ATD
FOURTH WORLD

"Extreme poverty is violence - Breaking the silence - Searching for peace"

2009-2012 Action-Research Project and International Colloquium

Conclusions

August 2012

Over a period of three years, the International Movement ATD Fourth World conducted an action-research project on the connections between extreme poverty, violence and peace, involving more than a thousand people from all over the world. Five regional seminars enabled the researchers to base themselves on local realities and identify common themes. An international colloquium with academics, grass-roots workers from other NGOs and international organisations was organised in January 2012 in Pierrelaye, France, to finalise the results of this research. An event was organised at UNESCO in Paris to present the results of the action-research project to the general public. The conclusions presented in this document have been prepared by a group that was representative of the diversity of participants in this Colloquium.

The Process of Gaining Understanding of "Extreme Poverty, Violence, and Peace"

As part of its 2008-2012 focus on "Striving Together to End Poverty", the International Movement ATD Fourth World took action in order to develop its own knowledge of the violence experienced by those in extreme poverty and of the conditions needed to strive toward peace in their communities. Drawing the attention of local, national, and international organisations to the violence of poverty was also a priority.

Local ATD Fourth World teams from 25 countries [1] participated in this research. More than a thousand people were involved, and three hundred of them attended five seminars [2] in different regions of the world. In each of these seminars the members of ATD Fourth World participating were from diverse backgrounds: some were activists living in extreme poverty, others were full-time Volunteer Corps members, and others were from a variety of professions.

The written stage of the research was conducted in French, English, and Spanish. Participants were also able to think and express themselves in their mother tongues: Arabic, Aymara, the Creoles of Haiti, Mauritius and Reunion Island, German, Malagasy, Mooré, Quechua, Sango, Swiss-German, Swahili and Wolof.

The process of gaining understanding was based on the dynamics of the "merging of knowledge" [3], which acknowledges that people experiencing extreme poverty are the primary agents of their own knowledge, and which sets up the conditions in which they can formulate this knowledge themselves, with others of the same background, before merging this knowledge with that of other groups, professionals, associations and academics.

The following questions were adapted to each local context: *"What is the most violent part of my life? What are the consequences of this violence? How do I cope? How can I speak out about it? What does peace mean for me? What do I need to live in peace? How do I promote peace myself?"*

The January 2012 International Colloquium concluding the action-research project gathered 40 people involved in ATD Fourth World's "merging of knowledge" process. After sharing their knowledge internally for two days, they next discussed this knowledge for another two days with 25 people invited from academia, grass-roots organisations and governmental and political bodies, who gave their own reactions and contributions. [4] To end the Colloquium, all 65 participants presented their findings to an audience of 450 people in UNESCO House in Paris.

1 Belgium, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Canada, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Germany, France, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Mauritius, Ireland, the Ivory Coast, Lebanon, Madagascar, Peru, the Philippines, Rwanda, Senegal, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

2 International Seminar in Grand Baie - Mauritius, December 2009 "Extreme poverty is an injustice and a physical and mental violence",; International Seminar in Lima - Peru, August 2010, "Ending the silence"; International Seminar in Frimhurst - Great Britain, March 2011, "Poverty is Violence - Speak Out for Peace"; International Seminar in Pierrelaye - France, June 2011, "Our lives are made up of violence, we must fight for everything"; International Seminar in Dakar, July 2011 "Extreme poverty itself is violence. If extreme poverty ends, peace takes its place."

3 Guidelines for the Merging of Knowledge and Practices: http://www.atd-fourthworld.org/Guidelines-for-the-Merging-of.html?var_recherche=merging%20of%20knowledge

4 In addition to the countries mentioned above, this group of 25 also included people from Brazil, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Paraguay, Poland and Vietnam.

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Summary of the Proceedings

"The violence of contempt and indifference causes chronic poverty, since it inevitably leads to the rejection of one human being by other human beings."

