intellectual powers that entitle them to these rights. This would require a quite deep philosophical theory that many if not most hierarchical societies might reject as liberal or democratic, or in some way distinctive of the Western political tradition and prejudicial to other cultures.”⁷⁴

Rawls says “that basic human rights express a minimum standard of well-ordered political institutions for all peoples who belong, as members in good standing, to a just political society of peoples.”⁷⁵ This formulation contains two limitations that show how Rawls’s liberalism differs from Donnelly’s. First, Rawls says that human rights pertain to those who are members in good standing in a just political society; for Donnelly, they apply to all humans simply because they are human. Rawls later says that human rights have universal application and are to be

⁶⁸Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights*, p. 18.

⁶⁹Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights*, p. 17.

⁷⁰Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights*, p. 23.

⁷¹Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights*, p. 87.

⁷²Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971.

⁷³John Rawls, “The Law of Peoples” in *On Human Nature*, p. 44.

⁷⁴Rawls, “The Law of Peoples,” p. 68.

⁷⁵Rawls, “The Law of Peoples,” p. 68.

distinguished from the rights of democratic citizenship,⁷⁶ but his constructivist approach never allows him to speak of human rights other than in the context of the law of peoples. The second limitation in Rawls's formulation sheds some light on this issue. The "minimum standard" established by human rights assures "the right to life and security, to personal property, and the elements of the rule of law, as well as the right to a certain liberty of conscience and freedom of association, and the right to emigration."⁷⁷ In a clarifying note Rawls goes on to distinguish "human rights proper" (he mentions Articles 3-18 of the Universal Declaration) from others that state "liberal aspirations" (Article 1) or "presuppose specific kinds of institutions" (Articles 22 and 23).⁷⁸ Donnelly, in contrast, accepts all of the articles of the Universal Declaration and insists on their indivisibility.

This brief discussion does not do justice to the complexity of Rawls's argument, but it does exhibit significant differences between two philosophers who claim a liberal heritage. Rawls appears to be a Liberal with an English lineage. Donnelly is best understood as related to the Enlightenment of the European Continent.

Finally, Richard Rorty, in the article quoted above, offers yet another appreciation of human rights. He wants to promote "the human rights culture" because it combats the division between us and them, a distinction which contrasts the genuine humans and those who are "animal," "children," or "nonmale."⁷⁹ Rorty wants an inclusive world in which people are sympathetic rather than hostile, in which they support rather than harm each other. But he says that we are mistaken if we think that we can contribute to such a world by seeking to know the distinctive attribute(s) that we all share as humans. He knows his Plato, his Aristotle, his Kant, and his Hegel and does not think that any of them delivered the knowledge promised. In fact, by giving primacy to reason and knowledge, these "foundationalists" have contributed to our moral predicament. Moreover, even if such knowledge were available, Rorty denies that it would make any practical difference. A pragmatist, he wants results, so he says that "the best, and probably the only, argument for putting foundationalism behind us is . . . [that] it would be more efficient to do so."⁸⁰

Rorty's alternative is a "sentimental education," which would consist mainly of telling long, sad stories of those unlike us, so that we will be induced "to tolerate, and even to cherish, powerless people—people whose appearance or habits or beliefs at first seemed an insult to our own moral identity, our sense of the limits of permissible human variation."⁸¹ Stories can do what knowledge can never do—bring about "the continual refreshment and re-creation of the self, through interaction with selves as unlike itself as possible."⁸²

⁷⁶Rawls, "The Law of Peoples," p. 70.

⁷⁷Rawls, "The Law of Peoples," p. 68.

⁷⁸Rawls, "The Law of Peoples," note 46, pp. 227-8. Article 1 reads, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." Articles 22 and 23 have to do with social security and equal pay for equal work respectively.

⁷⁹Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality," pp. 113-4.

⁸⁰Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality," p. 122.

⁸¹Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality," p. 122 and pp. 133-4.

⁸²Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality," p. 132.

So Rorty also is a son of the Enlightenment, although a strange one. He affirms Enlightenment humanistic ideals, and those of earlier “prophets,” but he wants to dethrone reason. Neither an anti-rationalist nor a romantic, he calls us to use our minds and hearts to deal with the contingent, historical situation staring us in the face. He does not quarrel with the list of rights in the Universal Declaration, nor quibble about its language. He is no doubt glad that the Universal Declaration has contributed to creating “the human rights culture,” but he probably worries that its friends will make it an object of reverence and fail to bring about actual change. For him, one Universal Declaration is enough; it is more important now to have 10,000 edifying stories. In the meantime, Rorty’s vocation apparently is to jibe at philosophers so that they will take a different tack.

This brief survey has dealt with four thinkers; any of two dozen others could have been chosen. My reading in this field has convinced me that: (1) human rights, and the Universal Declaration in particular, raise the question of human unity and diversity in new ways; (2) there is as yet no consensus about the philosophical status of human rights concepts; and (3) philosophers can contribute in two ways: (a) by clarifying central human rights concepts and (b) by tracking the dynamic relation between concept and application. In the next section of this paper, I will work at the first task by considering several ways in which “indivisibility” pertains to human rights.

EXTREME POVERTY AND THE INDIVISIBILITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Now the reader will understand my title, for in this Part I will deal with “indivisibility” four times: the indivisibility of humanity, the indivisibility of community, the indivisibility of the person, and the indivisibility of human rights. The Universal Declaration will figure more or less prominently each time. My hope is that the four reflections will build on each other so as to provide an increasingly complete picture, a coherent set of concepts that can be connected to making concrete social policy.

The indivisibility of humanity

It was the enormity of World War II (1939-45) that prompted the founding of the United Nations (1945) and the writing of the Universal Declaration (1948). The second plank of the Preamble of UDHR begins, “Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind . . .” The prime example of disregard and contempt was the Nazi program of destroying Jews, gypsies, and the physically and mentally disabled so as to assure the purity and dominance of the allegedly superior Aryan race. The UN and the UDHR exist in order to prevent the recurrence of such an atrocity.

Because the drafters of the Universal Declaration thought that the unity of humanity had been threatened by the ideologies of World War II, they insisted on writing a “universal” declaration, one that would apply to all human beings. Of course, they were not the first to see humankind as a unity. But it is also true that the indivisibility of humanity is precarious both in concept and in reality.

The Greeks have given us some of the most exalted human ideals. But they also created the word “barbarian,” meaning those who did not speak Greek and whose speech was, therefore, a senseless string of “bar, bar, bar.” Aristotle, who wrote brilliant and enduring treatises on ethics and politics, accepted slavery. There is no indication that he sensed contradiction or even tension when, in his discussion of friendship, he penned this portentous passage: “Master and slave have nothing in common, since a slave is a tool with a soul, while a tool is a slave without a soul. In so far as he is a slave, then there is no friendship with him. But there is friendship with him in so far as he is a human being.”⁸³

Latin culture as well is ambiguous about the indivisibility of humanity. Of course, Terence said “homo sum: humani nihil a me alienum puto” (I am a man: nothing that relates to man do I deem alien to me.). But there is also the saying, “lupus est homo homini” (man is a wolf to his fellow-man). And the Renaissance humanist, Erasmus, said “homo homini aut deus aut lupus” (man is to man either a god or a wolf). Taken together, these sayings suggest that, although at some level we know that we are all human, we are prone, if it suits our interest, to treat others as different (and in the process run the risk of losing our own humanity).

