



**Building vibrant communities; strengthening capacities  
for justice, equity, and collective action**  
Side event of the UN Commission for Social Development organized by Baha'i  
International – 10<sup>th</sup> February 2011

**HOW TO BUILD VIBRANT COMMUNITIES WITH THE MOST EXCLUDED**  
**International Movement ATD Fourth World**



Thank you so much to all of you that are attending this meeting, to Baha'i for hosting it and for giving me the opportunity to speak.

I am part of the International Movement ATD Fourth World. Our main concern is extreme poverty and human rights. For many years we have had to fight so that extreme poverty is recognized as a violation of human rights. It has never been an intellectual idea, it came from the experience of being very close to people that suffered from the insecurity, the exclusion, the violence and the stigmatization of living in extreme poverty.

Now we have arrived to the recognition of this idea at different levels: at the international level, the United Nations has an independent expert on extreme poverty and human rights, there is a resolution on the theme. There is also recognition of this relationship in civil society.

So, we have made a big step. What is next? What do we need to do to respect human rights when we are talking of people living in extreme poverty?

I would like to share the example of a small project in

Burkina Faso and the lessons we learned from that project.

We created a workshop: *Initiation to weaving and pre-school activities* with young mothers and their children in Burkina Faso.

The stated goal of this project was: “to weave ties between young single mothers, their preschool age children and their communities”.

**This project developed from people and the reality of their everyday lives**

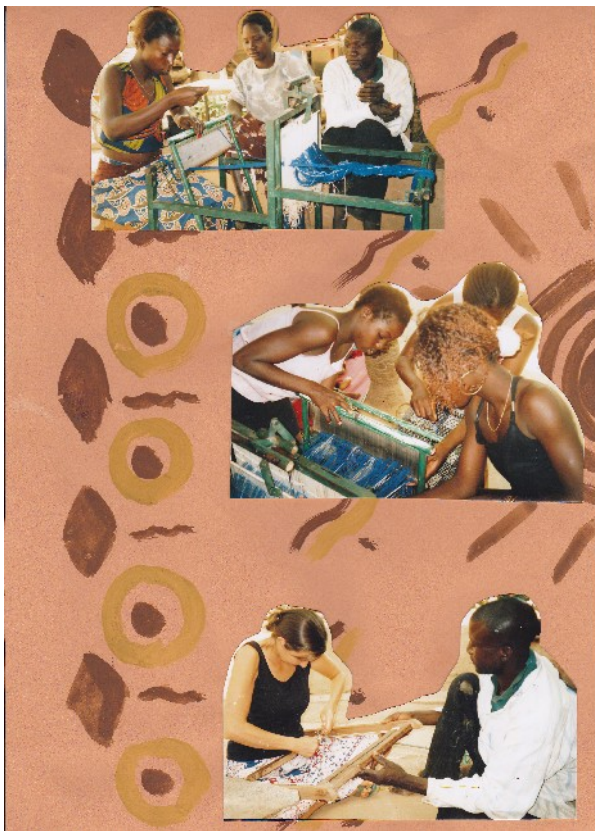
Instead of developing a project and then accepting participants who fit, this project was born out of our preoccupation for 4 young mothers. Their lives were the starting point:

- Ages 17 to 28, none had any training or income generating activity (they had either never been to school, or done 3 to 5 years max of schooling) All had tried to sell fruit in front of their homes, or sell fried dough, etc. But they always ended up using the small profits to face daily needs (buying food, coal, water, etc)

- All had bad reputations in their communities.
- All had preschool age children. Some of the girls had offers to participate in other training programs, on the condition that they entrust their children to social services. Because of their fear of losing their children, they refused these trainings.
- Their children were visibly exhausted by the instability of their living conditions. The mothers expressed their desire that their children be able to go to school one day, but their living conditions made it impossible for the children to acquire the basic skills necessary (motor and verbal skills, social skills).

*Objectives:*

- 1) Gain recognition for these young women through an income -generating activity respected in the country.
- 2) Dialogue with them on issues concerning their children's education.
- 3) Reinforce their ties within their communities.



We also had an overall objective: The project would only be a success if we were all still participating at the end of the cycle: the 4 young mothers, their 6 children and the professional weaver, a disabled man living in poverty actively involved in FWM, Ana and her son, and myself.

Every aspect of the weaving project was then developed from the observations I just gave and our list of goals born out of those observations. At every moment of evaluation or readjustment we came back to these observations as a reminder that the preoccupation for these girls and their children is the motor behind the project; that was the driving force, not any objective idea of what the project should be. This is harder than it sounds: there was some pressure from well-intentioned friends to make the project more “professional”; more focused on efficiently learning marketable weaving skills. There was pressure from the donors to show its success.

Three of four times, we were in danger of having someone drop out, and we came back to this overall objective and restated together that this was our first priority.

**Lessons learned**

**Lesson:** We realized that if we wanted to live up to our goal of making this a group success, we would need to take time because of the humiliation and failure that had defined people's lives; when we are with people living in extreme poverty projects can't always go quickly with an “efficiency” that we'd like.

**Lesson: The successes were not always what we would have imagined.**

The project ended up enabling the women to

- 1) gain recognition from others through a respected trade.

- 2) Be more active in developing their children's skills
- 3) reinforce positive relationships within their communities
- 4) develop a more stable economic and social life

If you judge this project solely by how many of the participants are earning a living through weaving, it wouldn't be judged as successful.

**Lesson: Need to involve the community or entourage of people living in poverty**

People do have networks of solidarity, even if they are fragile, even if we don't see them at the beginning. Sometimes outside projects inadvertently undermine, and sometimes destroy them. Getting to know and building something with those networks is a delicate process. But from the moment that you start to glimpse these networks, you can't think of the person or family as isolated and alone anymore; there is something to build on, you just have to find it and nurture it.

During the weaving project, each week, there were visits to each of the women's neighborhoods, to support them in the income-generating activities that they were beginning, but also to greet the neighbors and family members, and show them photos from the album that we developed throughout the project. We spoke with those neighbors each week. We understood from these visits that the young women's relationships in the neighborhood were fragile, but that people were concerned about them and wanted to support them.

So the contacts we made with the friends, family and neighbors of each young woman were as important as the training itself. The stability in a neighborhood and the solidarity with neighbors were conditions for being able to earn a living there: the neighbors became key in supporting the women in their future projects.

Throughout this example we can see that fundamental rights as school for children, training and work for the parents can only become real for people living in extreme poverty in the context of a community, of the fundamental bonds within the community. This is what I will put behind the word EQUITY, this is what is needed to achieve equity with the poorest populations.

Here is the huge challenge for us: how do we build vibrant communities that include its most deprived persons meaningfully, those that are often *regarded with mixtures of pity, fear, disgust and even hatred*.

Just to finish I would like to address the concept of JUSTICE:

How do people living in poverty perceive and experience justice?

I will just quote what Yvanite Saint-Claire, from Haiti, said referring to a period of extreme violence in her county: "Although my family was very affected by that (violent) period, I didn't want to stay in that violence and I didn't want to continue to suffer. (...) I didn't want to condemn those who had harmed my family. (...) And even though the court said I was right and the lady was convicted to pay me money, I didn't want to demand that money. I didn't want her children to suffer from her lack of income and have that on my conscience".

What I am trying to say is that people living in extreme poverty, the most excluded and stigmatized face us with an incredible challenge to reach justice, equity and collective action, they challenge us to be able to leave many of our convictions to think with them of the world in a different way and to act in consequence.

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