



“We reaffirm that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development, and note with concern that, for the first time in decades, the trend of poverty reduction is being reversed.”  
HLPF2021 Ministerial Declaration

“Every morning, I don't know if I'm going to make it through the day; my heart pounds. But I go. I know that even if I die in the street, collapsing under the weight of my load, I do it for my children.”  
ATD Fourth World activist, Democratic Republic of Congo.

# POVERTY ERADICATION IN A CONTEXT OF GLOBAL PANDEMIC AND CLIMATE CHANGE: OBSTACLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO ACHIEVE THE 2030 AGENDA

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## **The roots of a global pandemic: exploitation of the planet, exploitation of the poorest**

The emergence of the novel coronavirus that has been wreaking havoc on the world has resulted in close to 180 million cases of infection, 4 million lives lost over a year, and blatantly exposed social and economic injustices in all countries. But if the consequences of this disease are now painfully visible, little is said in policy fora about the causes of this global crisis - that is, the growth of human activities and the exploitative and unsustainable nature of our current socio-economic systems\*.

Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, natural resources have been plundered and polluted in the race for economic growth, without sufficient consideration for the impact of economic development strategies on the planet as well as on all sectors of the population, and without those who plunder and pollute assuming their responsibilities.

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\*According to the UN Environment Program's report, 'Preventing the next pandemic: Zoonotic diseases and how to break the chain of transmission', the emergence of the novel coronavirus is related to habitat loss, trade and use of wildlife and environment degradation due to human activities.  
<https://www.unep.org/resources/report/preventing-future-zoonotic-disease-outbreaks-protecting-environment-animals-and>

Similarly, our societies treat their poorest members as they treat the planet. People living in poverty have been exploited for generations and too often abandoned when their ability to work is exhausted. Around the world, struggling families and communities are often blamed and criminalized for their living practices and their impact on the environment. People in poverty are forced to rely on unsustainable practices such as logging, poaching, burning coal or trash, overusing limited natural materials etc. Instead of considering these practices as consequences of precarity, exploitation, displacement, imperialism and various other harmful socio-political dynamics that maintain people in poverty, marginalized communities are criminalized while root causes remain ignored.

Climate change constitutes yet another violence against the planet and against the poorest. Their situation, wherever they are in the globe, is the result of the same process of economic and political domination by an oligarchic elite, social exclusion and violence of ill-designed policies that have intentionally put aside and violated the political, economic, social and cultural rights of people living in poverty, whose lack of political power and agency add into the cycle of disempowerment.

For example, clean energy programmes that are ill-designed have adverse consequences on people and communities living in poverty. In many countries, the construction of large-scale hydroelectric dams has entailed forced eviction and relocation, unfair and insufficient compensation, sometimes marred by corruption and discrimination to the detriment of the poorest. This raises serious human rights concerns with respect to the loss of land

and means of livelihood by local people, and the severance of the cultural connection and history that are particularly important to Indigenous communities. When not designed with the participation of local communities, conservation efforts can also harm and displace local communities, pushing them further into poverty and then criminalising them for encroaching into conservation areas. These are some of the many examples showcasing that addressing environmental issues in isolation from their social contexts is counterproductive. Too often, poor people and the environment are put up against one another, in competition. In fact, poverty eradication and climate change must be addressed simultaneously and together.

The poorest also bear the heaviest brunt of global warming. People living in extreme poverty are amongst those hardest hit by the effects of climate change, yet they are the least responsible for its causes and have the least means to adapt to and protect themselves from its adverse impacts. The increase in frequency and intensity of extreme weather and climate events, including droughts, floods, and sea-level rise, all exacerbate the daily struggles of communities living in persistent poverty. Climate change impacts can be a matter of life or death for communities that rely on subsistence agriculture, natural resources, or the informal economy more generally to survive.

Communities who were already struggling to survive and make a living in the context of a changing climate and environmental degradation have also suffered the most from the global pandemic, with the accumulation of crisis combined with a lack of access to healthcare, personal protective equipment and now experiencing the "vaccine apartheid".

## **The impact of the pandemic: increasing poverty, aggravating deprivations and discriminations**

According to the World Bank, global poverty will increase for the first time in thirty years, with a global estimation of between 119 and 124 million of 'new poor' (that is income-poor) in 2020. In 2021, this number is expected to rise to between 143 and 163 million. These 'new poor' will join the ranks of the 1.3 billion people already living in multidimensional poverty.