Isaiah Berlin, the recently deceased and much celebrated historian of ideas, asserts that the revolt of Romanticism, which became “articulate in the second third of the eighteenth century, principally in Germany, has shaken the foundations of the old, traditional establishment, and has affected European thought and practice profoundly and unpredictably . . . is perhaps the largest shift in European consciousness since the Reformation.”⁸⁴ According to his biographer, Michael Ignatieff, Berlin held that Romanticism’s glorification of individual creativity, whether in art or politics, “helped to fracture the idea of a single human species whose members were equally entitled to the same forms of moral consideration.” He quotes Berlin as follows: “The division of mankind into two groups—men proper, and some other, lower, order of beings, inferior races, inferior cultures, subhuman creatures, nations or classes condemned by history—is something new in human history. It is a denial of common humanity—a premise upon which all previous humanism, religious and secular, had stood.” Ignatieff continues his exposition and interpretation this way: “The curse of the twentieth century, Berlin argued, has been that both of its major utopias—Hitler’s and Stalin’s rejected the very idea of the indivisibility of the human species. A communist true believer did not even attempt to persuade a bourgeois or aristocrat of the truth of communist principles: they were class enemies, to be re-educated or disposed of. Likewise, fascists did not begin to reason with Jews, gypsies or other racial enemies. They were to be extirpated as vermin. Romanticism’s denial that all human beings were everywhere the same could lead ultimately to the denial that they deserved to exist.”⁸⁵

Still experiencing the aftershock of World War II, those who created the United Nations wanted to mend the fracture of humanity. The UN Charter begins with the words, “We the peoples of the United Nations . . . have resolved to combine our efforts.”⁸⁶ The first plank of the “Preamble” of

⁸³ Aristotle, 1985, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin. Indianapolis: Hackett, p. 229.

⁸⁴ Isaiah Berlin, 1998, “The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 554.

⁸⁵ Michael Ignatieff, 1998, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life*, New York: Henry Holt, p. 248. The Berlin quotation is from his Isaiah Berlin, 1990, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, London: John Murray, pp. 179-80.

⁸⁶ *Charter of the United Nations*, New York: United Nations Department of Public Information, 1993, pp. 1-2.

the Universal Declaration speaks of the dignity and rights of “all members of the human family” and the following section proclaims that the Universal Declaration is “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society . . . shall strive . . . to promote respect for these rights.”⁸⁷ The words “all” and “every” are there to be a direct counter to those who would divide humanity. The “we” is without qualification. These documents are written by representatives of all of humanity in behalf of an undivided humanity.

“Each” and “all” are complementary. “Each” accents the dignity of each individual. Accordingly, many of the specific human rights affirm the freedom of the individual from coercion and oppression. “All” connects with the idea of “the human family” and accents the common human condition. The “accident” of being born now rather than then or here rather than there should not obscure the fact that we are all born into families and that if humanity is indivisible it makes sense to speak of “the human family.” There are many differences among us, but they all take their place with a common humanity. Hannah Arendt put “each” (individual) and “all” (common) together well when she said, “We are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.”⁸⁸ We are the same in that we are unique, and each of us deserves to be treated as one of the family.

Joseph Wresinski’s contribution to the French commemoration of the Bicentennial of the French Revolution was to write an essay called, “The Very Poor, Living Proof of the Indivisibility of Human Rights.”⁸⁹ He gives examples from his own life and from his lifetime of standing with the poorest of how society calls into question the humanity of the poorest. They are called names, they are excluded, and worst of all, they are simply ignored. Laws are made and agencies are set up as if the poorest did not exist. Faced with this exclusion, the poorest cry out: “It isn’t fair.” “We are not dogs, after all.” “Aren’t we human beings too?”⁹⁰ Wresinski’s argument is that exclusion of the poorest raises the question of the indivisibility of humanity just as much as the more notorious ideologies of our century.

His experience with the poorest leads him to offer a concept of the human person, namely, that “every person is [*a*] human being.”⁹¹ But we may ask whether he has said anything meaningful. Don’t we expect a concept to tell us *what* something is? The philosophers discussed in Part I decided not to spell out the content of the human because such work would be (1) too difficult, (2) lacking in universality, or (3) not necessary for considering the application of human rights. Perhaps Wresinski, not a professional philosopher, doesn’t understand the nature of a concept. For we might agree that every person is a human being, but still be in the dark as to *what* human being is.

⁸⁷ *Human Rights: The International Bill of Human Rights*, New York: United Nations Department of Public Information, 1993, p. 4.

⁸⁸ Hannah Arendt, 1958, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 8.

⁸⁹ The original, “Les plus pauvres, révélateurs de l’indivisibilité des Droits de l’homme,” appeared in *1989 - Les Droits de l’homme en question*, Paris: La Documentation Française, pp. 221-37. It was published in English with the above title, translated by Kathleen Fingleton and Charles Courtney, Editions Quart Monde, 1994. Quotations here are from the English version by Editions Quart Monde. The paper is reprinted in this volume as chapter 4.

⁹⁰ Wresinski, “*Indivisibility*,” p. 34.

⁹¹ Wresinski, “*Indivisibility*,” p. 34. Italics in the original.

But perhaps Wresinski has done more than it appears at first. He would agree, of course, that it is important to try to fill out the concept of the human with some content. But he would say that his “concept” should function as a principle logically prior to all specific definitions of the human. That is, whatever content is given to the idea of the human must be applicable to all persons. If it is not, that view of the human is untrue no matter how admirable the content is. One thinks here of Leibniz’ adage that truth is more likely to lie in philosophers’ affirmations than their denials; perhaps his point has its most weighty moral application right here. The point of the distinction between principle and content can be made in another way. We can assume that the content of any definition of the human will include all of the best qualities. The function of the principle is to require that whatever is claimed by the definer and the definer’s community will be claimed for all humans. The principle that “every person is a human being” allows us to know, before even looking at the particular content, that any definition which fails to be unqualifiedly universal is false.

Wresinski’s point is echoed by Isaiah Berlin in his 1959 lecture, “European Unity and its Vicissitudes.” Ignatieff points out that although Berlin affirmed that there is such a thing as a human nature, his list of features “was bare and to the point.” He claimed only that we share the same body and capacity to feel pain, and that we are moral beings. Without knowing the whole content of the human, we can recognize the inhuman when we encounter it. Ignatieff presents Berlin’s version of the “principle” as: “to regard human beings as vermin was to reason from demonstrably false premises.”⁹² Ignatieff continues his exposition by reporting that Berlin thought it was clear “where ideas of racial superiority and theories of the dictatorship of the proletariat, these twin denials of human universality, were bound to lead. The human race had at last performed all the necessary experiments: it was no longer possible to deny that mankind must either respect the universality of the species or perish altogether.”⁹³ Berlin and Wresinski share the same principle and the same logic. Wresinski’s contribution is to insist that the “quieter” denial of human universality, namely, the exclusion of the poorest, also raises the questions of the legitimacy of concepts of the human and of even the survival of the species.

