



# ALL TOGETHER IN DIGNITY

## ASIAN FORUM

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*From ATD Fourth World Regional Team (Romy Hoffmann-Tran, Quyen Tran, Patricia and Claude Heyberger)*

*In this letter, two articles look at how projects aimed at helping disadvantaged people and families can sometimes run the risk of creating division among the neighborhood and communities. Although projects are developed with good intentions, they may be ill-adapted to people's needs—and therefore may be ineffective in fighting poverty. The two authors describe the importance of understanding the concerns and motivations of the most disadvantaged individuals and families they aim to reach, whose voices are oftentimes silenced by powerlessness and despair.*

*The article by Nguyen Hoang is from a contribution she presented at the colloquium *Extreme Poverty is Violence: Breaking the Silence. Searching for Peace*. The event concluded three years of participatory action research conducted worldwide by ATD Fourth World, involving people with first-hand experience of extreme poverty, including grassroots workers. The colloquium was held in January 2012 at UNESCO Headquarters, where dialogue between the project participants and academics, policy makers and representatives of civil society organizations provided insight into the ways people can resist the violence of extreme poverty and contribute to building peace in our societies. You can discover more about this research at: <http://www.atd-fourthworld.org/-Colloquium-2012-Extreme-poverty-is-.html>*

**"Deep within them,  
the poorest carry a sense of peace  
that the world does not see."**

[www.overcomingpoverty.org](http://www.overcomingpoverty.org)

### Poverty eradication projects ill-adapted to people's needs

*Ms. NGUYEN Hoang is Project Manager at Catalyst Foundation. Hoang and her team work with a community of people who used to live and work on a public garbage dump in a southern province of Vietnam. The project includes schooling of the children, relocation and access to housing for the families, prevention of sexual abuse and human trafficking, community activities and alternative livelihood activities as the public dump is being closed down.*

Often, governmental and non-governmental organizations, put under pressure by the expectations of their funders or conditions of certain donors, execute their plan in a top down way.

In our project, we try to build on what we know of the situation of the families. Local authorities and organizations we partner with see our project as a model that can be applied in other contexts. However, they tend to focus on what is visibly appealing about our projects.

For example, they admire the nice houses in which the families formerly living at the garbage dump were relocated, they admire the charity school we built for the children – these children could not register at public school because they do not have birth certificates, or they are older than the children in the lower grades, or because their parents do not have money to pay for school expenses. These partner organizations are satisfied that



*Meeting of community members*

there are no longer people living at the garbage dump and that some of the people found work at the company that got the concession from the city to recycle the garbage. Local media show all these good results. What they do not mention is how much the families themselves do to overcome their difficulties.

**In reality...** All the new houses have been built identically according to a model for a family with two or three children -- including a living room and one bedroom, plus a space for a kitchen and a toilet. Each house is 32 square meters

in total. But most of the families have up to 7 children. One has 9 children. Many of them have grandparents staying with them. To save money, the houses were built in a way that every four houses share common walls and ventilation. Noises in one house can be heard in the other three as if people were sitting in the same room. As a result, the nice looking little houses are not quiet and offer very little intimacy. Having a front door that can be locked is of no use when it is possible to climb up and jump into the house from the back where the four houses are connected to each other.

When the families remarked that the houses were not what they would have liked, the project partner told them that they did not have the right to ask for more, since they got these houses at a very cheap price. People started to say that they would like to go back and live at the garbage dump because it was better there."

Why would the families prefer their old shacks in a bad smelling environment to these new houses? To stop working at the garbage dump was one of the criteria for the families to be relocated. Since not all of the families found a way to earn their living other than waste picking, some secretly went back to work at the garbage dump at night. To improve their livelihood, some families raise chickens or ducks. Having no garden at their new houses, they turned their bedroom into an animal pen and the whole family now sleeps in the living room.

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The lack of privacy and the cramped living space leads to tensions and quarrels and even violence among couples, family members and neighbors. Before, they had never experienced quarreling like this. They say that as a community they felt like a family before, now they find it difficult to trust each other anymore.