Families and individuals already living in persistent poverty witnessed their pre-existing deprivations aggravate during the global pandemic. For many children living in poverty trying to somehow continue their education remotely, internet access is a luxury, as is using technological devices such as computers and phones. In Belgium, for example, schools email students their homework documents in PDF. These can be full of links that are not accessible from a telephone, which is often the only digital device families living in poverty have. In Mexico, a mother and Fourth World Activist is worried about distance learning for her 14-year old son who is in Special Education, because online schooling does not attend to his specific needs. An Indigenous grandmother living in a remote part of New Mexico says: "Computer technology was the only way for my grandchildren to continue their school work, but it has created many challenges for them and me". For these already vulnerable families and communities, distance learning is yet another obstacle to education.

Many parents lost their main income when countries imposed harsh curfews and lockdowns, preventing them from running their informal economy businesses.

The little income that would be used to pay for food, education or basic necessities vanished and with it, the hope of many families to get out of chronic poverty and build a better future for their children. Because most people in developing countries work in the informal economy, none are covered by social protection. In some dire situations, children have to drop out of school to help their parents survive.

The effects of the global pandemic and related security measures (curfews, lockdowns) on children and families living in poverty range from an acute lack of food and nutrition - creating lasting deprivations and inequalities in children - to struggles in remote learning, disappearing income generating activities, but also heightened mental impact and trauma due to isolation and fear. The socio-emotional impact of the pandemic is a crucial topic requiring further investigations so as to fully understand the extent of its consequences also on children and teenagers.

For many families living in poverty, these deprivations are combined with discriminations and stigma carried from one generation to the next. In the Central African Republic, children living in the streets shared how life during the pandemic had become even more difficult for them as they had no protection and that the community would blame them as if they were the reason for the virus\*.

The recent participatory research led by ATD Fourth World and Oxford University identified two major dimensions of extreme poverty as institutional and social maltreatment.

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\*ATD Fourth World, Regional gathering on the impact of the pandemic on the poorest children in Africa, April 2020. <http://www.endchildhoodpoverty.org/coalition-prod/2020/7/16/atd4thworld-impact-of-covid19-on-african-children>

Institutional maltreatment is the failure of national or international institutions, through action or inaction, to respond appropriately and respectfully to the needs of people living in poverty, leading to their being ignored, humiliated or harmed\*. The inability of authorities to listen to people experiencing poverty, inequitable distribution of resources and services, lack of access to justice and persistent corruption are all aspects of institutional maltreatment. Social maltreatment describes the way in which people experiencing poverty are negatively perceived and mistreated by other people and groups around them. In countries around the world, communities and individuals stigmatized by poverty are systematically discriminated against, in their access to education, healthcare or in the job market, to name a few. As long as discrimination and stigma are not addressed, solutions to break the vicious cycle of poverty will remain incomplete.

At a time when many new policies or research are focused on the ‘new poor’, those who have plunged into poverty as a result of the pandemic, it is equally important to continue highlighting the accumulation of deprivations experienced by those already living in chronic and intergenerational poverty before the pandemic, and ensure that post pandemic recovery efforts also reach them.

## Policy Recommendations for Building Forward Better: Ending persistent poverty, respecting all people and our planet

- From extreme poverty to persistent poverty

Extreme poverty, as defined by the World Bank, refers to a monetary approach to poverty. The 1.90\$/day indicator can be misleading as to implying that ‘extreme poverty’ only exists in the global South. Nonetheless, various degrees of poverty, including multidimensional and intergenerational poverty exist in high- and middle-income countries. Additionally, many documents on intergenerational poverty use the term ‘transmission of poverty’. This carries the unfortunate connotation that poverty is a form of social illness that is transmitted from one person to the next. The notion of intergenerational transmission suggests that it is the parents who are guilty of transmitting to their children the poverty that they themselves inherited. It ignores the many structural and institutional barriers that trap families in poverty over many generations. **Instead, we call for using the term ‘persistence of poverty’, for it implies many other levels of responsibility in addition to those of parents, and can be used to characterize poverty both in developed and developing countries.**

- From ill-designed policies to intentional and inclusive policies

It is essential to acknowledge that systemic discrimination and ill-designed policies are at the roots of the many injustices and discriminations that have been exposed during this pandemic. The post-recovery context should be the opportunity to build forward an

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\*International participatory research led by ATD Fourth World and the University of Oxford, 2019 <https://www.atd-quartmonde.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Hidden-Dimensions-of-Poverty-20-11-2019.pdf>

inclusive society based on a new social contract and on a human rights approach, specifically reaching those furthest behind first. Poverty is man-made and the result of deliberate policy choices. Conversely, only pro-active and pro-poor policies can reverse decades of disinvestment in social sectors and series of exclusionary measures built upon misconceptions and biases about people living in poverty.

