

Intervention – Crystal Dantzler

Panel on Extreme Poverty and Violence Against Children

Organized by ATD Fourth World, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children (Marta Santos Pais) and UNICEF at the United Nations

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Hi, my name is Crystal Dantzler. I am from Brooklyn, New York and I am 17 years old. Through my family I have been involved in the Tapori Children's Movement since I was born. I grew up taking part in a Street Library that took place in East New York where we lived. Street Library brought books and art to my area and showed me that there are positive influences, even in difficult areas.

In October 2010 I took part in a meeting between UNICEF Child Protection officials Susan Bissell and Theresa Kilbane and delegates of the Fourth World Movement with an experience of poverty. Among my peers were Fourth World Movement delegates from Haiti and Honduras. We shared our experiences struggling against extreme poverty and violence in our communities. I was struck by our common experiences with poverty, exclusion, violence and gangs.

The Haitian delegation spoke about aid programs that didn't take the time to know the community they were helping. In some cases, funds and aid ended up in the control of gangs rather than being given out evenly to everybody, giving more power to those who perpetuate violence. The delegation from Haiti also spoke of aid distribution that was developed between the Fourth World Movement and Action Against Hunger, which ensured that all people were reached in the community, especially the poorest. With the help of young people, those hardest to reach on high hills and areas of the city thought too dangerous to go into were counted and received the supplies necessary for survival. Without these young people, Fourth World Movement and Action Against Hunger might not have reached the people they did in time. The distribution was peaceful and calm and the people receiving were actively involved, which eased violence and suffering, rather than perpetuate it.

As I said before, I noticed that I have experiences in common with the children who spoke from Haiti and Honduras. Yvenson from Haiti spoke about the close, crowded living conditions in post-earthquake Haiti, and the increase in crime and violence that have resulted. A spike in rapes has been recorded and young women, barely into their teens, are having babies of their own. Some similar issues can be seen in close, crowded living conditions of some housing projects in New York. Well where I am from there are 14 floor with 10 apartments on each floor, so there are 140 families in one building, so you can imagine the size of the apartments

themselves. It's not the same, but gangs, violence and sexual assault are not unique to Haiti. They are part of life just outside these doors, in our overcrowded, under resourced communities. Poverty does not know any race, religion or country. It is not a concept that is understood only by other nations. The face of poverty might change from one place to the next, but how it is felt is the same. Our shared experiences of poverty connect us.

Carmen Banegas from the Honduran delegation, spoke about children and exclusion. Extreme poverty is very common in the community where the Honduran Street Library takes place. Sometimes kids have to miss school to help out their parents. Other times, if they do get to go to school, they might be unprepared, or get made fun of by their classmates. In Brooklyn, I see similar things. Kids miss school because their family is poor. Because they can't afford nice clothes and school supplies, they get teased and harassed at best, and repeatedly jumped at worst. I remember when I first moved to Farragut Housing, I attend M.S.117. It was very different than my old school in East New York P.S.328. All the popular kids in my old school had to wear gap and BabyPhat clothes but in 117 the kids had on Coogi and Rockaway name brand clothes. So I would get picked on cause I didn't wear that. It got so bad that one day I was walking to the bus stop going home and 7 girls had jumped me. But sometimes it isn't because of the clothes you wear, or the nice things you have. Some get pregnant, or have to work more to help their families. As Carmen said, education isn't truly free, and extreme poverty makes kids miss out on it and forces them back into a life of ongoing violence. This is not right. When a child's mental and social development is affected and their physical well-being is threatened because extreme poverty, their human rights are being grossly violated. The street library in Honduras creates a place of peace where youth who are dealing with violence on a daily basis participate and support each other. Like the young people in Haiti, they look for those who are hardest to reach and who have been forgotten about.

In New York, gangs are one of the biggest problems facing my community. Kids whose parents have to spend all their time working and surviving because of poverty don't always have the time and resources to give kids the attention they need. Some kids look for family bonds in gangs instead. In a community where violence is everywhere, gangs give power and protection that create a lot of pressure to join. It's not the parents who are at fault, but extreme poverty itself that creates these situations in my neighborhood.

This is a system that perpetuates violence and increases the prison population, which in turn causes even more poverty and violence. Can you see the cycle?

Violence is a serious situation in poor communities. It creates a cycle that keeps people in poverty. But extreme poverty is a form of violence itself, because it creates an environment in

which children and families have to defend their rights daily.