

Summary

Turning rhetoric into action - building effective partnerships to combat poverty and exclusion

Friday October 17 2008, Conference Room 8, UNHQ, New York
The International Day for the Eradication of Poverty

Ms. Gemma Adaba (moderator), Representative to the UN, International Confederation of Free Trade Unions; **Mr. Abdul Alim**, Counselor, Permanent Mission of Bangladesh to the United Nations; **Ms. Diana Alarcon**, Senior Advisor for Inclusive Development and Poverty Reduction, UNDP; **Ms. Patricia Bailey**, Activist, ATD Fourth World, United Kingdom; **Ms. Danila Boneva**, Human Rights Officer, NY Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; **Ms. Sylvia Borren**, Co-Chair, Global Call to Action against Poverty; **Mr. Eugen Brand**, Director General of International Movement ATD Fourth World; **Ms. Widney Brown**, Senior Director of International Law and Policy, Amnesty International; **Ms. Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona**, UN Independent Expert on the question of Human Rights and Extreme Poverty; **Ms. Angela Medina Castro**, Activist, ATD Fourth World, Peru [representing **Ms. Silvia Velasco Quispe**, Activist, ATD Fourth World, Peru]; **Mr. Matt Davies**, Activist, ATD Fourth World, United Kingdom; **Mr. Philippe Delacroix**, Special Advisor to the Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations; **Sr. Sujita Kallapurakkathu**, Superior General, Sisters of Notre Dame; **Mr. Kevin Locke**, Activist, Lakota Tribe and Bahai' International Community; **Mr. Manuel Montes**, Chief of Policy Analysis and Development, Financing for Development, DESA; **Ms. Tahirih Naylor**, NGO Representative to the UN, Baha'i International Community, and Chair, NGO Committee for Social Development; **Mr. Michael Nyangi**, Community activist and organizer, Kibera, Kenya; **Bro. Steve O'Neil**, NGO Representative to the UN, Marianists International and Vice Chair, NGO Committee for Social Development; **Mr. Jacques Petidor**, Activist, ATD Fourth World, Haiti; **Mr. Nikhil Seth**, Director of Office for ECOSOC Support and Coordination; **Ms. Ingrid Srinath**, Secretary-General, CIVICUS; **Ms. Elsa Stamatopoulou**, Acting Director, Division of Social Policy and Development, DESA; **Ms. Julia Tripp**, Research Assistant & Constituent Coordinator, Center for Social Policy, UMass Boston; **H.E. Fekitamoeloa 'Utoikamanu**, Ambassador and Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Tonga to the United Nations; **Mr. Quentin Wodon**, Lead Specialist for Africa, World Bank

In her welcome *Gemma Adaba* acknowledged that despite the diversity of the group of roundtable participants, all shared a common commitment to promoting understanding and inclusion. Ms. Adaba said that at some point, each one of us has felt excluded or lacked access in some way, similar to the experiences of those who are living in extreme poverty and in a state of exclusion. Ms. Adaba stated that October 17th, initiated by the International Movement ATD Fourth World, is a day for people who actually have the experience of poverty to come together, and have an opportunity to speak, be heard, and to honor the lives of these individuals in our common humanity. Ms. Adaba expressed her desire to use this event to have a highly interactive dialogue, where we are able to think about all the issues of poverty, the experience of poverty, and how we can be agents of change. Ms. Adaba referenced the roundtable toolkit, "Turning Rhetoric into Action: Building effective partnerships to combat extreme poverty and exclusion", and emphasized that the theme for our interventions and presentations today was how to

move from talk to action, build partnerships, and actually make a difference in terms of combating poverty.

Kevin Locke, a member of the Lakota nation and a representative of the Baha'i International Community, led the group in a prayer song in the Lakota language about an eagle. Mr. Locke said the eagle is symbolic of the ascendant nature of the human spirit- the innate capacity of the human spirit to rise to nobility. Mr. Locke drew the comparison between an eagle soaring into a new day, and a person striving to escape the darkness and come into the light.