Joseph Wresinski [5]

It is not possible to live in peace as long as the inhuman condition of extreme poverty persists. Extreme poverty is often trivialized, viewed simply as a lack of food, income, adequate housing, education, etc. Yet when we put ourselves in the position of trying to understand and learn from people who suffer these conditions, other realities appear: violence inflicted on people, coupled with the denial of fundamental rights. Material deprivation traps people in the fight for survival; insecurity can cause family breakdown; exploitation is at such levels that it leaves people no way of reaching their potential; humiliation, exclusion and contempt go so far that people living in extreme poverty are not recognized as human beings.

"Our lives are made up of violence." [6] This statement calls into question assistance, education, the fight against poverty and the institutions intended to serve all citizens. Moreover, it radically questions all relations between individuals and peoples. Lack of understanding between people and inappropriate responses result from scant, incomplete knowledge of reality. An understanding of extreme poverty developed without the people concerned is in itself a source of violence and rejection.

In order to break free from these misunderstandings, there is the need to *"break the silence"* [7] surrounding the violence experienced by the poorest and all the efforts they, and others, make to defend themselves against it. When people live in violent situations, they cannot break the silence alone. They know that speaking out as an act of resistance can be turned against them. Collaborative research, stressing every individual's input, and making conscious efforts to make people feel free to speak out are required to develop an accurate understanding. The three-year action-research, and the International Colloquium, made it possible to determine the conditions for this type of research. The participants' common desire for change created trust and resiliant solidarity among them. This made it possible to take risks and dare to *"speak out for peace"* [9].

What sort of peace are we talking about? *"Addressing the violence of extreme poverty without linking it to the perspective of searching for peace reduces us to attributing blame. On the other hand, concentrating only on the search for peace, without putting it in the context of violence, extreme poverty and their consequences, would turn peace into a privilege."* [10]

In a circle of people, be they relatives, a local community or society as a whole, peace means that everyone is valued and given recognition. It means being useful to one's family by providing them with a decent life, and being useful to others. It means being able to assert one's personality and being at peace with oneself.

Peace cannot be based on the silence of those who keep their heads down because they are without means to defend themselves. In the face of violence that can damage people for life, institutions and policy-makers should take the first step.

"If extreme poverty stops, peace will take its place." [11] By withstanding the violence of extreme poverty, those in the worst situations of poverty help us understand what peace means, in order to work toward it everywhere.

5 "The Violence Done to the Poor" (1968), http://www.joseph-wresinski.org/The-Violence-Done-To-The-Poor.html
6 Theme of the seminar in Pierrelaye, France.
7 Theme of the seminar in Lima, Peru.
8 Theme of the seminar in Grand Baie, Mauritius.
9 Theme of the seminar in Frimhust, England.
10 Eugen Brand, Director General, International Movement ATD Fourth World, during the Colloquium at Unesco House.
11 Theme of the seminar in Dakar, Senegal.

Extreme poverty is violence

Being treated as no human being should be

"Like everyone else, I want a good life, but life is so difficult that you cannot live it as you would have hoped." [12]

"People look at you with disgust; they'll even treat you like their enemy."

Alongside the violence of deprivation exists another equally extreme form of violence: the humiliation and contempt that denies a person's humanity, "Like we were not even humans". This attitude leads to many types of violence: continual disrespect, humiliation, discrimination, verbal abuse, and denial of basic rights. This can go as far as physical blows at school, work, and in the street. "Not only did I have nothing, but I was reduced to nothing." People are denigrated, stereotyped in stigmatizing categories, or even referred to with dehumanizing language, such as "cases". While this everyday violence is unbearable for the person on the receiving end, it is either invisible to others or considered normal. It is trivialized by those who perpetrate it and those who witness it without reacting.

"When people disrespect us by labeling us with such words as 'welfare case', 'bad mother', 'incapable', 'good for nothing', it reflects judgment and ignorance, and we feel the violence of being discriminated against, of being non-existent, of not being part of the same world, and not being treated like other human beings. This daily violence is a form of abuse."

The consequence of extreme violence is to silence its victims. The indifference and contempt to which people in chronic poverty are subjected is so violent that they end up feeling unworthy, doubting themselves and seeing themselves as others see them: useless, incapable, good for nothing, outcasts.

