

How Poverty Separates Parents and Children : A Challenge to Human Rights

International Movement ATD Fourth World - Pierrelaye - 2004 - 170 pages
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Executive Summary

No one wants children to suffer the harshness of life in poverty. This can drive some parents to entrust their children to an orphanage or to work in domestic service. It can lead some social workers to remove children from a home because their family is poor. There are times when these are the best options available: the children will be better fed and the parents may have the time to overcome a crisis and build a more stable home. Outcomes are far worse when children leave of their own accord and end up on their own in the streets. But even in the best of circumstances, what children themselves say time and again is that they know something irreplaceable has been lost when they leave their families and communities. Children in the custody of private institutions or the government are likely to find themselves in a system with scant resources that is seldom held accountable to the families they serve. We owe it to these children to innovate better solutions together.

Poverty is not the only factor separating parents and children. The phenomena explored in this study—that affect children living in the streets, in foster care, and in other difficult situations—are complex and will not be resolved by any single measure. Parents themselves often show unstinting resilience and courage on behalf of their children. But the enormous efforts necessary to keep a family together in the face of poverty also sap people's energies and hopes in ways that can delay and even sabotage their attempts to escape poverty.

Safeguarding parent-child relationships is a question of human rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms that it is in the overriding interest of children that they be brought up in their own families. It envisages separation as the last possible step after doing everything that can be done to support parents in their responsibilities.

Committing to defend the rights of children and families is only the first step. Implementing change requires training, planning, methodology and evaluation that is developed in partnership with children and families themselves. This begins with a focus on people as active participants in development. Priority must be given to support the efforts made by the very poorest people.

The six countries profiled in this study

- In the situations examined in Guatemala, some very poor families lack community support. Too many children end up in the streets, with some of them in prostitution. Other children in formal structures find themselves marginalized by their extreme poverty, as when school administrators humiliate them for having lice and worn out clothing. Still other children find themselves in situations where they have access to drugs and become addicted. Meanwhile, parents live with the fear of their children being kidnapped for adoption. Faced with such overwhelming challenges, these parents make enormous efforts to protect their children as best they can.
- In Haiti, the situation of children in domestic service has recently been in the spotlight. It is important to look at all aspects of this issue. While the ideal situation would be for children's families to have sufficient means to raise them at home, until that goal can be achieved, it is important to distinguish between varying situations of domestic service. While some are highly exploitative of the child, in other situations, a child may simply be helping out neighbors who have the means to welcome her or him until the child's family has more food or the means to send the child to school. A network of three schools in the rural community of Fond-des-Nègres offers a practical model for ensuring the education of some of the poorest children—both those in domestic service and those at risk of going into domestic service.

- The chapters on the Philippines, the United States, and the United Kingdom, give complementary views of families whose children are in the custody of social services. Life and economic realities are very different on these three continents. The parents profiled in the Philippines chapter were more likely to voluntarily entrust their children to orphanages in hopes that they would thrive better in that environment than at home. Although the institutional and legal frameworks vary in these countries, it is striking to notice the similarities among parents who are faced with a series of obstacles to overcome. Too often, the outcome is despair. A child in the United States blames her parents for not having been able to protect her from the child welfare system; a child in the Philippines runs away from an orphanage to find her parents. These are symptoms of institutions gone awry. And yet, there are also important ways in which institutions can strengthen children and families. The Child Welfare Organizing Project (in the U.S.) proposes an approach that enables parents to examine issues together and contribute to the analysis and planning of the child welfare system.
- The children living on city streets in Burkina Faso have often been going in circles. They suffer from the rootlessness inherent in their lives and the risks to their health and well-being that result from fending for themselves. Institutions designed for their benefit have helped to protect some, but they have also left many of these children disoriented, not knowing how they can grow up to participate in their community. Here, the work of the Courtyard of 100 Trades is an innovative model demonstrating how it is possible to reintegrate these children into the lives of their families and mostly rural communities.

Lessons learned

Some approaches are ineffective. In Burkina Faso, for instance, opening institutional homes for children living in the streets can have unintended consequences, inciting some children to leave home, believing that their lives will be better in these institutions. Despite the sincere efforts of staff in these centers, many children's lives do not actually stabilize there. The existence of the centers keeps children hoping that a "perfect center" will exist one day. So each time a new center opens, they rush to move into it, quitting projects they have begun in other centers. This new infatuation usually wears off soon, but it can be too late for them to return to the previous project they had not completed. New private initiatives (usually funded by partners in industrialized countries) crop up continually, with no common public standards to measure their competence and effectiveness. Children find themselves buffeted from one experience to another, failing and growing disillusioned.

