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***Giving priority to families puts ending extreme poverty
at the heart of our world's governance***

Children, whatever background they are born into, eventually discover and endure different kinds of human and institutional violence. These forms of violence can end up shaping the way children look at the world, how they feel about things, how they think and behave and look at the world. When children grow up in a situation of extreme poverty, in some of the most abandoned and forgotten rural areas or urban districts, whether they live in the north or the south, they are born into a world with “injustice and violence everywhere you turn,” as their parents say.

Some of the most visible forms of violence are linked to armed conflict and gang violence. But the children and their families living in these situations and also living in extreme poverty speak first of the more insidious forms of violence linked to their material deprivations:

- There is violence linked to hunger, when family members know there is not enough to go around and each of them must face the fact that some will get less food than others. In Bolivia, there is a boy whose hunger pains show in his face. He is a talented drummer and when he plays, his face is peaceful, but when waiting his turn to play the drums, he holds his stomach and his face shows clearly how much he is suffering from hunger.
- Children also grow up with the violence linked to a lack of housing to protect them from heat, cold and injury, like Arsen, a four-year-old boy growing up on the perimeter of a garbage dump in Madagascar, getting cuts and then infections on his bare feet to the point where he has learned to walk using only part of his feet to try to keep the festering infections away from the polluted ground. In Ireland, Rose describes her struggle with homelessness when she was a girl. Since the age of 8, to request a spot in a shelter, she had to go to the police every day before school. But as she grew older, she became less and less of a priority for them and was given a bed only every third night, having to fend for herself on the other two nights.
- The environment is another source of violence harming children's health and well-being because the only places they manage to live tend to be flood zones full of polluted waters, in condemned buildings or districts where mudslides make construction impossible. Often, shanties of plastic sheeting and straw are so frail that when it rains, mothers stay awake all night to try to move the children out of way the many leaks that shift from place to place. And when this kind of shanty washes away entirely, or when a family is banished or evicted, there is the violence of losing everything once again and needing to find a way to start over.

Children living in extreme poverty also grow up discovering and enduring the violence of exclusion, of discrimination and bullying, of stigmatization:

- Children sense very quickly when teachers, social workers, judges, bosses have no understanding of their parents' courage and experience, and no interest in or respect for their views. They see that society's institutions reduce their parents to objects of exploitation or of charity. This disdain is something that deeply struck Joseph Wresinski, founder of ATD Fourth World, when he was a child. Benefactors from the local church who sometimes gave his mother used clothing for her children would cross to the other side of the street to avoid greeting her in town.
- These same children also discover very early the violence of bullying and low expectations that

shut them out of schools and the world of learning. How many children who had been excited about their first day of school end up crushed within a few days, certain that they cannot learn? How many children from impoverished rural communities are taught that the future is in the cities, and that what their families could teach them is of little value? Too many children find the doors of school closed to them, or end up leaving school without having learned to read and write. In schools where children do not feel known, valued or heard, their minds remain untapped, their creative and intellectual potential hidden and injured.

There is also violence among family members and within neighborhoods, and children understand very early that there are two kinds of violence. Some violence is linked to seeking power and money, to gangs, to drug trafficking. There is also violence that explodes from daily humiliation, from the frustration of never finding words to express oneself, from never being able to say freely what one thinks when you must depend too much on others to survive.

At the same time, these children also discover that their families look for ways to resist violence and to articulate their values. There is a mother who lies awake at nights knowing that one of her older children has gotten caught up in gang life and is out selling drugs. She is worried that he may be killed. But at the same time she is worried about the other mothers whose children may end up buying drugs from her son and spiraling into misery. Another mother knows that her son wants to avenge the murder of his friend and looks for ways to stop him and to keep his heart from hardening. Elsewhere, a father refuses to send a neighbor's son to prison, knowing only too well that the prison conditions in his country can destroy lives forever.

Deep within themselves, people living in extreme poverty carry a sense of peace that the world does not see. Families living in extreme poverty have unique ways of resisting violence and making it possible to live together. While unnoticed and invisible, collectively these efforts are worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize.

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We live in a society where the attempts to protect some people from violence end up creating complete insecurity for others – through racial profiling, the building of walls and borders, and through war. Many experts analyze and try to understand the causes and mechanisms of the violence against people. But people living in extreme poverty have experience and their own analysis to contribute.

Violence is a particularly intimate issue that can be difficult for any person to speak about because it affects people so acutely. Despite this, it is concern for their children that leads parents in many countries to tell us, “Violence is about our lives and the lives of others. We cannot leave such a crucial issue only in the hands of experts. We have to find courage to break the silence and to bear witness to the violence of poverty. We have to create new pathways toward living together in peace.” Their determination led ATD Fourth World to begin in 2008 a participatory research on this question in many low-income districts around the world, knowing that people living in extreme poverty have a crucial contribution to make in finding peace.

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Extreme poverty, in and of itself, creates an unceasing violence that destroys the lives of children and their families. Working toward peace means implementing a human rights-based approach toward ending extreme poverty. One parent tells us, “All day long, I'm struggling for our family to survive, searching for food, for warm clothes. Then when I'm about to fall asleep, I realize—tomorrow will be just as hard. And that kills me.” Day after day, and generation after generation, parents and children are worn down together by the harshness of poverty. This is why fighting extreme poverty is a

question of human rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child was a ground-breaking milestone. But for the very poorest children, it remains impossible to defend their rights while their families and communities remain mired in deep poverty. Protecting children's rights requires that we protect the rights of those who are closest to children. Parents living in extreme poverty have knowledge and understanding of what our society needs to change, but they have no opportunities to share what they know. A woman in Bolivia said that before joining our “people's university”, she was sure that she would die without ever having had a chance to speak of the things she carries the most deeply in her heart.

Putting an end to extreme poverty remains an immense challenge that requires us to harness our collective intelligence, to unleash the potential of every facet of human knowledge and of each person. In founding ATD Fourth World, Joseph Wresinski used to say that he was not bringing the world new ideas, but instead new partners. Our challenge is to learn to think and act together, to replace thinking that builds walls between people with thinking that recognizes each person and links us to one another. A World Bank study affirmed that the poor themselves are experts on poverty. But the world's discourse on development and poverty remains dominated by the point of view of those who are not poor: academics, politicians, civil servants... Our collective blind spot remains the contribution of those who, in every country, find themselves living in the most violent conditions because of exclusion, and whose voices remain silent. On occasion, their input may be sought, but at the same time limited to the framework of anti-poverty programs, when in fact their contribution is of great value to the many challenges our world faces, whether social or scientific, ethical or cultural, economic or spiritual. Freeing the planet “from fear and from want” is a tall order and requires every one of us to contribute to shaping comprehensive and forward-looking approaches to living together differently.

We must take advantage of the 2015 deadline to look together at the impact of the Millennium Development Goals in the lives of children, families and populations who continue today to endure situations of extreme poverty, discrimination, exclusion and stigmatization, and hence of violence. This evaluation should give us the means to make proposals for a world policy to put at the heart of our governance “freedom from fear and freedom from want”, in the name of the treasure of each irreplaceable child—of her vantage point, of his imagination, of their minds, their strength and their friendship.