



*“Wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty,  
human rights are violated.  
To come together to ensure that these rights be respected  
is our solemn duty.”*

Father Joseph WRESINSKI (1917-1988), founder of ATD Fourth World

Written contribution of the International Movement ATD Fourth World  
NGO with General Consultative Status  
59<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on Human Rights (2003)  
Agenda Item number 10: Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, paragraph 85

**Fight poverty, eradicate extreme poverty**

In 1987, Father Joseph Wresinski requested that the Commission on Human Rights address the issue of extreme poverty as a violation of Human Rights. Since the 1990's, the Sub-Commission on Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and the Commission on Human Rights have examined the relationship between “Human Rights and extreme poverty.”

For many years, ATD Fourth World has suggested a holistic definition of poverty and extreme poverty, one that has been adopted by several national authorities and by the Sub-Commission in Leandro Despouy's 1996 report on “Human Rights and Extreme Poverty.”<sup>1</sup> This definition concludes “the lack of basic security leads to chronic poverty when it simultaneously affects several aspects of life, when it is prolonged and when it severely compromises people's chances of regaining their rights and of reassuming their responsibilities in the foreseeable future.” It describes the boundary separating poverty from extreme poverty, the multidimensionality of extreme poverty, its persistent nature, and the difficulty of the poorest members of society to exercise their rights and assume their responsibilities independently of others.

The implementation of poverty reduction initiatives around the world remains insufficient. Sergio Vieira de Mello, the High Commissioner for Human Rights at the United Nations declared “Current data suggest that the Millennium Summit target will be reached only in 2030... Undernutrition and hunger are the hallmarks of poverty. The right to food, health and education are fundamental, and their realization must be a priority for us all. The United Nations Human Rights system recognizes the relationship between respecting human rights and eliminating extreme poverty and hunger...”<sup>2</sup>

Considering the target of halving the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day and the proportion of people who suffer from hunger by the year 2015, the question remains whether the remaining half will be better or worse off at the end of that period.

<sup>1</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 53/146 and UN Human Rights Commission Resolution 1996/23 adopting the “Final Report on Human Rights and Extreme Poverty”, submitted by the Special Rapporteur, Leandro Despouy. (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1996/13). This definition was proposed by Father Joseph Wresinski, in the report entitled “Grande pauvreté et précarité économique et sociale”, adopted by the French Economic and Social Council in 1987 (Journal officiel, “Avis et rapport du CES”, p. 25)

<sup>2</sup> Statement by Sergio Vieira de Mello, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, on the occasion of World Food Day (16 October 2002) and the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty (17 October 2002)

What might happen at a grass-roots level? The International Movement ATD Fourth World has been working for several years alongside youths living on the streets in an East African town.<sup>3</sup> Until recently, many of these adolescents earned their living in the old fish market doing odd jobs such as cleaning fish, helping the fish vendors and collecting firewood. These jobs provided enough money for a small meal. The local government initiated a development project to rebuild and modernize the fish market with the financial support of an industrialized country. Those who worked in the market were not consulted in the planning phase of the new market. When the new market opened, only half of them were allowed to continue working there on the condition that they had an identity card. As a result, many of the poorer workers who earned their meager livelihoods in the old market are currently without jobs.

The situation of half the workers has improved, but the other half have been further impoverished. In the same way, reaching the Millennium Development Goals may further impoverish the poorest groups if all means are not provided to avoid it.

\*\*\*

We would like to re-emphasize to the Commission on Human Rights some characteristics of the relationship between Human Rights and extreme poverty that ATD Fourth World has learnt from populations living in extreme poverty around the world.

## **1 Human Rights are interdependent and indivisible: minimum rights for very underprivileged populations runs contrary to this**

The first characteristic is the recognition by national and international institutions that Human Rights are fundamental to international co-operation. This will ensure that all human beings live in dignity, which is the goal of human development, and furthermore that “dignity” should be recognized as “equal dignity.”

The progressive realization of basic rights is a reality that cannot be avoided. However, it is not acceptable to give priority to “four basic rights” (food, water, health and shelter), “understood as the necessary and essential minimum for survival that facilitates the exercise of the other rights to which all human beings are entitled.”<sup>4</sup> This would risk according to these groups merely the minimum necessary conditions for survival. Human rights encompass more than the right to survival: their aim is that all human beings live in dignity.

The extreme poverty faced by populations and States should not discourage the noble ambitions that we have for all humanity, on the contrary, our best resources should be invested in these ambitions.

## **2 The necessity to create legal instruments in partnership with people living in extreme poverty.**

The struggle to survive of people, families and communities living in poverty or extreme poverty throughout the world, as well as their hardships, experiences, and aspirations, must be

---

<sup>3</sup> “Partnership with People Living in Persistent Poverty, the Missing Partners in Sustainable Development” submitted to the World Forum on Sustainable Development by the International Movement ATD Fourth World, August 2002.

