

Campus 2010

Becoming agents of knowledge together - the challenges for the international movement ATD Fourth World

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Our focus this year in Campus is on "becoming agents of knowledge together" beginning with people living in poverty. This is an appropriate topic in a world that is increasingly multilateral. Where once it was the International Monetary Fund or the foreign policy of the United States that defined policy for others, now there are also countries like China, Venezuela or Saudi Arabia that are able to fund overseas development and to influence other countries. More and more countries are finding their voices on a global stage; and yet within each of our countries there remain voices that are completely unheard. Becoming agents of knowledge together is a way to learn from those excluded voices.

There is nothing new about poverty or inequality in the world. But the many approaches to fighting poverty in the past have failed because they were based on the knowledge of only some people. For thousands of years now, top-down approaches have been tried: from the Greek invention of philanthropy, to the writings of Confucius on helping those in need, to the invention of the first hospitals and shelters in India in the year 400. Sometimes these top-down approaches have been punitive and judgmental, for instance in England in 1531 when the law allowing some people to beg but punished unlicensed beggars, or in the 1870s when social Darwinism argued that helping the poor makes them lazy and weakens the human race.

Over the years, a more bottom-up approach has been developed, for instance by people like Nobel Laureate Jane Addams in Chicago in the 1890s whose work with low-income families was based on social democracy and egalitarianism. This approach led her to focus not only on economic issues like access to food and housing, but also to start a music school, an art gallery and a night school for adults working in factories. Her approach influenced the League

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of Nations and the future shape of the UN, founded in the name of “we the peoples” and of “the dignity and worth of the human person.”

Just as the world's approaches to fighting poverty have evolved, there has been evolution in the ways of measuring poverty. Until and throughout the 1980s, the UN focused mainly on measuring national income, in link with working towards economic growth. In 1990, Mahbub ul Haq transformed this by developing the Human Development Index in order to measure improvements in human well-being and to inspire policies centered on people. The HDI (developed also with Amartya Sen) measured not only economic well-being (purchasing power) but also education (through school enrollment and adult literacy) and health (through life expectancy).

Now exactly twenty years later, the next UN Human Development Report is introducing a new measurement of poverty: the Multidimensional Poverty Index. The change was made to look past the aggregates of average data to micro-data by looking at deprivations that overlap in individual households. In addition to factors used in HDI it adds factors like: malnutrition of both adults and children; access to clean water less than a 30-minute walk from home; the kind of cooking fuel used; the level of sanitation; and whether a household has access to assets like radio, a bicycle or a telephone in order to communicate with others. The MPI is also used to show the differences in challenges faced within a single country by different regions or ethnic groups. In Kenya for example, even though the capitol city of Nairobi has a medium MPI, the same as the Dominican Republic, rural northeastern Kenya has one of the lowest MPIs in the world, lower than Niger, which is placed the lowest of all countries with 93% of people living in deprivation of 69% of the indicators.

One of the reasons for developing the MPI is to have an international tool that is better adapted for evaluating the Millennium Development Goals. Until now different countries and regions have measured progress differently. It has been ten years since these MDGs were agreed on by 189 heads of state. One of ATD Fourth World's priorities for the coming five years is to contribute to the UN's evaluation of these goals. What have they achieved? Who has been left out? How should the world go forward? We will carry out this evaluation in consultation with people living in poverty in different regions.

Although international tools like the MPI are becoming more and more complex, they were not developed with people living in poverty and there remain many things they do not measure.

- Behind the figures on employment and income, when do we make opportunities to think together with people whose days and nights are filled with dangerous work, with the chaos of finding odd jobs, or with the stress and indignity of unemployment?
- Behind the figures on school enrollment, where is the mother in Tanzania who could not afford the fees and was able to enroll her child only by lying and asking her child to lie in order to benefit from a fee waiver for orphans? Where are the children in New Orleans who, as Anne Monnet said, “were so used to failing in school and being punished that they didn't dare even draw anymore, being so sure of doing nothing well”?
- Behind the figures on malnutrition and life expectancy, where is the mother whose child was refused treatment for tuberculosis because the mother was hospitalized with gangrene and the hospital considered the child's sister too young to accompany him?

All these women, men and young people must not remain only “sources of data” for measuring poverty. Our goal is to become agents of knowledge together with them. The word “become” is important because when some people have been excluded for generations from

seats of learning and seen instead as objects of research, we need to invest enormous efforts and time in developing mutual understanding over the long term. Plenty of knowledge is developed “about” poverty but this leads to statistics based on problems, and on what is lacking. It categorizes people and it leads to policies about catching up. Knowledge gathered “about” people in this way cannot lead to the transformation of world that has created exclusion and inequality.

On the path to becoming agents of knowledge, we need continually to find new ways to enable people to give voice to their hopes and aspirations. We need to find new ways to take responsibility for our own ignorance of who they are and what they think. We need to find new approaches to partnership. People living in poverty invite us to invest in enduring links among people, to build knowledge that frees us from fearing one another, knowledge that gives meaning to our efforts to think, work and live together in new ways.

Alone, none of us can define the full spectrum of humanity. This is why we need a collective undertaking, one where each of us can change our perspective based on the equal dignity of all people. As agents of knowledge, we can agree to rethink the future, beginning with this encounter between people of different backgrounds.

Developing this new approach to becoming agents of knowledge together leads us to another of the themes for this week: evaluation and its impact on action. Just as measurements and indicators shape policy, our approach to evaluating shapes our credibility. The general public and financial donors continually judge the work of civil society based on its evaluations. Even more importantly, our approach to evaluating shapes our credibility with people living in poverty themselves. Have they felt treated only as objects of research and sources of data? Or has their painful life experience been able to inform and shape new approaches to creating communities without exclusion? Have peoples lives remained just as difficult as before or not? Are they any more hopeful than before? Do they feel their dignity is respected?

Joseph Wresinski said: “We must have the humility to recognize that we are all apprentices with so much to learn and accomplish. An overall human rights approach to the deepest abyss of poverty puts us all at the same level.” This need for constant learning is why we are enthusiastic to be welcoming each of you here for Campus. We look forward to learning from one another as we work towards becoming agents of knowledge together.