The indivisibility of community

In the preceding section the idea of “the human family” from the Universal Declaration was used to argue that all conceptions of *what* is human must apply to all persons. This section will use the idea of family as the basis for some reflections on *how* we are together.

Our very being requires human togetherness. Every human being has a mother and a father. In order for there to be a new human being, two people must come together. Does the possibility of cloning provide a counterexample? Not really, because whereas normal conception requires only two people, the highly sophisticated and delicate process of cloning requires the involvement of many more people. Moreover, each of us comes helpless into this world. If we are to live beyond birth, others, biological family or not, must give us care. And the period of time for this intensive care is much longer for humans than for other animals. Even the strongest advocate of the

⁹²Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, p. 249.

⁹³Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin*, p. 250.

independence of the individual must admit that at the beginning and for a long time afterward each of us is deeply dependent on others. “Human family” is more than just a nice phrase.

The special needs of children were recognized by the United Nations in the 1959 “Declaration of the Rights of the Child” and in the 1989 “Convention on the Rights of the Child.” The Declaration states that “the child, by reason of . . . physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care.” The goal is “to ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child” (Convention, Article 6). States are called on to see that the goal is reached, but there is ample recognition of the primary role of parents, relatives, and those closest to the child. Principle 2 of the Declaration indicates that the development envisaged is indeed comprehensive: “The child . . . shall be given opportunities and facilities . . . to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity.”

The Declaration and Convention make it clear that if the child develops into a full member of society it is because of the efforts of many others working together. The Universal Declaration, in contrast, presumes that development has taken place and speaks for the most part of the rights of adults. We saw earlier that many have divided those rights into two kinds, civil and political on one hand and social, economic, and cultural on the other. John Rawls goes so far as to hold that only the first kind are human rights in the strict sense. But since childhood is focused on the *development* of personhood, the documents about the child do not distinguish between kinds of rights. It is assumed that the whole person needs to be developed. And we can become adult persons only through the support of the wider community, that is, the human family.

The child serves well as a model for how the human community is indivisible. We are born helpless and flourish only through the help of others. Development consists in increasingly being able to help oneself (and to help others) without ever outgrowing the need for the support of others. Is there a principle here that can be applied beyond the age of childhood (now, almost universally the age of eighteen years)? I suggest the following: without regard to age, all unmet need concerning health and well-being should be regarded as an occasion for the human community to offer help. Lifting the age restriction allows for recognizing those cases where the optimal development process did not take place, for whatever reason (lack of human or material resources, natural catastrophe, negligence, etc.). If physical, mental, social, or moral development did not take place at 5 or 9 or 15, it should not be denied at 25 or 37 or 46 or any age. Why? Because every human being is always a human being and a human being is a terrible thing to waste.

It is also possible to tease out of the model of the child a criterion for how help is to be offered. Since needs are met in order to achieve human development, help must be offered in such a way as to enhance development, that is, the capacity to act independently and take responsibility. It is on this point that the thought of Joseph Wresinski and the experience of the Fourth World Movement can be helpful.

First of all, the Movement has learned that there is great solidarity within the world of the excluded poorest. Those who have very little show over and over again that they stand together and share whatever they have. So the poorest show the indivisibility of the human community by

their way of life. And the poorest provide a test of others' understanding of the meaning of indivisibility. Indivisibility is incompatible with exclusion, and the Movement has discovered that in all countries there are those who have crossed the barrier to stand with the poorest. The Movement, made up of the poorest, full-time trained volunteers, and supporters, is a living world-wide witness that humanity is indivisible. Those in the Movement would say that standing together is itself the decisive first step toward eradicating extreme poverty. To be sure, crossing the line of exclusion does not by itself change intolerable living conditions nor does it meet all needs. But the simple act of crossing over and standing with affirms the humanity of the poorest.

Second, the poorest claim their human rights so that they can fulfill their responsibilities, that is, so that they can participate fully in human society. The poorest know what their needs are because they have lived in lack. They are eager to state their needs and participate in designing the ways of meeting them. Rather than being passive recipients, they want to be active participants. Wresinski closes his essay with these words: "Could it not be that, in the end, the future of human rights will depend on the poorest and the mission they wish to take on with us? To achieve these rights, a new alliance and new partners are offered to us. What a gift it would be to the world, if we were willing to accept them!"⁹⁴ There is indivisibility, coupled with one of its finest fruits, mutuality.

The indivisibility of the person

The third indivisibility, that of the person, can be presented more briefly, partly because it is the continual and direct experience of each of us. Shakespeare marveled, "What a piece of work is man!" There are two things in that line. We are complex and elusive, but we are also *a* piece. We can and should distinguish different functions and aspects of our lives, but we are mistaken when we think of them as actually separate. Examples are ready to hand. Physical exhaustion and illness are obstacles to good mental activity; rest and fitness contribute positively to thinking. Preoccupation or inattention often leads to falls or accidents. We should not try to resolve an interpersonal conflict when we are emotionally upset. Efficiency may be an appropriate standard for the office but not for the nursery. Questions acceptable between friends are not so in a financial transaction. Yet each person is body and mind, officer and parent, friend and clerk, etc.

We each have one name, unless we are trying to deceive with an alias. Thus we are responsible for (that is, answerable for) everything that is done under that name. It won't work to say "the Devil made me do it," because we are indivisible. We do not get to choose what to own up to. But indivisibility also means that we can claim credit for our accomplishments. If someone else claims credit for our work, it has been alienated from us, literally, othered. The dynamic relation between personal unity and diversity is expressed in the statements, "I fell apart" and "She has finally got it all together."

Even though the Universal Declaration does not explicitly state that the human person is indivisible, it implicitly affirms it in two important ways. First, one can read the entire document and replace each pronoun or general noun with one's own name. This substitution would work for such terms as "human being," "everyone," "person," "no one," and "all." Thus, one and the

⁹⁴Wresinski, *Indivisibility*, p. 47.

same person can be seen to be the subject of each of the articles. Second, the content of all of the articles applies to every person. The person is the object of each of the articles; they are all directed to the individual person. Something would be amiss if someone read the various articles and said, "This human right applies to me, but that one does not." The person is a complex unity and the Universal Declaration attempts to articulate many of the basic aspects that each one of us is.