Poverty destroys our common humanity. It creates barriers that make communication impossible. There is a dual violence: forcing people to live in extreme poverty; and misunderstanding why they react the way they do. Their tears, their cries are considered manipulation; their anger and disagreement are perceived as aggression; and even their silence is misjudged. Not feeling part of the same humanity prevents people living in extreme poverty from talking about what they feel. Parents blame themselves for being unable to offer their children a decent life, to protect them from the violence in their neighborhood and sometimes even within the family. These humiliations cause suffering, indignation, anger, feelings of injustice and rejection. They result in mistrust of neighbors and institutions, even to the point of fleeing potential assistance. *"This is what kills you, you don't even want to carry on living."*

Institutional violence and violence legitimized by the State

Violence and injustice affect the freedom and the physical and psychological integrity of individuals and families. They are an impediment to their future and affect the cohesion of society. Yet this has been trivialized to such a degree that it does not cause people to question public or private policies when they fail to promote peaceful and safe communities, where everyone would have access to public resources and services.

12 All the quotations in italics are contributions from participants in the three-year project or during the international colloquium.

"A motorway was built from the city to the airport. It had to cross a residential area. Its route was changed so that it was poor families who were displaced and further impoverished by the construction of this highway."
"In our country, when our children have been taken from us and placed into the care of an institution, we are only allowed to write to them once a year. It is forbidden to tell them you are missing them, that you are fighting to get them back, and that you love them, because they say that this can disturb the child!"

"When I was in school I had no book bag, I had to carry everything in my hands. I also wore plastic shoes. The teacher pointed all this out and made fun of me."

"My country announced to the rest of the world that it has already reached the Millennium Development Goals on universal primary education, when in fact it has increased access to school but not its quality. Many children fail exams at the age of ten or older and can neither read nor write."

Here we see various cases either of rejection, or of institutions holding themselves far beyond the reach of individuals. These are acts of violence that institutions embody and accept via their representatives. Too often, institutions claim to have tried everything they can and then blame the resulting violence on those in difficulty. When the latter refuse to enter into a logic of submission and when they develop other defense strategies, they are deemed *"unmanageable"*.

The failure of an institution is sometimes blamed on the professionals who have to deal with these situations with inadequate means. Those who try to show solidarity by fulfilling their professional responsibilities while taking into account the reality of those living in the poorest conditions take the risk of being sidelined in their careers. When this happens, the know-how gained from their understanding is wasted, denied or seen as a threat to the institution instead of a contribution to implementing the institution's mission.

"I worked as a case manager. I was responsible for 'partnering' with people to develop plans for recovery […]. Yet when someone ran into a little trouble, I had to beg the director before the person was finally granted the help. An indignant elderly man said to me, 'After all I had to show you, I was brought a used mattress, and it is stained.' When I told my supervisor, one of the administrators responded that beggars can't be choosers. I felt humiliated and disgusted at the same time."

Institutional violence becomes political violence when it is legitimized by laws or is carried out by the State. This is the case of laws and policies that oblige institutions to maintain people in inhuman conditions of extreme poverty even when these conditions have been shown as being contrary to human rights: repeated evictions, inadequate housing, lack of access to health care, legal support and schooling, and the separating of members from their families

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Institutional violence is rooted in historical violence that has been neither understood nor recognised as such. That is why it continues over generations, making outcasts of individuals, families and entire communities. People living in extreme poverty are left without an understanding of their own history nor of their resistance to poverty. Their only knowledge of their origins is negative and shameful. For others, ignorance of their history keeps prejudice alive and perpetuates exclusion and discrimination.

Denying people the capacity to participate means that they have no access to processes of governance. Policies aimed at reducing poverty by a certain percentage are themselves acts of violence as this implies from the outset that the policies will not concern the whole population.

Aid and development projects that are not adapted to people's needs

In today's social and economic context, where projects must be at least efficient or even profitable in the short term, many institutions do not take the time to get to know and to understand the lives and hopes of the people and families with whom they propose to work.

"An association that wants to help the poor gives wood, sheet metal and cement, but they don't supply people to build the house. If you're a single mother, and you have no money to pay the builders, if you have no place to keep the goods you were given, they deteriorate, the cement becomes rock-hard and unusable. NGOs come with projects that are not developed together with the families concerned, without knowing the reality they live in."

