

## WHAT IS EXTREME POVERTY?



ATD's work focuses on extreme poverty. But what is extreme poverty? In countries where many are well off, it's easy to see when someone is very poor. However, in any country where most people live on low incomes, it is important to differentiate between those who are merely poor and those who are the very poorest.

### United Nations Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights

The [United Nations Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights](https://www.unhcr.org/refugees/article/2016/04/14-4879431.html) define extreme poverty as being characterised by social exclusion and by an accumulation of insecurities in many areas of life: a lack of identity papers, unsafe housing, insufficient food, and a lack of access to health care and to education. These insecurities tend to cut people off from the rest of society. Their compounded result is a cycle of extreme poverty passed down from one generation to the next.

ATD members in Senegal, some of whom live in deep poverty, describe how they see the difference between simply being poor and living in extreme poverty.

## **“When You Are Poor”**

“When you are poor, you go through times when life is out of balance, but your life makes sense. Improving your station in life is not an idle dream but what you strive toward daily. Little by little, your efforts bear fruit. But in extreme poverty, your efforts do not bear fruit. What grows every day, all the time, are your problems. And you just can’t fix things: your child falls ill, you can’t afford the medicine, and then it’s your wife who falls ill. It never ends.

“The custom here in working-class families is to be discreet and to hide any suffering from others. But when a family is in extreme poverty, everyone in the home wails in despair. There’s just no room in the shanty, so you spend most of your life outdoors in full view of everyone else. When your home floods, the toilet can’t be used. The stagnant water has a stench that you can’t possibly hide. This is extreme destitution: your roof is barely one meter above the ground and your rooms are half flooded, with rubbish everywhere. You cannot hide your misery. You have to pick up and move once a year. Everyone can see the imbalance of your life.

## **Glad to Be with Your Children**

“In Senegal, when you are poor, you are glad to be with your children—they are the joy of every day. But parents who are in extreme poverty have to entrust their children to others, outside the city, back in the village. Sometimes they can no longer even maintain honourable relationships with one another. During traditional ceremonies, a poor person is present, but isolated, off to the side. However, someone in extreme poverty will hide. He will not even be present at the ceremony. When you are in extreme poverty, others distrust you. They have no faith in you. They don’t know who you are.

“When you are poor, you do what is needed to gain your dignity by summoning your children to the table at mealtime. But a head of household in extreme poverty must send his children out to beg for their meal.”

## **Complexity of Extreme Poverty**

In order to effectively support the poorest children and families, policy-makers must first understand how the complexity of extreme poverty can make those who experience it particularly hard to reach. Some of the characteristics of extreme poverty include shame and stigmatisation, separation of children from their families, lack of civil registration, and lack of access to education and health care.

Because of stigmatisation, reaching the poorest people requires more than just making services available; only specific outreach can ensure the inclusion of all. The most effective policies are those elaborated in direct consultation with the poorest children and their families. Only this direct consultation makes it possible for actions to reach and benefit the very poorest among the poor, and to push back against their stigmatisation, thus strengthening their connections to the rest of society.

This article is an excerpt from "[What Works for Africa's Poorest](#)".

[More information on ATD in Senegal.](#)