*Placing agency, participation and dignity at the center of policy design in the post-Covid recovery period:*

As stated in the Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, "effective and meaningful participation is an affirmation of the right of every individual and group to take part in the conduct of public affairs...States must ensure the active, free, informed and meaningful participation of persons living in poverty at all stages of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of decisions and policies affecting them." The lived reality of poverty is expert knowledge: it is important because it deepens our knowledge about the implications of living in poverty. This experience is all the more enlightening when combined with knowledge from other professional sources, and is essential to meeting the challenge of developing more effective systems and structures to end poverty and inequality.

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\*Paragraph 37 and 38, Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, OHCHR 2012  
[https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/OHCHR\\_ExtremePovertyandHumanRights\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/OHCHR_ExtremePovertyandHumanRights_EN.pdf)

\*\*Zero Long-Term Unemployment Zones" Experiment in France: Work as a Common Good: <https://www.atd-fourthworld.org/zero-long-term-unemployment-zones-experiment-in-france-work-as-a-common-good/>  
 Case study page <https://www.co-val.eu/case-studies/blog/project/zero-long-term-unemployed-territory-tzclld/>

*Designing projects and programs by valuing peoples' skills and contributions, not by blaming them nor criminalizing them.*

In France, a key initiative launched by ATD Fourth World involved the establishment of "Areas with zero long-term unemployment"<sup>\*\*</sup>, a pilot project conducted in ten targeted areas under a law adopted in February 2016. It is based on three critical propositions: that no one is unemployable — there is work appropriate for everyone; that there is work available, many of the labor needs of society being unmet; that there is real money-saving involved in making work available, as long-term unemployment is a cost to the state. The project shows that it is possible to offer any long-term unemployed person who wishes to participate a permanent job that corresponds to his or her skills, that meets the needs of the area, and that incurs no extra cost to the community, largely by reallocating existing public budgets. One beneficiary of the project testified: "We all experienced the difficulties of unemployment, the suspicion in the eyes of others, being excluded. However, through this initiative, we stick together to make it work." The first full year of the project trial has already made it possible to hire 500 job seekers in ten areas of 5,000 to 10,000 inhabitants. This represents 25 percent of the total number of people who are hit by long-term unemployment in these areas. In 2020, a law was passed that will extend the project to 50 additional territories.

The knowledge and skills of people living in poverty are rarely seen, acknowledged, or valued. Against the odds, they fulfill many important roles, often supporting others and making significant economic and social contributions. Policies and projects that affect them should recognize their contributions and aspirations from the start. Instead of imposing harsh conditionalities for individuals to keep their benefits, policies and projects should ensure that individuals can contribute their skills and energy and at the same time, take the necessary time to rebuild their confidence, capabilities and assets.

*Promote a revolution in mentalities by combating the stigmatization of people living in poverty.*

Stigma, blame and judgement result from the way people experiencing poverty are treated in society by the public, media and politicians. They serve as tacit or explicit justification for their exclusion and result in the deprivation of their rights. In addition to making people doubt their worth, the stigmatization leads them to adopting behaviour to avoid dehumanization. Engaging the media to change their perception of people living in poverty, changing the narrative around poverty are crucial actions to promote a revolution in mentalities.

In the UK, Following a government campaign targeting welfare benefit fraud, ATD Fourth World members with an experience of poverty designed a project to help the public discover the positive role they play in society. This project, *The Roles We Play\**, demonstrated the courage and solidarity demonstrated by people in poverty. It underlined the fact that they do not want others to take pity on them; rather they seek recognition of their equal right to dignity and of the rarely noticed contributions they make to society. They are active defenders of human rights within their communities.

- Investing in human capital to make social and environmental justice a reality

The COVID-19 pandemic was a powerful reminder of the interconnectedness of the environment, biodiversity and human systems. Damaging and polluting ecosystems negatively impact human life, affecting the most vulnerable and marginalized communities first. The only way forward to protect human and ecological systems is to ensure social and environmental justice for all through poverty eradication and the promotion of sustainable livelihoods.