Joseph Wresinski and his colleagues in the Fourth World Movement testify to the indivisibility of the person in another way. They have seen in thousands of cases how poverty is not just a lack of money, but rather a total condition that touches every aspect of a person. A few examples will make the point. Without employment parents are unable to provide nutritious food for their children. The children are frequently sick and miss many days of school. They fall behind, are treated negatively by teachers who do not understand the whole situation, and end up misbehaving and being dismissed from school or simply dropping out. Such a child finds it hard to get a good job, and the cycle repeats itself. Or, parents, out of self-respect or in order to protect their children from taunts, don't send their children to school unless they have shoes and clean clothes in good repair. The children fall behind, etc. Or, a family that does not have a permanent address does not get the proper kind of identification and, therefore, does not qualify for the housing, medical, and food support offered by its society.

Finally, the accumulation of deprivations and the negative regard or disregard by others can affect the very personhood of the one in extreme poverty. Once again, the indivisibility of the person is manifest. Others radically reduce the poorest to what they choose to see about them. The poorest are seen not in their full humanity, but only according to that one term, "poor." The poorest are often referred to as "they," a term that stops at anonymity and does not include a face, let alone a name on a face. Here we have indivisibility, but of a foreshortened kind that offers a caricature as a substitute for a real person.

A parallel reduction can happen for the one in extreme poverty. If at every turn I am lacking or incapable or not recognized, I will begin to ask, "Who am I?," "Am I worthy at all?," "If I am not acceptable at the workplace, can I be a good spouse or parent?," "If no one cares whether I live or die, why should I take care of myself?" The indivisibility of the person is shown most cruelly when the circumstances of poverty leads one to give up on oneself.

The indivisibility of human rights

Anyone familiar with the philosophical literature on human rights would expect that this section on the indivisibility of human rights would consist of arguing against those who distinguish between civil/political rights and social/economic/cultural rights and claim further that one has priority over the other. But that is not what I will do. Rather, the preceding sections suggest that the issue must be posed differently. For if I have made a persuasive case for the indivisibility of humanity, community, and the person, I am in a position to say that unless human rights are indivisible they run the risk of lacking human significance.

Perhaps the best way to show the link between human significance and human rights is to look at the case Joseph Wresinski makes for the proposition that extreme poverty is a violation of human

rights. The “Wresinski Report,” adopted by the French Economic and Social Council on February 11, 1987, contains the following definition: “Situations of extreme poverty result from a series of insecurities which persistently affect several areas of existence, jeopardizing a person’s chances of reassuming their responsibilities and regaining their rights independently in the foreseeable future.”⁹⁵ Each of the chapters of the Report can be correlated with specific Articles of the Universal Declaration: Income (22-23), Housing (25), Health Care (25), Social Services (22), Education (26), Training and Employment (23-24 and 26), Civil and Political Liberties (3-21 and 28). Except for Articles 1 and 2 and 29 and 30 which are more general in nature, the Report deals directly with every article. By using statistics as well as case studies based on decades of direct experience, the Report is able to show that extreme poverty involves deprivations in many if not all of the above categories. The conclusion is easy to draw. If the articles of the Universal Declaration are a standard by which to judge respect of human rights, extreme poverty is a glaring example of their denial.

In addition to identifying extreme poverty as a violation of human rights, the Report goes on to make policy proposals for its elimination. The basis for the point by point reclamation of human rights and responsibilities is the affirmation noted earlier (and correlated with Articles 1 and 2) that every person is a human being. Since “every person” includes the poorest, the poorest themselves must be included from the beginning in every effort designed to eliminate extreme poverty. Indivisibility comes into play in two ways. (1) The partnership between the poorest and others shows the indivisibility of the human community. (2) If the partnership is to succeed there must be coordination among the various institutions and agencies. That is, the housing department must know what the health department is doing and they must be in concert with the labor department and the justice department. More than a decade after the adoption of the Wresinski Report and on the basis of sustained collaboration with representatives of the Fourth World Movement, the French Assembly in mid-1998 approved just such a comprehensive and coordinated program to address the problem of extreme poverty. This program respects the indivisibility of the person and shows that human rights are protected best when they are regarded as an indivisible unity.

Extreme poverty and capabilities

I want to conclude with a brief discussion of a recent and increasingly influential philosophical approach to rights theory. It is the “capabilities” approach most prominently associated with 1998 Nobel Prize laureate in Economics Amartya Sen of Trinity College, Cambridge, and Martha Nussbaum of the University of Chicago. What follows is by no means an adequate exposition of their views. I do, however, hope to show that the capabilities approach correlates well with Wresinski’s call for a partnership for development and with my emphasis on the various forms of indivisibility.

On the latter point, Nussbaum, in a recent article, presents a list of the most central capabilities, each of which is separate (I have been saying distinct) and indispensable (I would say indivisible). 1. *Life*. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length. 2. *Bodily health*. Being able to have good health (reproduction, nutrition, shelter). 3. *Bodily integrity*.

⁹⁵Quoted in Wresinski, *Indivisibility*, p. 22.

Being able to move freely from place to place; secure against all forms of assault. 4. *Senses, imagination, and thought*. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, and think. Freedom to express and create. 5. *Emotions*. Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves. 6. *Practical reason*. Being able to form a conception of the good; freedom of conscience and religion. 7. *Affiliation*. Friendship: being able to live for and to others. Respect: being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. 8. *Other species*. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature. 9. *Play*. Being able to laugh, to play, and to enjoy recreational activities. 10. *Control over one's environment*. Political: being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life. Material: being able to hold property and employment.⁹⁶

I have shortened Nussbaum's descriptions, but it is readily seen that her central capabilities include all of the things covered in the Universal Declaration while giving more explicit attention to what we might call the inner life of persons. Sen and Nussbaum have chosen "capability" as their basic concept for two reasons, one empirical and one philosophical. Sen's first important empirical research dealt with the economics and ethics of famines in India and China; Nussbaum spent several years doing interdisciplinary research at WIDER: World Institute for Development Economics Research at the United Nations University, Helsinki, Finland. While the traditional categories of analysis (incomes, utilities, resources, primary goods) accounted for much of the data gathered from widely different societies, they came to the conclusion that looking at things through the lens of capability does an even better job. It allows the focus to be on the person as an agent in relation to a natural, human, and cultural environment. The philosophical reason is that "capability" allows them to address rights issues without having to take a stand on the question of the goals and goods of life (here, they, to some extent, follow Rawls's formalism) or on the question whether people have the right to be provided with resources for living (here, they find a middle way between liberals and conservatives). A society that assures capabilities does not promise achievement. A person with capability is free either to function well or not. But a person without capability is denied the possibility of achievement. Nussbaum's list of central capabilities states what the approach says every person has a right *to be able* to do.

I connect capability theory with Fourth World thinking in the following way. Wresinski consistently pairs rights with responsibilities because he sees persons as agents, not objects; this squares with the Sen/Nussbaum accent on being able to act. Wresinski's account of the cluster of deprivations that define extreme poverty can be read as a list of capabilities that must be developed if people are to have a chance at a full human life. The development of capabilities must be a joint effort, suited to particular circumstances, and this is echoed in Wresinski's call for a new partnership between the poorest and others.