Over the years, very poor families have often developed ways of coping based on their relationships with neighbors and the willingness to find common solutions. All this is as important to them as projects and the change that they bring. But when aid and development projects do not take these realities into account they can unintentionally break these support networks and common links from which the families draw their strength.

"We lived in a very poor neighborhood, but most of us could find work in the area. The neighborhood was demolished, and all the families relocated to a so-called 'model' area. We have houses, but many have lost their livelihoods, and we cannot live without money. I wrote a newspaper article saying that we needed help. Without warning, a truck came to the neighborhood and dumped tons of clothes. Photographers were there to show that we were being helped. But it created strife amongst the community. We need help to ensure that our children succeed and fit in at school, [... and] that our neighborhood can be better accepted by the rest of the town. This assistance has humiliated us instead of helping us."

A project which is not based on relations which already exist between people is inherently inappropriate. For people living in poverty, when such projects come to an end, life is more difficult than before. This type of project divides communities, and the people in the worst situations of poverty are left even weaker and more impoverished.

"We have NGOs that work here, who give us a lot of money, who give us many things, but it's nothing. They cannot fight poverty or extreme poverty because they do not know who to go to. They speak to those who are smarter, and they divide the community, which creates violence. They come to give rice to someone for six months, and they don't even go to the poorest. That is violence. Such behavior pits people against one another."

We come back once again to the question of understanding and knowledge, and the type of relationship this requires. When projects – even those designed to help, such as vocational training, housing, micro-credit... – are based on only partial knowledge, they result in overly short-sighted or too modest responses and trap people in situations that offer no way out without lying about their situation. Ultimately, as these projects do not achieve the results those managing them expect, they end up adversely affecting people in the most vulnerable situations of poverty. *"The type of support that is thought out for us does not correspond to our real needs; we experience it as something imposed to satisfy the desires of project managers who want to dictate their values to us."*

A number of projects meant to help people get out of poverty are based on people's ability to seize opportunities. People living in poverty are thus often accused of failing to seize them: "Others succeeded, why haven't you?" But opportunity is like a lottery ticket, you win or lose. An opportunity is not a right. Only genuine access to rights can reach each and every person, instead of settling for the most enterprising

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Breaking the silence

"There is unforgettable violence that we are forbidden to talk about."

Even in the face of all these forms of long-term violence, people remain aware that they are experiencing violence. If this is not expressed, we cannot start to build peace. Even if a person has always been condemned to silence in order to survive, nobody can speak for this person. Creating conditions to break the silence means first understanding why people feel they have to remain silent.

Of course there are silences that concern people's privacy, and it is possible to speak out while respecting that privacy. There are silences that protect people because talking would bring more violence. Telling the truth can make you enemies. "We repressed everything so that the situation would not get worse." There are silences of resignation because people no longer believe they will be taken into account. Their experience shows them that when they speak, they are ignored and sometimes their own words are even used against them.

"Silence is also a form of resistance used to avoid entering into a cycle of violence. The problem is that this silence hides violence."

People cannot break the silence when they are trapped in extreme poverty, when they feel helpless, guilty, angry with everyone and have no hopes for the future. People must have others they trust around them in order to dare break the silence and bring out what overwhelms them in their inner lives, so that they can free themselves of it. When people can participate in organisations or movements together with others who also live in extreme poverty, they are able to express themselves freely about their efforts and hopes, and this gives them strength. This strength allows them to find courage, to show solidarity with others, to respect others and to feel at liberty to speak as equals in society. *"We know where, when and with whom we can talk."*

For professionals and researchers -- of both the public and private sectors -- breaking the silence around the violence of poverty means, to begin with, recognising that, in their work, they can produce violence themselves. Of course they have a widely recognised ethical obligation to denounce injustice. Some take risks in order to do so. However, denouncing is not "breaking the silence". Ending the silence imposed on people who live and struggle against the violence of extreme poverty requires recognition of the key contribution they can make to understanding. It means making it possible for them to express this contribution and being willing to merge this understanding and expertise with that of academics, institutions and NGOs, to develop new knowledge which transforms institutional practices, the processes of producing knowledge and the daily lives of people living in extreme poverty

Searching for peace

"As long as I do not know what I can bring home for my children to eat, I cannot say that I am at peace."