It is also ineffective to bring children too suddenly from city streets back to their home village without preparation. Some children left home in hopes of earning more money to help their families and are embarrassed to return empty-handed. Other children may have left following a conflict. A generation ago, extended families were better prepared to support their members through conflicts. Today, rapid changes in society have frayed extended families and led children to leave home at a younger age. When these children come home, parents do not know what their children have been through or what they have done to survive. They may suspect the worst and need time to trust their children again.

As this project in Burkina Faso continued, more positive lessons about effective approaches emerged.

- Children may return home successfully with the proper preparation. To make the decision to return home, children need time and the opportunity to accomplish something, such as beginning to learn a trade. Families also need time to prepare for their children's return. It is most effective to build a relationship with a family over time, even if the child does not initially plan to go home.
- Ambiguity surfaces when a child's future is discussed with parents. Parents who had been joyful to see their child would then say, "My child may stay with you if he wants." It is very difficult for a very poor family to imagine that they could offer more to their child than any social service organization, whether public or private, local or international. Focusing on the hidden strengths in the family and the community can

make it possible for children to thrive at home after all.

A. Transparency and accountability

Accountability to the families living in the worst forms of poverty means building a constructive dialogue with them to evaluate services regularly. This ensures that fewer children will slip through the cracks of a program and that the program will benefit an entire community, rather than just its most dynamic members. However, the poorest families are fragile. Their time is consumed by their survival efforts. They lack education and face stigma. For these reasons, it is not effective to report back to them simply by mailing out a newsletter or inviting them to a meeting. More individual relationships should be built by regularly visiting families for informal conversations. As trust is built over time, it will become possible to include them in meetings where others can hear their voices as well.

B. Local policy development benefits from looking beyond national boundaries

There are specificities to every region, country and neighborhood. And yet children in institutions in Burkina Faso and the United States face a similar disorientation at being part of an artificial community. Policies should never be designed far from the communities they serve, nor imposed without regular evaluation with community members. However, we hope that sharing grassroots experiences across borders can help others learn from mistakes that have already been made, and can spark ideas that can be adapted to similar situations.

We live in a world where ideas and expertise emanating from industrialized countries are too often imposed on developing countries. Most industrialized countries remain pockmarked with social inequality and poverty, and have no monopoly on finding solutions to overcome poverty. It is important to recognize the wealth of innovation that exists in developing countries as well.

C. Empowering people through a long-term investment in capacity building

We must:

- Build the capacities of those who work with the poor. These people, including professionals and volunteers, may have little or insufficient knowledge about families from backgrounds different from their own. This can put them at risk for making preconceived judgments about these families, or of seeing them as individuals in isolation from one another (rather than recognizing their family ties).
- Find creative ways to invest in capacity building with people living in poverty. Requiring the poor to be instructed in classes is not always effective, given both the lack of time available for people struggling to survive and the humiliations they face daily, which undermine their ability to benefit from a class. Successful capacity building should recognize the importance of an individual's family ties and use positive, creative methods. For instance, it works well to initiate discussions about a homeless child's return to his family by including the joyous component of storytelling that involves family and community members of all ages. Group discussions that give value to the contribution of each participant are invaluable for enabling people to place their personal experiences into a wider context and to shape a collective vision of how to improve the situation for the future.

D. Parents, children and communities as active participants

All members of a family should have the opportunity to express themselves and play an active role in shaping their destiny. They depend for their well-being on one another and on their communities. The rights of one member of the family cannot be protected effectively without protecting the rights of the others.

- Children's voices matter. As soon as they are old enough, children should be encouraged to voice their feelings and opinions. Many children who live in poverty play

an active role in helping their families survive and in fighting exclusion in their communities. They deserve as much support as possible to ensure that this role does not hinder their health or access to quality education. Children living in institutions deserve protection from the risk of losing the support of their family and original neighborhood community. An artificial community is a challenging setting in which to shape one's own identity. Children who are not living in a community, such as children living in the streets, should nevertheless be considered as both individuals and members of the family and community they came from.