<sup>4</sup> See the “Human Rights and Extreme Poverty Programme of Work” presented during the last session of the Sub-Commission on Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (E/CN.4/Sub.2/2002/15).

recognized and taken into account by the international community. Without this understanding, it is impossible to empower the poor and to eliminate poverty.

It is difficult for society-at-large to understand how people living in poverty, often without qualifications or who are illiterate, are able to apply their life experience, not just to change their own situation, but to contribute to a future vision of humanity. This is not to say that people living in poverty are completely absent from all platforms, studies and projects. However, it is one thing to talk about people living in poverty, and quite another thing to hear them speak for themselves. All too often, and with the best of intentions to change their situation, the fate of people living in poverty is discussed without their participation. The poor are rarely considered as intellectual partners.

Initiatives already exist that are working towards these ends, and the international community has the responsibility to take into account these original and enlightening experiences. This was addressed in the resolution on “Humans Rights and Extreme Poverty” (E/CN.4/RES/2002/30) of the Commission on Human Rights. This states the need to “take into account the efforts to empower people living in poverty to participate in decision-making processes on policies that affect them.”

If partnership with people living in poverty is a necessity then so is the support of those who work long-term with these populations. Without this support there would be little possibility for people living in poverty to freely express themselves and to become involved in the future development of their own communities, nations and the international community.

Many initiatives such as international texts, laws and current jurisprudence, are encouraging. In Canada, for example, the province of Quebec adopted “Law 112” on December 13, 2002 which states that “the respect of the dignity of human beings and the recognition of the rights and liberties of which it is tenured constitute the foundations of justice and peace.”

This law paves the way for a national strategy for the fight against poverty and social exclusion. It affirms that “people living poverty and social exclusion are the first to act to transform their situation and that of others.” Amongst its aims are the involvement of people living in poverty in the conception, evaluation and improvement of this strategy.

This law is the result of an unprecedented mobilization of the citizens of Quebec at the initiative of community groups, trade unions and NGOs. Thousands of individuals, including many living in poverty, contributed their experiences and ideas towards the formulation of the first proposal of “Law 112” that became a launch pad for its eventual adoption.

### **3 The accountability of duty-bearers**

The independent expert, Anne-Marie Lizin, makes several proposals for policies in a Human Rights approach to the fight against extreme poverty in her report E/CN.4/2002/55.

In point § 174, “the expert stresses that the necessity of a declaration or a convention on human rights and extreme poverty remains on the agenda of the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights.” Such a legal instrument would remind States of their obligations in the fight against poverty through Human Rights norms in international law.

The statement on poverty of the Committee of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of May 4, 2001 (E/C.12/2001/10) is a possible basis for such a declaration. The Office of the High

Commission recently formulated some draft guidelines in its “Human Rights based Poverty Reduction Strategies.”<sup>5</sup> that could also be a basis for such a declaration. The “Draft Guidelines” are founded on the conviction that Poverty Reduction Strategies must fulfil human rights objectives. They are centered on the participation and empowerment of the poorest members of society. They also emphasize the concept of the interdependence of Human Rights and that “the respect of the dignity inherent in each human being is the basis of freedom, peace, justice and of all Human Rights.” Bearing in mind that people living in poverty are often socially excluded and deprived of basic capabilities, of the right to participate, and to appear in public without shame, they do not define these rights in a minimalist way. The “Draft Guidelines” serve as a tool for the implementation of Human Rights for all by placing the poorest members of society at the center of the process in both a holistic and multidimensional approach.

The programme of work (E/CN.4/Sub.2/2002/15 see footnote 4) initiated by the Sub-Commission will prepare a study to contribute to the drafting of an international declaration on extreme poverty and Human Rights. However, the present approach is restricted to “the most essential aspect of the right to life that is the biological sustainability of human beings.” This deviates from previous work by Human Rights institutions that aim to promote the full enjoyment of all Human Rights: civil, cultural, economic, political and social as well as the right to development. We advise that the programme of work take a comprehensive Human Rights approach to the elimination of extreme poverty.

By strongly affirming the universality of poverty and that its existence constitutes a violation of Human Rights, a declaration would allow the international community, States and society-at-large, to see the necessity to adopt international norms with which to fight it. It would fulfill the requirement of article 28 of the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” which stipulates “Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.”

International Movement ATD Fourth World  
Web-site: [www.atd-quartmonde.org](http://www.atd-quartmonde.org)

Headquarters: F-95480 Pierrelaye (France)  
E-mail: [atdint@atd-quartmonde.org](mailto:atdint@atd-quartmonde.org)

Geneva branch  
E-mail: [atd.quartmonde-geneve@span.ch](mailto:atd.quartmonde-geneve@span.ch)

---

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.unhchr.ch/development/povertyfinal.html>