A final observation is that the poorest are more capable than others think. For example, the hard school of poverty has made the poorest able to endure hardship, able to cope with the unexpected, and able to discern the more important from the less important. The poorest bring these things to the partnership. They also bring what no one else can, namely, a direct knowledge of life in extreme poverty. Wresinski's challenge is that if we are serious about indivisibility,

⁹⁶Martha Nussbaum, 1977, "Capabilities and Human Rights," in *Fordham Law Review*, Vol. 66: 273-300. The list is taken from pp. 287-8.

human rights, and the eradication of poverty, we, especially those of us responsible for creating and carrying out social policy, will not deny ourselves that knowledge.

CHAPTER 7

EXTREME POVERTY AND HUMAN RIGHTS AT THE UNITED NATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

A superficial reading of the today's world taking into account only the dramatic increase of commercial trade and communications around the world, the frenzied growth in consumption, and the tremendous technological progress registered in some areas, could lead us to optimistic conclusions about the state of our world. But these conclusions would be erroneous because they would hide the dramatic reality of poverty and exclusion, social fragmentation, and deprivation for masses of people living in dire conditions.

Poverty is one of the major problems afflicting humanity at the end of this century. Poverty, and more specifically extreme poverty, is not a one-dimensional phenomenon of an exclusively economic nature. It is a complex mechanism of social corrosion involving all aspects of human life and entailing social consequences whose magnitude forces us to ponder the phenomenon at the global scale. This paper reviews the evolution of the thinking about extreme poverty in the social bodies of the United Nations System (particularly those agencies charged with safeguarding human rights), the contribution made by Father Joseph Wresinski in bringing the topic to the fore within the United Nations, and the role of his movement, ATD, in the development of a study on extreme poverty and human rights that was carried out by the United Nations Human Rights Commission.

From a methodological viewpoint, the study on human rights and poverty on which this paper is based is the outcome of a long consultation with families and organizations that live or have spent a long time in places riddled with poverty. This is what sets it apart and is, perhaps, its most significant contribution. In the present paper, we provide an analysis of the increasing focus on poverty and social exclusion that has taken place in many United Nations agencies. The paper discusses the progress achieved through the statement and the action program adopted during the World Conference on Social Development that took place in Copenhagen in May 1995. Thereafter, the most salient aspects of the report on human rights and poverty adopted by the United Nations Human Rights Commission are highlighted. The indivisibility of human rights is exemplified through situations that are similar to poverty such as slavery and Apartheid.

EXTREME POVERTY IN UNITED NATIONS DEBATES

Poverty and its impact on peace and international security were among the concerns of those who created the UN Organization, as well as its predecessor, the Society of Nations. Part XIII of

⁹⁷ Leandro Despouy is a former Ambassador to the United Nations' Human Rights Commission in Geneva. This chapter has been edited from the original version in Spanish prepared for this report. The study at the Human Rights Commission on which the paper is in part based is: United Nations, 1996, *Final report on human rights and extreme poverty*, submitted by the special rapporteur, Mr. Leandro Despouy, E/CN.4/Sub.2/1996/13, 18 June 1996.

the Versailles Treaty (1919), containing the Constitution of the International Labor Organization (ILO), stated that “Universal and lasting peace can only be based on social justice,” and that the discontent caused by injustice, poverty and deprivation to a large number of human beings constitutes a threat to universal peace and harmony. Later, on May 10, 1944, when the basis of the new world institutional reorganization was laid out in the Philadelphia Declaration, this OIT concept was confirmed: “Poverty, in any place, constitutes a threat to the well-being of all.”

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted on December 10, 1948, established the idea that among the highest aims of humankind was, precisely, the achievement of a world where human beings could be free of fear and poverty and thus enjoy freedom. The statement of this ideal was repeated later in the preamble of many other international instruments, as was the case of two Agreements adopted in 1966: The International Agreement on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Pact on Civil and Political Rights, which also establish that such ideal, “Cannot be achieved...unless the conditions are created for each person to enjoy their civil and political rights as well as their economic, social and cultural rights.”

However, beyond the statements in both instruments, the truth is that during the development of these documents—which took almost 20 years (1947-1966)—the link between poverty and human rights was practically absent. However, when these were adopted (1966) and especially when they were implemented almost 10 years later, the world was already bogged down in an extensive and deteriorating debate over the prevalence of one or the other category of rights. In some Western countries, only those rights of a civil and political nature were considered human rights. Economic, social and cultural rights were denied such categorization.

This debate extended over two decades within the realm of United Nations, and it was related to the ideological continuation of the last period of the “Cold War.” The West argued that liberty and democracy were the priority while those of the Eastern Block stressed equality, as if these were incompatible and not needed both for the achievement of human rights as a whole. This sterile and Byzantine debate, far from contributing to the development of human rights, was an obstacle and created distortions within the framework of an international environment that became more polluted and hostile every day.

Even though it is obvious that the international dimension attained by human rights today is one of the greatest achievements of our times, a quick glance on the overall international human rights protection mechanisms is enough to confirm that most of them are designed to protect civil and political rights. In fact, besides the International Pact establishing them and the Human Rights Committee overseeing their application, there are several agreements and treaties that specifically strengthen the protection of each of these rights. For instance, the different conventions against torture reaffirm the protection of every individual’s personal and psychological safety. The International Convention to Abolish Racial Discrimination adds to the protection mechanisms included in the Civil and Political Rights Pact. It is important to highlight that each of these agreements (more than 30 of a universal nature) provide for their corresponding control bodies. An identical situation is also observed at the regional level, where most of the conventions give priority to this same category of rights. Thus it is fair to say that the “conventional mechanisms,” that is to say, those originating from specific international monitoring treaties, almost exclusively comprise of civil and political rights.

The same phenomenon is observed at the level of the regular bodies of the United Nations (General Assembly, Human Rights Commission, Human Rights Subcommittee, etc.) where supplementary surveillance mechanisms have also been established. Actually, several working groups (Forced and Involuntary Disappearance of Persons, Arbitrary Arrests, etc.), thematic rapporteurs (on Torture, Summary Executions, Freedom of Speech, Independence of the Judiciary, etc.), and country-specific groups have been created (e.g. Iran, Cuba, Sudan, etc.) in the field of civil and political rights. These “unconventional mechanisms,” besides increasing during the last years, have been adapting and improving to achieve greater levels of operation and effectiveness in their corresponding activities.

The treatment given to economic, social and cultural rights has been very different and the outcome has also been different. Beyond the untiring work performed by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights—from the activities undertaken by the ILO in its specific area, from the general discussions held in the General Assembly, the ECOSOC, the Committee and the Subcommittee on Human Rights—the United Nations has never adopted mechanisms similar to those provided to protect civil and political rights, nor has it set up other mechanisms, different and more appropriate, to promote the implementation of this category of rights.

Thus, the recognition that both categories of rights are indivisible and interdependent routinely reaffirmed through different resolutions at that time, was more a formal statement of intention than a legal reality. In fact, the only thing that increased during these years was a large arsenal of protection standards and mechanisms, both universal and regional, of a single category of human rights: civil and political rights.