Before, they used to visit each other and have fun together. Because the shacks were not as close to one another, there were less people intervening in their family life. The people say that there is not as much unity among the neighbors as before.

**Learning from this experience**, our organization now plans a new project for housing the 70 families: We want to conceive of the new houses together with the families, to take into account the family size for the allocation of square meters, and to ask the families to contribute

working time to the building of the house, so that they have a say at all moments of the process. There has to be space between the houses, a garden area, a playground for the children, a community center and a plaza with benches under trees where they can meet and play together. The local authorities have already made available 2 hectares for this project. In response to the tense atmosphere among the people, we hope to be able to create a group of what we call "peace makers". This group would consist of people from the community and staff of our organization.

I dream for the people of the community to be the project creators, implementers and monitors themselves. And I hope that through this project people can rebuild trust and peace together. I expect from myself and my colleagues that whatever we do with the families is based on love, trust and honesty.

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## "For the simple reason that she loved them"

*Ms Ratjaneey Saychana is the president of the Sisaket Communities Network. In 1996, she started a community development project in Sisaket (Thailand), without any financial assistance. This program eventually became part of the Community Organization Development Institute (CODI) 3 years later. With CODI's support, Ms Ratjaneey was able to organize saving groups in several poor communities.*

Money remains just one element of community development projects. On the one hand, we are very happy to receive financial support so we can work towards improving life in the communities. On the other hand, this also makes it more difficult dealing with the community leaders, local and national authorities. It is challenging when you are aware of the many ways poor people can be abused and exploited in their daily life. They are powerless, voiceless because they are seen as nobody—people living outside the margins of society.

On the whole, projects that are successful in engaging the very poor remain exceptions. When the ultimate goal of a project is to realize "success stories", it may unintentionally create greater disparity and discrimination among the most poor and excluded. This misguided focus may make other poor people in the community feel ignored which can lead them to forget the importance of maintaining solidarity within their communities.

Working with the poor is like planting a mango tree. After a period of hard work, you will be rewarded with mango fruits. However, to think like this is to forget how much effort it takes to bring the seed to blossom. Before being able to eat the mango, you must till the soil, water the plant regularly and maintain the tree. You need to do many actions before you can feast upon the fruits.

A few years ago, we were in contact with a blind woman in Sisaket. She used to earn a living by begging in the streets.

A social worker from the General Hospital Sisaket informed us that one of the children was suffering from malnutrition and should be sent to a children's home in the city of Khon Kaen (360km from Sisaket). This child was about 7 years old and had never been to school. The social workers believed that police officers could help in persuading the mother to shelter the child in an institution, which would offer him a safer, healthier upbringing than she could provide. It was also proposed that the child's two other

siblings would be adopted by a home in another province, closer to Sisaket.

Knowing this, we went to sit beside the young blind woman and spoke with her. We realized that she wanted to keep her children with her for the simple reason that she loved them. She told us that seeing the children placed in care would make her lose her reason for living. The younger daughter expressed she didn't want to go on to another home: "I want to stay with my mother," she cried. The other son, who was also blind, affirmed this: "My mother won't let my sister go."

Events like this invoke our own parental instincts: "If a child wants to stay with his or her mother, are we able to find a solution? What could be of any help to them? "

Initially, we thought that providing the mother with some nutritional supplement for her children would provide remedy. We found a way to raise the mother's awareness about it. We returned to the social workers with our proposal. After receiving approval from their supervisor, they agreed not to relocate the children.

We also went to the city hall authorities, to address the issue of the children being unable to attend school. We discovered that the children were eligible to be enrolled in a nearby school, receive a school uniform and be provided with school transportation for free. From then on these children began regularly visiting my home to do their homework. On Saturdays and Sundays, my own children used to help them with reading and writing the Thai alphabet. My family did this

simply because we thought, "If we do not help these children, they will not manage to stay together and will be unable find their place in society." At one point, while assisting the mother process her disability allowance, we realized that she did not possess a family record book nor a residence permit. Born in Laos, she has remained a stateless person in Thailand for many years. Eventually, she was able to continue living with her children in a neighborhood of Sisaket.



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