Too difficult a life prevents peace. Above all, parents who live in the violence of extreme poverty want a different life for their children. However, too much suffering, too many humiliations, too much anger, make it impossible to find the inner peace that would allow them to educate their children with hope for the future. There is no progress toward peace without them and without beginning to change their daily lives.

It is not just because a society is at peace or is implementing a peace process in a warring country that there is also peace for people living in extreme poverty. They pay a stiffer price than others for economic crises, and yet they are not involved in designing approaches to end these crises. After civil wars have torn countries apart, they are not involved in the reconstruction and reconciliation process.

"Peace is not just when everything is going OK for you and yours. [...] Because peace must be lived at a community level, in homes, in neighborhoods and in the country. Myself, I am in a family, I am in a neighborhood. 'How can we talk about peace? What type of peace are we talking about?' If everyone asked themselves these questions every time they woke up, we would see that the peace we aspire to and that we say exists in fact does not."

The trivialization of the violence of extreme poverty leads to living a lie and cultivating cynicism. Universal values are proclaimed and all the while it is continually denied that people living in extreme poverty can share these values. We know that "everyone" never really means "everyone". We cannot be satisfied with a peace that condemns some people to live with the scars of this violence in body and soul. Without recognition of the violence inflicted, peace is not possible.

Despite everything, those suffering the worst of poverty's violence defend themselves on a daily basis, sometimes with some violence, forced to compete for survival, forced to put off peace for tomorrow, to the point of saying, *"For me, peace is being buried where I will finally sleep undisturbed."* Some, even after suffering serious aggressions, give up their rights because they are aware that, for example, in a specific situation, helping to send fathers or mothers to prison is not the solution, neither for themselves nor for the people who attacked them. Others do not want stigma and discrimination to enter their community and are willing to fight and confront others so that respect between neighbors remains. Others bear the burden of guilt because they could not cope and could only flee.

"When we do not take into account that people living in extreme poverty are themselves contributing to making peace, we cannot talk of building peace. Even if they do not build peace with us, because we do not let them, we could at least acknowledge that they give it to us. Even though they suffer so much violence and we make so many mistakes, the silence of these people gives us a chance to keep building."

Peace building should not fall only on those who are coping with poverty's violence. States and institutions should make the first step towards re-establishing dialogue and creating the conditions to bring all these forms of violence to an end. Society as a whole must acknowledge, recognise and join the efforts of those who resist the violence of poverty. Peace is a collective responsibility which involves us all.

"We can start to build peace from the moment that each person feels responsible for the injustice done to others. Because if this injustice is not denounced, peace can never be established in such a world." Together, we can talk of peace only when each of us strives toward peace based on our relationships with others, starting with the person in the most extreme poverty.

Evaluations by Participants in the Colloquium

"For me, it was a really a fantastic experience giving everyone the opportunity to speak out. It's a liberating experience for the heart, soul and mind. We came to UNESCO to submit all the suffering each family lives through, and when we return to our own countries, we have to destroy poverty just the same. We are going to look after people who live in poverty, take them into consideration and above all give them the first place in society […]. I didn't know there was a movement that took poor people's interests really and truly into consideration to this extent. […] I have to say that we won't leave it at that. You have lots of good qualities, lots of talent, each of you has values to share with others. We need people like you, like me, to be part of our world. Despite our differences, despite the color of our skins, we are all the same. We must hang on to each other, when we see someone stumble, we must catch him, pick him up. I have work to do in my district and in my village, and I hope I'll be up to it."

Mariline Legentil,
participant in theaction-research project

"When I think about it, what I've learned in the last week is that I don't know a lot. Despite working for 40 years in and around poverty, I feel totally inadequate in the face of what I've heard of the lives of people who gave their testimonies. But that's not necessarily a bad thing, for me. Because if you think you know a lot, that's the problem."