When the international community took the risky road of drafting a text on the Right to Development, a new opportunity to overcome this dichotomy was once again lost. The countless discussions and debates that took place both in the General Assembly and in the Human Rights Commission during the preparatory works are a reflection of a world dominated by ideological confrontation and too far from the material and spiritual concerns caused by poverty. The main result of such effort was the Statement on the Right to Development adopted by the General Assembly in 1986. Indeed, this was not the outcome of a real consensus but rather the result of a formal compromise between both rival blocks. Proof of this is the fact that the working groups subsequently created for its implementation prolonged the same discussions beyond the fall of the Berlin Wall. Third World countries continued to use the same forum to wage the political and ideological battle that opposed and still opposes the interests of the North to the needs of the South. This debate delayed the realization of this right and the creation of an environment amenable to international understanding and cooperation that are indispensable to secure this right.

In summary, up to the end of the 1980s the issue of poverty had vanished from the legal and political literature of UN social organizations and, if any reference was ever made on the subject, it was only in the small and neglected setting of economic, social and cultural rights. In this regard, it is important to note that when Father Joseph Wresinski gave his famous speech before the Human Rights Commission in 1987, only an item in the agenda referred to this category of rights, under the topic “The Issue of Effective Enjoyment of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,” in which Father Wresinski made his presentation.

This indicates that at that time, poverty was a phenomenon disassociated from human rights, and if there was any relation between them it was only with economic, social and cultural rights, especially with economic rights. The novelty in Father Joseph Wresinski's speech was that he identified poverty as one of the most serious ills of our time directly affecting the enjoyment and exercise of all human rights. In his speech he stated that if there is anything that shows with dramatic realism the indivisible and interdependent nature of all human rights it is precisely poverty. "If you, who are responsible for safeguarding the effectiveness of human rights in the world do not see in poverty the inhuman face of the worst violations, it would be difficult for humanity to move forward in the path of progress and fraternity..."

Beyond the moral impact of the speech, the reaction in the political and diplomatic front was cautious, especially at the beginning. Governmental delegations wondered who would benefit from a debate on poverty. The developed Western countries thought that this type of issue could become a political weapon used to serve the interests of the Socialist block. The latter, in turn, had the fear that Western countries could rescue for their own benefit an issue that Socialist countries had raised for ages. The developing countries assessed with concern the risk of being ostracized as great violators of human rights given the high indices of poverty recorded in most of them. It is in this context of mutual mistrust, increasing skepticism and widespread doubts that the Human Rights Commission, pushed by a strong demand from the non-governmental sector (and in particular by ATD and other NGOs working in the field), adopted the first resolutions on the issue.

In 1988, a first resolution referred to the issue under the title: "Human Rights and Extreme Poverty." One of its paragraphs mentioned poverty as the denial of human rights but as always, within the frame of economic, social and cultural rights. This was reaffirmed the following year in similar terms and it was only in 1990 that the first resolution of the General Assembly was achieved. This narrative is intended to describe the historical context in which the debate on the issue was initiated within the United Nations and the multiple obstacles that had to be overcome until a correct treatment of the issue was achieved. It was not until 1990 that the Human Rights Commission asked the Human Rights Subcommittee to carry out an in-depth study on the existing link between extreme poverty and human rights and, in 1992, the Commission requested a worldwide study on the impact of poverty on human rights.

This victory was not easy. It was the outcome of a long effort of dialogue and persuasion in the diplomatic environment in which those individuals who were familiar with Father Wresinski's work played a very important role. In fact, it was his great power of conviction, his longstanding presence in places where poverty existed and the credibility of his movement that allowed the successful start of the difficult UN path. Wresinski knew the Secretary General of the UN, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar from Peru, who later joined his movement; and the then Director General of ILO, Mr. Blanchard, who among other celebrities naturally and fiercely supported his proposal. Wresinski never lobbied personally; he went to the UN only once and left the lobbying to the dignitaries working in the UN system. All the diplomatic colleagues that met Father Wresinski at that time, both from the East, the West and the Third World acknowledged having been greatly touched by his personality, his strong convictions, and his belief that the issue of poverty and its linkage with human rights would soon be at the fore among the issues of greatest concern and interest in the international agenda. He died two years later.

However, there were many obstacles that had to be overcome, from the approval of the resolution by the Human Rights Commission requesting the study, to the appointment of a Special Rapporteur (a task that was entrusted to the author), in order to complete the work. The political significance of a report of this type was obvious because it was, and still is, an extremely sensitive issue to governments, no matter their ideological direction. It is easy to imagine that the mandate I was entrusted could have been used as a lethal weapon to attack the West in the hands of an orthodox communist; at the same time, a staunch anticommunist could have used the report to focus his/her criticism to show that socialism had not even achieved the elimination of poverty.

This explains why at the start, when the issue was beginning to be discussed, only the term “extreme poverty” could be included in the resolutions as a denial of human rights. It took a while to accept the idea of a study. To reach that decision, prior approval of a methodology offering guarantees of a non-political and specific approach to poverty, from the human rights viewpoint, was necessary. It may seem paradoxical that a report of this nature, which had to dodge so many risks and overcome such obstacles, was finally unanimously approved with the co-sponsorship of more than 80 countries. This was the largest number of co-sponsors registered so far for any study.

Several external factors helped the development of the study. First, there was a period of goodwill in East-West relations following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Second, the UNDP reports on Sustainable Human Development opened the door to a more comprehensive rethinking of development. Third, the World Conference on Social Development took place in Copenhagen (May 1995). Meanwhile, the preliminary reports from the Special Rapporteur were the basis for a specific mention of the relation between extreme poverty and human rights in the final statement adopted at the World Conference on Human Rights which took place in Vienna in April 1993.

THE LINK BETWEEN EXTREME POVERTY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Traditionally, poverty and particularly extreme poverty have been perceived and described mainly as economic phenomena. Here however, we will aim at showing the broader impact of poverty on human rights. Specifically, the report prepared for the UN Human Rights Commission shows that extreme poverty is not just a single dimensional phenomenon but actually affects all aspects in the life of individuals. It also shows that it is not a matter of the denial of a specific right, or of a certain category of rights, but rather of human rights as a whole. The report shows to what extent extreme poverty is not only a threat for economic and social rights as is generally assumed from an economic viewpoint, but also a threat for civil, political and cultural rights. Under this vision, extreme poverty is a fact that is particularly revealing of the undivided and interdependent nature of human rights. Actually, life in extreme poverty suggests that there is a cumulative process of precarious aspects that are mutually intertwined and strengthened: poor living conditions, an unhealthy environment, unemployment, poor health, lack of education, deprivation. All these elements constitute a “horizontal vicious circle” of poverty.

