

**Commission on Human Rights  
59<sup>th</sup> Session, 17 March – 25 April 2003**

3 April 2003

Joint Oral Statement

**Agenda Item 10:  
Human Rights and Extreme Poverty**

**Speaker: Xavier Verzat, International Movement ATD Fourth World**

Madam Chair,

I am speaking to you today on behalf of the International Movement ATD Fourth World, the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Council of Women.

Your Commission has on numerous occasions expressed its concern over the spread of extreme poverty in all countries of the world, regardless of their economic and social status.

In November 2002, the United Nations General Assembly (A/RES/57/211) reiterated that extreme poverty constitutes an infringement of human dignity and called for the implementation of urgent action at the national and international levels to put an end to this situation.

Everyday, the poor themselves try to change their situation, assisted by other citizens committed to their cause.

For example, authorities in a South European country decided to dismantle a shantytown. Its inhabitants feared they might have to live under bridges, in tents, or even in cars. Though they were unsure they could obtain results, they organized themselves to change this situation. A petition of 1,000 signatures was presented to the authorities. The inhabitants even received letters of support originating in other European countries<sup>1</sup>. Thanks to their collective action, everyone received adequate replacement housing.

In an East African country, a rural community committed itself to helping its most disadvantaged families. Two social workers walked several kilometers every day to help the most isolated and downtrodden families. They continually encountered extreme poverty, illness and hunger. The community decided to organize community projects, such as rebuilding the roof of a hut, with each person contributing wood and other materials necessary. This project enabled everyone to participate in the fight against poverty, making it a collective priority.

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<sup>1</sup> Testimony presented for the World Day to Overcome Extreme Poverty, 17 October 2002, cf. [www.oct17.org](http://www.oct17.org)

Similar community involvement is presented and analyzed in the UNICEF study “Reaching the Poorest” (1996).

The work of your Commission and the High Commission on matters concerning human rights and extreme poverty is beginning to inspire initiatives at both the regional and national levels – the most recent example being the adoption of Law 112 in Quebec, Canada. Initiated by civil society and community organizations, and using the report by Leandro Despouy (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1996/13) as reference, this new legislation gives a legal foundation to an approach based on civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights. The goal of this legislation is to promote participation of the poor in community and societal development.

Experience has shown that reliance on certain minimum rights to which other fundamental rights would be subordinate is not sufficient in order to make sustainable progress in the fight against extreme poverty and social exclusion. On the contrary, it is necessary to work towards policies based on each and every fundamental right.

Madam Chair, we ask that:

- the Commission continue its pioneering work in this domain by responding to General Assembly recommendation 55/106 and making a priority of the study of concrete means to create partnership with the very poor, based on the experience of persons or groups already committed to their cause, in all parts of the world;
- the Sub-commission continue its work on a draft framework text on human rights and extreme poverty based on the indivisibility and the interdependence of all human rights;
- the High Commission continue the implementation of its Draft Guidelines: A Human Rights Approach to Poverty Reduction Strategies, particularly by examining whether, if necessary, these guiding principles can be modified in order to be applied in developed countries.

Thank you.

*Translated from the French by Kelly MOUDY*

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