H. E. Fekitamoeloa 'Utoikamanu discussed poverty in the Pacific region and how we can promote more engagement from people in poverty as part of the solution to poverty reduction. The Ambassador defined poverty as inadequate levels of sustainable human development in access to essential public goods and services and economic opportunities, and pointed out that many in the region are living in poverty. The Ambassador stressed the need for improvements in access to healthcare and education, employment opportunities, and measures to reduce HIV/AIDS and malnutrition, which are growing threats in the region. Despite the growing hardships, lack of funding by development organizations, and increasing dependency on aid, the high level of community involvement and strong safety networks provided by immediate and extended families are some of the core reasons for the resilience of the people of Tonga. The Ambassador emphasized the necessity of the engagement of people living in poverty, and the need to encourage their participation in the fight against poverty through community involvement. The Ambassador concluded by stressing the importance of placing the needs and participation of people living below the poverty line in the policies advocated and implemented by governments and development partners.

Angela Medina Castro read the testimony of *Sylvia Velasco* of Peru, who was unable to attend because of visa complications. Ms. Velasco described her experience during a participatory meeting on UN Draft Guiding Principles on Human Rights and Extreme Poverty, organized by ATD Fourth World, community leaders, and a union of household workers in Cusco Peru, 2007. At the meeting, participants shared their lives and experiences, and learned the importance of their individual experiences, while collectively organizing themselves as a movement to defend their rights and ask that authorities don't overlook the contribution of people living in poverty. They made concrete propositions to the text of the UN Draft Guiding Principles. The experience of sharing stories, meals and activities, allowed the group to quickly develop trust, confidence, understanding and solidarity. Ms. Velasco wrote that the group still participates in "Uyarinkalusunchis" (gatherings), which means "listen to us" in Quechua, in order to further organize themselves.

Matt Davies and *Patricia Bailey*, members of ATD Fourth World in London, described "Voices for Change", a project that brought together people living in poverty in London, giving them a platform

for their experiences to be heard and acted upon by relevant practitioners and policy makers. The project involved people living in poverty as peer researchers, who received formal training in areas like confidence-building, public speaking, and interviewing skills to become effective spokespeople on behalf of those experiencing poverty. The peer researchers talked to their peers and asked them what support they needed in order to move themselves out of poverty. A report with concrete proposals was subsequently produced. The experience was beneficial to all parties involved, and many of the peer researchers have since begun college courses, employment, work experience placements, or volunteering.

Manuel Montes spoke of financing for poverty eradication. Mr. Montes stated that even during periods of high economic growth, the incidence of poverty did not change. Given the current economic crisis and the potential for decreased growth in developing countries as a result of decreases in developed countries, Mr. Montes suggested that government assistance should not be based on percentage of GDP and we must ensure that development assistance, as a proportion of aid, continues to be committed.

Philippe Delacroix, of the French mission, expressed his country's commitment to fighting poverty and acknowledged the importance of including both developed and developing countries in discussions of poverty, as both groups have citizens who are living in poverty. Mr. Delacroix stated that people living in poverty must be able to participate in all aspects of political, economic and social life and that the international community must ensure that the poorest be involved in decision-making processes and that policies should benefit the poorest members of society. Mr. Delacroix expressed his desire to utilize a participatory approach in implementing the Second International Decade for the Eradication of Poverty.

Nikhil Seth, reflected on his experiences growing up in India and expressed three main ideas. First, the needs of people living in poverty differ depending on where they are from, and that they need to be present in discussions of aid quality and quantity. Mr. Seth also spoke of the need to develop innovative solutions that work within the community in the implementation of poverty reduction strategies in urban areas. Finally, Mr. Seth expressed that recipients and donors need to have a say in terms of aid quality. He also expressed the importance of involving people in poverty in policy discussion at governmental and UN levels.

Magdalena Sepulveda said that while participation is highlighted, people in poverty aren't actually given a meaningful role in policy formulation because certain groups like minorities, women, and people in poverty are marginalized and discriminated against. Persons living in poverty should participate in designing benchmarks and objectives for policies, and the implications of policies need to be transparent so those living in poverty can understand their options and be heard. Ms. Sepulveda also drew the comparison between the reduction of poverty spending and the increase in military spending, and

stressed that we need to encourage governments not to cut money going to poverty reduction even when times are tough.