This last statement poses several questions. First, from a legal perspective what is at stake is not the acknowledgment but rather the real exercise of overall human rights and basic freedoms by extremely poor individuals. Second, this vision allows to verify that as a consequence of the indivisibility and interdependence of human rights, in a linkage such as the one described above, being deprived of one right may have—in fact, it often has—a negative impact on the exercise of all other rights. Likewise, the specific nature of poverty alerts and allows us to anticipate that under similar conditions, the fact of reestablishing in an isolated manner a single right is not enough for an individual living in extreme poverty to have access to the full exercise of all of his/her rights.

Another equally detrimental aspect is the marked tendency to perpetuate poverty, as it seems to be passed from one generation to another. This has been the subject of various research works in different periods in world history, and it is also clearly reflected in several case studies developed by the ATD Movement that discuss the life of families spanning along several generations. When poverty perpetuates itself, a “vertical vicious circle” takes shape. In this manner, both spirals become some sort of a “hellish mechanism” that make it enormously difficult to get out of it, depriving individuals from any real and effective prospect of exercising their human rights and assuming responsibilities. Social exclusion is another of the most acute social consequences of poverty, frequently accompanied by the stigmatization of those suffering it. If exclusion may sometimes lead people into poverty, poverty almost always leads to exclusion.

One of the advantages of the methodology used here lies in its thematic scope since the true impact of poverty may only be known if all and each one of the areas on which it has an impact are examined: economic, civil, social, cultural and political. Besides, it is imperative that the information obtained on people living under such conditions originates from the people themselves. However, this population is generally not consulted, even in cases of studies and programs focused on them. The views of those affected by poverty is an indispensable condition, not only because it is a requirement inherent to any approach on human rights, but also because if this is not done, it becomes impossible to know the internal dynamics of poverty. In other words, it is impossible to verify the impact that each of the deprivations has on the potential aggravation of other needs, and so sequentially up to reaching extreme poverty.

Besides the negative impacts that the different deprivations have on each other (poor environmental conditions, unhealthy work, impacts on education and these, in turn, on participation and cultural life, etc.), as these deprivations increase and intensify, exclusion becomes worst, insecurity heightens, there is a decrease in possibilities to truly exercise human rights, and difficulties increase for these populations to assume their own responsibilities. When these insecurities become more acute and perpetuate over time in such a way that the whole existence of the individual is controlled by this multiplicity of shortages and dearth, we see the merciless face of poverty. To conclude: the sum of shortages and deficiencies in health, education, the environment, participation, etc., whose persistence destroys the lives of all those suffering poverty, is a denial of the basic human rights in the current legal language.

CHANGING THE PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE POOR AND POVERTY

It is often more difficult to prove what is apparent than what is unique or exotic. The poverty phenomenon is a case in point. One of the main challenges I had to face as Special Rapporteur on this issue was, precisely, avoiding that my commitment and faithfulness to the portrayal of poverty (which is as useful as irreplaceable given the methodological requirements of the study), would betray the message and reality of those living under extreme poverty conditions. How can one describe truthfully the miserable living conditions, the suffering and, above all, the degradation poverty causes on individuals without resorting to fatalist messages in the sense that people who have become impoverished would never be able to escape from it, or even worst, that degradation has been such that these individuals have already lost their status as human beings, without unwillingly contributing to racist or xenophobic biases? How can one show the terrible aspects of poverty without playing the card of those that have a discriminatory perception of the poor?

As this was a global study, I decided to make reference to other situations that equally highlight the lethal mechanism of discrimination to solve this problem. For example, I took Apartheid. What did the government of South Africa do to justify itself and carry forward its policy of social exclusion and unchecked exploitation of blacks? The mechanism it used was no other than to deliberately deny the economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights, etc., of the black population. Something similar occurred with slavery. Beyond the socioeconomic and pragmatic motives of both systems, the ideological basis was similar: slaves were not deemed to be human beings and, therefore, they had no rights.

There is a risk if we describe the terrible consequences of slavery and the level of degradation to which it may lead, that this could lead to somebody interpreting—much as slavery advocates did—that such a slavery-degraded human being was actually an object and, consequently, he/she did not deserve to be treated as a human being. However, it was under the impulse of the struggles of the slaves themselves and of the ideals of humanistic thinking that it was acknowledged that all human beings are equal in dignity and that behind the condition of a slave there is a human being. Thus it was possible to see that that creature, who slavery advocates saw as an object, became a human being—to the extent that he was allowed to exercise his rights on an equal footing. We have also seen how blacks in South Africa—once they had access to the enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedoms—initiated, along with the regime that excluded them, one of the most original and exemplary political processes of this century, leaving behind very rapidly the last remnants of such contemporaneous form of slavery which was Apartheid. As to the differences existing among the three situations under analysis, the most relevant one may be that slavery was seriously questioned even at the time when it was institutionalized. Apartheid was repudiated and fought with almost all the mechanisms the world community had developed up to then. But poverty can roam comfortably given the general indifference.

One of the most important contributions of the study on extreme poverty and human rights was to show how little and how poor the knowledge on poverty at the global level was. Even worst, we ignore how little we know about extreme poverty. Aside from being deficient, our knowledge is often wrong, since the perception of poverty in our societies is mostly derogatory and full of biases. “The rich,” wrote Charles Booth, founder of the Salvation Army in the last century, “hid

the poor behind a curtain, and over that curtain, they painted monsters.” This explains why a large part of the population feels frightened and scorns the poor. The poor are regularly made responsible for their situation and are deemed to be less competent and incapable of becoming more skilled. It is believed that poor people are condemned (and this belief is actually what condemns them) to live in poverty, as if it were a deliberate choice to fall into poverty or to remain poor.

When the unawareness and prejudice barriers of our biased knowledge are overcome and we enter into such complex social reality, we discover a world that we hardly know. This is the conclusion drawn from various statements from those that have lived close to families in extreme poverty for a long period of time. It must also be emphasized that those in extreme poverty are a fragile population. We cannot intervene without paying close attention or else we may destroy the precarious balance in which the very poor survive. This is a population that is more vulnerable to mistakes and failures than others. We are always at risk of giving only partial responses to a population, while ignoring their efforts, thereby perpetuating the lack of cohesion in their existence. The irrationality of life under extreme poverty forces this population to commit senseless and even antagonistic actions. If our response to that population is fragmentary on a case by case basis, we are at risk of deepening the divisions and the gaps.