Sean Dunne,
participant in the action-research project

"The merging of knowledge is above all respecting what others say as legitimate and knowledgeable, as well as being ready to be transformed by this knowledge. This is a challenge for academics, not because they do not respect what others say, but because what others say is usually considered to be a source of information to be understood and analysed rather than legitimate knowledge. But that is also an opportunity for enrichment, which doesn't mean academics should simply give in and let 'others' talk, but should listen and learn."

Paul Dumouchel, guest

"Seeing extreme poverty as violence allows us to revise all the declarations and universal treaties of human rights which have defined the major orientations. It has other implications for State institutions, international bodies and people engaged in peace making, who have to define peace agreements. If we are going to define extreme poverty as violence, then this theme must also be present at the negotiating table. That generates a rather interesting field of new developments, new thoughts and new revisions."

Guillermo Monroy, guest

"I think now we can push even more this question of peace because we understand better to what extent this word peace can be violent for people who are excluded from it. I mean that a talking about peace in a 'trivial and theoretical' manner can be violent, and as long as we haven't become aware of that, we will have caused people to remain silent about peace. I fervently hope that all we have done for the past three years is going to mean that, when we talk about peace, nobody will be reduced to silence."

Anne-Claire Brand, member of
the facilitating team of
the action-research project

Proposals for Future Commitments

This research has given rise to proposals for common goals to achieve, to be adapted to each reality.

1 - Acknowledge and refuse violence against people in poverty and work toward peace with them.

- Renew the fight against poverty and commitments for peace. No longer talk about poverty or projects against poverty without considering the violence experienced by people facing extreme poverty. No longer talk of building peace without the voices of people facing the daily violence of extreme poverty.

- Undertake, in conjunction with people living in extreme poverty and organisations where they have freely chosen to express themselves, a broad analysis of the guarantees needed so that each individual, each population and the entire human community can live in dignity and build peace on a daily basis.

- Introduce the question of violence of extreme poverty into bodies such as the United Nations Security Council.

2 - Organise gatherings and promote understanding between individuals and populations working on eradicating extreme poverty

- Create spaces where those living extreme poverty can freely develop their thinking over the long term, and merge their knowledge with other community stakeholders.

- Intensify and make public the goal to eradicate extreme poverty, in order to encourage, strengthen and lend credence to all of the commitments and responsibilities taken in solidarity with people living in extreme poverty.

3 - Re-evaluate our way of building and validating knowledge gained from the realities of life experienced by people living in extreme poverty.

- Join forces with academics and professionals to increase their involvement on a regular basis in the processes of the merging of knowledge with people living in poverty, and promote recognition of this process within universities and institutions.

- Support long-term commitments to reach those most oppressed by poverty and to create conditions to enable them to “break the silence”. Work towards the right of every human being to be able to count on others.

4 - Restore the place of the most disadvantaged in their struggle against poverty and in their collective and family histories.

- Support the re-establishment of family ties and the process of handing down memory and values from generation to generation so that all children can learn from the daily efforts of their parents to resist violence.

- Collect, from those people and groups who are the least heard, their history of resistance to poverty's violence and courage to work toward peace.

- In the history of humanity, restore its rightful place to the history of families, groups, and populations who are today's victims of extreme poverty and shame.

5 - Recognise the unique contribution of people in extreme poverty in striving towards peace between all human beings.

- In the framework of the appropriate structures within the United Nations, begin work on the merging of knowledge with the poorest, to elaborate a set of "Guidelines to Build a Culture of Peace Based on the Eradication of Extreme Poverty."

- Ensure that the call to action, central to the 17 October, World Day for Overcoming Extreme Poverty, *"Wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty, human rights are violated. To come together to ensure that that these rights be respected is our solemn duty"* [13] figures prominently not only at significant commemorative sites in each country, but in their Constitutions.

- Make known the contribution of people and populations living in deep poverty to all those who commit themselves to building peace in the world, including the Nobel Peace Prize Committee.

13 The words of Fr. Joseph Wresinski, engraved in 1987 on the Commemorative Stone in Honor of the Victims of Extreme Poverty, located on the Plaza of Liberties and Human Rights in Trocadero, Paris. Replicas of this stone now exist in 37 places around the world: http://overcomingpoverty.org/article/commemorative-stone