*Investing in social, education and health sectors, by ensuring equity and justice*

Strong social protection systems allow for basic needs to be met, based on the right to social security. Many governments rolled out temporary social protection measures during the global pandemic for their citizens with low income to stay afloat and not fall into poverty. In developing countries, limited fiscal space prevented countries from guaranteeing such entitlements. A Global Fund for Social Protection should be set up to increase the level of support to low-income countries, thus helping them both to establish and maintain social protection floors in the form of legal entitlements, and to improve the resilience of social protection systems against shocks\*\*.

As millions of people lost their jobs during the pandemic, global recovery efforts should ensure that livelihood recovery measures reach people working in the formal and informal labour markets, and that decent work is equally proposed to those who have been out of employment for a long time. Greater access to jobs, to labour rights and social protection are at the basis of a dignified life. The transition towards a green economy should be used to create decent jobs and make them accessible to people trapped in poverty. Supporting small agricultural producers and workers in the informal economy, who make up the largest group of people living in poverty, would at the same time increase food security and stimulate economic development.

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\* The Roles We Play website:

<https://www.therolesweplay.co.uk/>

The Roles We Play book: [https://www.atd-fourthworld.org/wp-](https://www.atd-fourthworld.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2016/02/20141017-The-Roles-We-Play.pdf)

[content/uploads/sites/5/2016/02/20141017-The-Roles-We-Play.pdf](https://www.atd-fourthworld.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2016/02/20141017-The-Roles-We-Play.pdf)

\*\*Olivier de Schutter, Global fund for social protection: international solidarity in the service of poverty eradication, Human Rights Council 2021

The pandemic also demonstrated the major gap in funding in the healthcare sector. Investing in human capital, that is in education and healthcare, in a way that is free, universal and without obstacles, is essential for people's wellbeing. In the context of the pandemic, a global recovery can only be achieved when COVID-19 vaccines will be available for all, ensuring they are safe, efficacious and affordable for all.

In accessing education and healthcare, combating stigma and discrimination is essential to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

In education, if we want to avoid a lost generation of children due to school dropouts (according to Unicef, over 168 million children missed nearly a year of schooling during the pandemic), then major investments are needed to ensure both teachers and students are at ease in navigating remote learning and that parents, including parents living in poverty, can support their children.

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\* Health Coverage For People In Poverty: An Experience In Port-Au-Prince (Haiti):  
<https://www.atd-fourthworld.org/health-coverage-people-poverty-experience-port-au-prince-haiti/>

In Haiti, ATD Fourth World is leading a project that links health and education\*. One of the components of this project is aimed at children from 0 to 3 years of age and their parents and offers access to health care for the family, health education, and monitoring of child development with an emphasis on caring for malnourished children. The involvement of parents and the recognition of their knowledge and their efforts, together with the spaces for co-training and dialogue strongly contribute to the improvement of health within the family. In the same way, the role of parents in the preschool component contributes to the success of the children both in their learning and in their socialization. It is a project that is a source of pride to parents and children, whereas often the parents of malnourished children are blamed by others. It also enables the children to thrive in a school where their environment is not discredited.

Increased poverty due to the pandemic means more family separation due to poverty when authorities get in the way. Keeping families together is vital for the mental and physical health of all family members. People living in poverty have a right to a family life, and children should not be removed from their family due to poverty. Many early childhood policies are ill-conceived and fail because parents are not considered as the first partners in ensuring a child's psychological and physical development. Child protection services need to work in the favor of children and their families in poverty.

The International Movement ATD Fourth World is a movement of solidarity among and in collaboration with the most excluded families around the world. Founded in 1957 by Joseph Wresinski in France, ATD Fourth World, active in 34 countries, brings together people from different cultures and social classes. With the goal of leaving no one behind, all our projects are designed and planned with people living in persistent poverty and aim to bring their voices to all decision-making spheres, including at the global level.

ATD Fourth World has had general consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council since 1991 and associate status with UNESCO since 1970. It has permanent delegations at the European Union and the Council of Europe.

It is also recognized by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Organization of the Francophonie (IOF).

For more information:  
[www.atd-fourthworld.org](http://www.atd-fourthworld.org)