Sylvia Borren, of GCAP, emphasized that we have to get rid of the incoherence both within our governments and the corporate sector. Ms. Borren also urged the group to change power relationships in terms of gender and the coherence of our lives, and expressed that we have the means, words, and agreements to do so, yet somehow we're not finding the serious commitment and will to do it. Ms. Borren also pointed out that billions of dollars can be raised for a financial crisis within a matter of weeks, and yet, children are suffering worldwide and funding needs for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals are still unmet.

Abdul Alim, of the Bangladesh Mission, began by stating that discourses on poverty will remain incomplete without looking at statistics and where we stand in terms of poverty alleviation globally, citing that poverty levels have been significantly undercounted. Mr. Alim also said the combination of developing a strong partnership between stakeholders, using a network of NGOs as service providers, microfinance and informal education have led to the success of drastically reducing poverty levels in Bangladesh. He also expressed his desire that the financial crisis will help in reformulating the international financial architecture to address the huge gaps of capacity in developing countries. Mr. Alim concluded by suggesting that the only way poverty will become history is to develop a strong partnership with people in poverty.

Quentin Wodon, from the World Bank, discussed the difficulty of true participation, and that even though we may call for participation; we are actually very far from it. Mr. Wodon said that participation achieves several things: a better awareness of the plight of people in extreme poverty, a better understanding of the real life impact and consequences of a policy, including unintended consequences, and re-strengthening participants and communities.

Ingrid Srinath said that despite all the conversations and discussions on participation of people in poverty, very little seems to be changing. Ms. Srinath said that what seems to be happening at every level in policy-making is that there is not the genuine belief that people in poverty, marginalized people, women, children, the disabled, etc. not only *can* participate, but *must* participate. Ms. Srinath stated that participation must be thought of as a right, and not simply as an entitlement or a privilege. Ms. Srinath also explained that the only way that communities and individuals are going to be able to achieve their rights is if they are first aware of what their rights are and that we need to dedicate our attention to human rights education. We also need to defend the rights of civil society. Ms. Srinath concluded by urging roundtable participants to get out of our boxes, whether the boxes are thematic issues, or geographies, or race or gender and start to collaborate more fruitfully.

Jacques Petidor, of Haiti, said that the participation of those living in poverty is based on partnership and that they must be “agents of their own destiny”. Mr. Petidor believes that pretending to change the world without the inclusion of those who experience human rights violations firsthand is an illusion. He also said that we can learn the value of patience, modesty and trust from the poorest, and that these things must be cultivated before we can reach a true partnership. Mr. Petidor pointed out that participation, which involves a merging of knowledge or learning by exchange, is an ethical obligation.

Sujita Kallapurakkathu spoke of her experience working with women living in poverty in North India, and discovered that many of these women felt that poverty deprived them of human dignity. Ms. Kallapurakkathu said the first step in the participation process involves establishing relationships with people in poverty by using active listening, letting them define what poverty is, and what aspects we need to deal with. The second step involves creating collectives of common experiences and going to the roots of poverty together. Because poverty is a structural problem, Ms. Kallapurakkathu believes that we need to build structures of inclusion in order to lead to systemic change and that women can be best empowered through education and employment.

Elsa Stamatopoulou discussed the relationship between the concepts of well-being and development, citing that the concept of well-being goes to the heart of participation. Ms. Stamatopoulou made several points: 1) We need to train people for participation by providing basic education and securing basic needs, in order to create an environment for participation; 2) The approaches we take in poverty eradication need to be culturally sensitive to the communities that are disadvantaged; 3) We can promote participation by using Amartya Sen’s concept of self-determined development; 4) Because poverty can be regarded in a human rights context as a state of exclusion and discrimination, laws, policies, and budgets should reflect inclusion and capacity-building; 5) We should consider that participation is important for building a society for all. Ms. Stamatopoulou also cited some examples of participatory research used at DESA.