- Both mothers and fathers should be enabled to assume their family and community responsibilities. It is important to understand why some parents voluntarily entrust their children to others. This act, which is often viewed as abandonment, can be intended to protect one's child from hunger. Something that looks like a bad choice to an outsider may actually have been one of the better choices among the parents' limited options. For programs addressing child welfare, it is important to include in the budget an investment in getting to know the child's family, even if they have already been separated for several years, as in the case of children living in the streets. These parents should be considered partners in elaborating solutions to a crisis and developing the educational plan made for the child (preferably in a way that allows the parents to contribute directly to their child's education).
- The unintended consequences of giving priority to women. Programs designed to help women and ensure that families benefit from their proven trustworthiness, could be improved by designing and evaluating in collaboration with women who may have had negative experiences with social services. Understanding how a husband's exclusion from a program can have negative consequences for the whole family could lead to new improvements in the lives of women, men and their families.
- Extended family members can be invaluable resources that help hold a family together in times of crisis. Contributions made by extended family members to raising children in the face of poverty must be valued and reinforced. For example, they should have a clear legal status to the child and a role in planning the child's education.
- Respecting and involving communities. It is also vital for project coordinators to show respect for children's communities and culture, particularly in rural communities that do not feel valued. Geographic regions that have seen particularly large numbers of children leaving home should be targeted for economic, environmental and cultural investments that strengthen the traditional, local economy.
- Not overshadowing the role of neighbors. For family and community members to be active participants, rather than passive beneficiaries, some restraint is needed on the part of project directors. If all goods and services are provided by an outside organization, existing efforts of solidarity among neighbors living in poverty can pale in comparison, robbing the community of a source of pride.

E. Making a personal commitment to building partnership

"As I see it, the lawyer's job is to create a sense of community with their client. Through my years of doing this work, I have had the opportunity to meet, and work with, many parents whose children are placed in foster care. I have come to know people with enormous strength, fortitude and determination. They face enormous obstacles; they fight through their pain; they struggle with their self-esteem; they sometimes give up; they sometimes go on to achieve their goals. [...] To create a society where people do not live in conditions that foster [child abuse and neglect], how can we help to marshal the political will [needed...] to invest social capital in improving conditions in the communities where most children in foster care come from, and [empowering] institutions in those communities? [...] Child welfare advocates need to think of themselves as anti-poverty advocates, and to think of radical reforms to the system."

- Ms. Nanette Schorr, Bronx Legal Services, United States

Believing in each person and following through on that belief with a long-term commitment to support people's efforts is vital to overcoming poverty. Because this is unquantifiable, it is rarely mentioned in the context of development or child welfare. And

yet this is one of the most common issues addressed by both parents and children living in poverty: the weight of humiliation, the feeling of being mistrusted by the community, and the constant lack of self-esteem. All of these factors can drive people deeper into unemployment, addiction and homelessness, which contribute to the break-up of a family. Seeking out and highlighting the unseen efforts made by people who are among the least respected is a way to reinforce their endeavors and improve their chance of success.

This commitment requires courage and preparation as well. Even people from a very simple background who visit a shantytown are sometimes so shocked by the conditions that they make a donation and flee, instead of following through on their original hope of offering long-term support. Training and support can help people get past the shock of extreme destitution and join in a long-term partnership.

F. Creativity

Families living in extreme poverty around the world are diverse and no single solution will work for all families, or even for all families in a given community. It is important to envision many different paths to a successful outcome. Enabling these families to be involved directly in the planning and evaluation of programs will lead to more creative solutions.

Families in crisis may need to ask for support from non-profit organizations or from government child welfare services. The fear people living in poverty face of losing custody of their children deters them from seeking preventative support that could avert a crisis altogether. Creative alternatives to orphanages and foster care should be explored, and funding should be invested in preventative services. New forms of educational intervention and child protection should be developed which will benefit the children and the whole family.

Fighting poverty is urgent and we should strive to make continual headway. But any program intending to reach people in extreme poverty must plan to invest over many years. Initial plans should leave ample room for these people to become partners who contribute their experiences and ideas. It is in the context of this long-term framework that originality can evolve and succeed.

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This study is a step toward showing what ATD Fourth World has learned from its own grassroots actions and from those of other NGOs. We learned about families' lives while working in partnership with them on cultural and educational projects that benefit their children. From our mistakes, from our accomplishments, and from reflecting together with these families, we learned what works best to support families' efforts to remain together.

The next step is to further our dialogue with the relevant policy makers to see how these lessons from grassroots actions can help improve policies affecting children and families in poverty.

As long as extreme poverty persists, there will be parents who feel they must entrust their children to others, children who end up in the streets, and child welfare systems that distrust parents' ability to raise their children. We must continue to invest in fighting poverty, in ensuring access to quality education for every child, and in creating social justice for all.

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