The answers to the problems of the very poor lie in coherent interventions and projects that must be developed, implemented and evaluated with their participation. To be able to act efficiently, we need to understand the complexity of this painful world, and to value and encourage its struggles and its successes. Even within this world of dearth, marked by adversity and misfortune, there are moving gestures of solidarity, both intended to preserve family ties and to provide assistance to somebody suffering from similar situations. These are gestures that define a willingness to fight, even when the fight materializes in small achievements, scarce successes and many defeats. But these successes—which may seem insignificant in light of those countless battles that are lost daily—state in their own way (and in the wordless language of those who most of the time have not even learned to use these words), the reality of a fight, of a silent and unseen struggle whose intensity and resilience allows the very poor to face their condition each day and at each moment of their lives. Without an acknowledgment of the efforts of the poor and those who support them, it would be difficult to contribute to the liberation from poverty.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SIGNS OF THE LAST FEW YEARS

Today, there is an awareness, albeit insufficient, of the extent and seriousness of poverty and exclusion. This is reflected above all in the fact that the extreme poverty issue has been included in the agenda of almost all UN Common System agencies dealing with economic or social issues. For example, in its resolution 47/196 of 1992, the General Assembly declared October 17 as the World Day for Poverty Eradication. A few months later, during the World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna in 1993, a consensus was reached to consider extreme poverty and social exclusion as affecting human dignity and being at the opposite of a full and effective enjoyment of human rights. There was also a consensus to promote urgent actions to reduce poverty.

Likewise, the UN General Assembly through its resolution 48/183 proclaimed the year 1995 as the International Year for Poverty Eradication. In its Resolution 50/170, it proclaimed the first United Nations Decade for Poverty Eradication (1997-2006). Also, at the International Conference on Population and Development that took place in Cairo in September 1994, at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995, and at the World Food Summit, that took place in Rome on November 13-17, 1998, poverty appears to be clearly identified among the main obstacles to achieve the objectives proclaimed in the corresponding final statements.

A positive fact has been the approval and implementation of the recommendations of the study on “Extreme Poverty and Human Rights” and, in particular, the appointment of a Special Rapporteur in the UN Human Rights Commission. The Special Rapporteur is responsible for presenting an Annual Report before the Commission and before the General Assembly on the impact of poverty on human rights as well as the actions adopted to fight poverty. The Special Rapporteur must also present an evaluation on compliance with the objectives and goals set in the Copenhagen Declaration and Action Plan at the next United Nations General Assembly convened for that purpose and which will take place in the year 2000.

Another important fact is the progress recorded in the field of cooperation and, particularly, the enhanced role to be played by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in that field and the agreements executed with the World Bank to undertake joint or solely Bank-financed projects. With respect to the work undertaken by other organizations and institutions, it should be remembered that already in the UNDP 1992-1996 Program, poverty eradication was among the six main objectives. A noteworthy aspect of its strategies consisted in supporting community-based organizations, NGOs and governmental institutions assisting the poorest. But the most important contribution of UNDP on this issue was its decisive participation in the development of the Sustainable Human Development concept in its subsequent Annual Reports. The reports indicate that economic growth is not the only reliable indicator to measure development: it must be complemented by other basic indicators such as life expectancy, adult illiteracy, infant mortality, gender equality, etc. Actually, it incorporates new development evaluation parameters that are as reliable as the previous standards but are much more revealing of the economic, social and cultural progress achieved by the countries.

In summary, it could be said that the concept of human development is based on a much more accurate and comprehensive understanding of reality. If what is sought is to assess the development level of a country—besides being cognizant of its economic growth indices—the extent of access of all its inhabitants to effective exercise of their economic, social and cultural rights, their participation in political life, and their full exercise of freedom, must also be examined.

“Without a correspondent social development there will not be satisfactory economic development,” said James Wolfensohn upon assuming his duties as the new President of the World Bank. In subsequent speeches, he acknowledged that social development was one of the main deficits of our age, and thus a substantive part of World Bank activities would be focused to that sector. Previously, in its publication entitled “The lessons of the Past, the Actions of the Future,” the World Bank acknowledged that throughout the years it modified its objectives:

“while it was initially thought that growth would end up benefiting the poor through osmosis, it has now been understood that in order to reduce poverty it is also necessary to take measures in favor of the most deprived and most vulnerable groups.”

The same trend has been recorded in the regional development banks. For instance, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) was able to expand its annual lending capability to US\$7 billion with the commitment that 40 percent of its lending portfolio or half of its operations must be earmarked to the social sector, justice and poverty alleviation. These are the positive signs. However, there are still reasonable doubts within most of the agencies concerned with social issues about the seriousness and the size of the announced changes. This explains why working groups have been created within the Human Rights Commission to discuss the impact of structural adjustments and the policies of international finance organizations on the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights and of overall human rights.

Nevertheless, despite these positive signs, there has been a lack of adequate planning in development plans and programs or macroeconomic measures, and a lack of analysis on the impact that these have on poverty. Moreover, the social policies implemented by governments during the last decade have been essentially of a service delivery nature. These policies have lacked efficiency in fighting poverty. There is not even certainty that the current efforts and the renewed emphasis placed by some of the international finance organizations in the social sphere are going to translate into poverty reduction. Some critics see these actions as merely palliative measures intended to diminish the impact of structural adjustments and delay the social breakdown that globalization may cause. In any case, poverty has expanded throughout parts of the world with sequels of impoverishment and exclusion that affect numerous populations and even entire countries and regions such as Sub Saharan Africa. If 10 years ago the fate of some peripheral countries that had large impoverished areas was uncertain or difficult, today this is even more so. Another element of concern is the gap in wealth distribution, which has increased and each day appears as a greater obstacle to achieving forms of development that are more inclusive than the current ones. Still another disturbing signs is the impact of poverty on conflicts as the State appears to be less able to prevent social conflicts. This is an issue that deserves to be analyzed in depth given its direct link with human rights and the proliferation of conflicts in societies already weakened by poverty.

CONCLUSION

What is the relevance of the above for the policies and work of international human rights organizations and other international organizations? What could be the changes that would be implemented in the work of United Nations agencies and in development assistance organizations if the close relationship between extreme poverty and human rights were taken into account? While these are difficult questions, it is imperative to weed out the views that ignore the multidimensional nature of poverty and its harmful incidence on all aspects of the life of individuals and over all human activities. There is a need not only to improve the policies implemented to fight poverty, but also the perception of the very poor in the public at large.

The first thing that poverty reduction programs should be careful about is the poverty that the programs themselves can generate. Transparent social policies that can be assessed by all sectors concerned, especially by those that are generally not reached by the programs, are necessary. For the programs to be effective and capable of reaching the poorest, they must be developed from first-hand knowledge of the life of their beneficiaries. Thus, it is essential to involve the poor in the development, implementation, follow-up and evaluation of the programs designed for them. Not much can be done for the very poor if it is not done with them. Even before the programs are developed, it is essential to become familiar with the target population so that from the very beginning there is some knowledge of the needs of the community. Another important element is to have direct contact with poor families, without which it is impossible to establish a trusting relationship based on mutual trust. For this, it is indispensable to take advantage of the expertise of the NGOs that have been carrying out activities for a long time in poverty stricken areas.

The fight to eradicate poverty requires not only full knowledge of the causes and the conditions that generate, aggravate and perpetuate it, but also of the effect they have on all human rights and fundamental freedoms. It is absolutely necessary to implement participation mechanisms involving the impoverished in all the stages of policies designed to their benefit. More generally, only to the extent that the effective exercise of their rights and freedoms is reestablished, will we see the human being in all its prime and splendor rise from behind that face disfigured by poverty.