Danila Boneva, from the Office of the High Commission on Human Rights, linked the fundamental principles of accountability and transparency with the principle of participation. Ms. Boneva said that we will not have meaningful participation, unless we ensure that key decision-makers in governments, international organizations, the UN and the international financial institutions, are actually accountable for the policies that they design, implement, monitor and evaluate. Ms. Boneva acknowledged the reality that we don’t necessarily have the time, will, or capacity to engage in the meaningful participation of people in poverty and other excluded groups. Ms. Boneva also pointed out a state of exclusion of the human rights community from some of the key policy debates that are happening at the international level, both inside and outside of the UN.

Amnesty International's *Widney Brown* stressed the idea that nobody should be making decisions about people living in poverty if these individuals are not at the table, citing the slogan "Nothing about us, without us". Ms. Brown discussed the right to information and said that people in poverty must be fully engaged and armed with the information they need to be able to have a meaningful ability to participate in the conversation. Furthermore, information must be accessible in a timely manner and not merely printed. Ms. Brown also recognized the importance for accountability from governments and media independence.

Eugen Brand, Director General of ATD Fourth World, began by thanking all the roundtable participants for their attendance and saying that thanks to them this work has also been made possible. Mr. Brand stated that when we speak of participation, one of the first responsibilities we have is to be precise about what participation consists of - it's not just a question of consultation, but rather to think together and merge our knowledge. Mr. Brand also believes that we need to make the necessary conditions to be able to think together, and we should acknowledge how unprepared we are to participate in true dialogue between people in extreme poverty and those not. Mr. Brand acknowledged that people in poverty are taking a risk when they enter into a dialogue with us, just as those who have public responsibilities also take a risk because the world doesn't really expect this kind of dialogue. Mr. Brand acknowledged that despite the number of initiatives that already exist, we fail to draw ideas, methodologies and pedagogies of action from them in order to learn together and share between people in poverty and others. Mr. Brand concluded by urging the roundtable participants to look within their own countries to find out what public places already exist for reflection between people living in poverty and those not.

Michael Nyangi gave personal examples of his life and a microfinance project in the Kibera shantytowns in Kenya. Mr. Nyangi said that those who are living in poverty are sidelined, and if you can involve them in participation, then change can be realized. He stressed the importance of finding the right people to work with, and that participation can not be realized unless we participate with the right people. Mr. Nyangi also suggested that non-governmental organizations should work directly with community-based organizations to find solutions for reducing poverty.

Janice Wood-Wexel, chair of the NGO Committee on Mental Health, emphasized the importance of including women in the conversation about participation and human rights. She stated that if women are not included in the discussion on human rights, then social development fails.

Julia Tripp is a grass-roots organizer for individuals who are homeless; she pointed out that it is not just individuals in developing countries who are marginalized and excluded. Ms. Tripp said that African-Americans face this same issue in the United States, calling the situation a 'state of emergency' referring to over-prevalence in the jail system, homeless shelters, instances of mental illness, and

HIV/AIDS. Ms. Tripp also suggested that people living in poverty should have the last word in policy, programming and practice.

Tahirih Naylor, who represents the NGO Committee for Social Development, said that international organizations, members of civil society and other groups need to take a people-centered approach and engage in capacity-building of individuals living in poverty. Ms. Naylor suggested that we must be willing to listen and adopt an attitude of learning in our approach to developing participatory programs and policies, and that we must examine and evaluate the systemic issues that underlie our current processes.

Steve O'Neil responded to Mr. Wodon's comment on the difficulty of true participation. Mr. O'Neil suggested that one of the ways that participation can occur is if each party does not try to take on the responsibility of creating a participatory dialogue alone, because true participation will happen in a realistic partnership. Mr. O'Neil said we must also be proactive in facilitating community organizing and capacity-building.

Gemma Adaba closed out the round table event by thanking all the participants for a rich discussion and ATD Fourth World for organizing the event. Ms. Adaba reflected on several themes that emerged over the dialogue including the need to ensure that we are creating genuine spaces for dialogue and participation, to closely examine the possibility of working with community-based organizations, and link the global with the local in terms of participation.