

## **Applying ‘Merging of Knowledge’ in Tanzania: What Can we Learn About Interrupting Patterned Relationships to Reveal New Dimensions of Poverty?**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper was to reflect critically on the application of a research approach termed ‘Merging of Knowledge’ that attempts to ensure that people with lived experience of poverty are co-researchers, participating in each stage of the study on an equal footing to academics and others considered to have expertise on poverty. The Merging of Knowledge is a dynamic process that creates the conditions so that the experiential knowledge held by people living in poverty can engage in dialogue on even footing with scientific knowledge and professional knowledge. Tanzania’s experience in applying Merging of knowledge formed the key source of information for the paper. Other sources of information include international experiences and overall literature review on the application of participatory approaches. This study has revealed that Merging of Knowledge can be transformative in effecting empowerment amongst individuals and stimulating action in social spheres beyond the research team. That was made possible because Merging of Knowledge was able to address power imbalances by training and empowering all groups of participants at each stage of the research, building trust, confidence and fearlessness in a sustainable manner. This study therefore concludes that Merging of Knowledge holds great promise for future research on topics where strong hierarchies of knowledge exist, and where the physical inclusion of participants in data collection is not readily translated into intellectual inclusivity in the analysis and dissemination of findings.

**Key Words:** Poverty, Participatory approaches, People in poverty as Co-researchers, Merging of Knowledge

### **Introduction**

Poverty is a widely investigated issue and its literature fills the shelves of many libraries (Wetengere *et al.*, 2022). Despite the fact that research on poverty has employed different methodologies, most take a conventional approach in which academics are positioned at the heart of the research (*ibid.*). Also, both the axiom and non-axiom definitions of poverty are ‘top-down’ formulation of the problem (Bray *et al.*, 2020). Studies and/or approaches of this nature tend to serve the interests of researchers rather than the people experiencing poverty (*ibid.*). Doing things differently requires overcoming significant social barriers. For example, a common perception in wider society is that people living in poverty do not possess valuable knowledge about its nature and meaning. In turn, there are obstacles to participation in research frequently faced by those living in poverty such as illiteracy and social exclusion.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect critically on the application of a research approach termed ‘Merging of Knowledge’ that attempts to ensure that people with lived experience of poverty are co-researchers, participating in each stage of the study on an equal footing to academics and others considered to have expertise on poverty. It focuses on the experience of introducing this approach in Tanzania, one of six countries in an international study to define the dimensions of poverty. The lessons learnt through tackling initial challenges and sustaining this approach over time provide insight into what was made possible for individual participants, for the research team a whole, and consequently the impact of this study nationally, and internationally. In this way, the paper contributes to the development of transformative action-research approaches that show promise in the healthy disruption of patterned social relationships that typically keep those living in poverty at arm’s length from defining the nature of poverty and what to do about it.

## **Background and Rationale**

Attempts to address the alienation of those experiencing poverty have brought participatory approaches to poverty into the mainstream, and generated definitions of poverty derived from the insights of those experiencing poverty on a daily basis, in diverse global South contexts. These include, notably, the World Bank’s Voices of the Poor project (Narayan *et al.*, 2000), and fieldwork across six countries to develop the Individual Deprivation Measure (Bessell, 2015; Wisor *et al.*, 2014). While inclusive in their approach, these and related studies did not set out to share analytical decision-making with people with direct experience of poverty. Consequently, they have struggled and often failed to include the perspectives of the most marginalized, omitting them in defining the dimensions of poverty and failing to differentiate between extreme poverty as a lived experience, and its conceptualization in policy, research and practice. Also, limited are the abilities of existing multi-dimensional models of poverty and resultant knowledge to generate meaningful insight into the nature of poverty across the global North and South, including consistencies and differences therein.

The above limitation to participation poses a significant barrier to achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to eradicate extreme poverty everywhere (target 1.1) and halve the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty *in all its dimensions according to national definitions* (target 1.2) (Bray *et al.*, 2020). It also obstructs the global commitment to “leave no-one behind” in processes and priorities relating to all seventeen SDGs (United Nations, 2015). Following the above, there is need to find out practical ways to engage people experiencing poverty and those working to address it at all levels as equals in study design, governance, operation, analysis and dissemination (Patrick, 2019), thereby valuing their competence and status as knowing individuals (Fricker, 2007) and achieving a shared mandate

In the same vein, in 1980, the founder of a social movement to combat poverty, Joseph, Wresinski argued that there was need to combine the perspectives of people experiencing poverty with those informed, notably researchers and practitioners who need to respond professionally to the circumstances and needs of people experiencing poverty (CHR,

2012). He argued that the fight against poverty requires every actor, and specifically those perceived as poor, illiterate and voiceless, to participate fully rather than being sidelined as passive recipients of decisions and resulting action (ibid). Realizing this ambition meant ensuring the active, free, informed and meaningful participation of people experiencing poverty at all stages of the design, implementations, monitoring and evaluation of decisions and policies affecting them (CHR, 2012).

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) constitute the core component of the 2030 Development Agenda, adopted in 2015 by the 193 countries of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly (Bray *et al.*, 2020). It is officially recognized that, of the 17 goals: ‘eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development’ (United Nations, 2019). Its seven associated targets aim, among others, to eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, and reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty (ibid.).

Surprisingly, despite the fact that the SDGs repeatedly specify reducing poverty “in all its dimensions”, this phrase has never been officially defined (Bray *et al.*, 2020). Target 1.2 and indicator 1.2.2 also demand reductions in poverty ‘according to national definitions’ (United Nations, 2019). The implications are that poverty is both multidimensional and area or country specific and that it is the responsibility of a nation to identify its own dimensions against which they will be drawing up strategies and measuring progress on fighting poverty (UNICEF, 2017).

Reflecting the United Nation’s aspiration that policy should be informed by ‘the meaningful participation of persons living in poverty’, participative research was undertaken in six contrasting countries (Bangladesh, Bolivia, France, Tanzania, the United Kingdom and the USA) to identify the dimensions of poverty (Bray *et al.*, 2020). People experiencing poverty were involved at all stages of the research as members of the national research teams alongside academics and practitioners (ATD Tanzania, 2019). They joined social welfare practitioners and specialist academics in an eighteen-month research process based in the Merging of Knowledge approach that was designed to derive definitions of poverty within each country, and to scope the possibility of a definition of poverty in all its dimensions that applies across all six countries, and that might serve as an international definition.

The paper proceeds as follows: we introduce the Merging of Knowledge methodology and its process, followed by a literature review that places it among other action research approaches. Next, we present the findings and discussion sections, which delve into our case study of Merging of Knowledge in Tanzania, outlining the process, lessons learnt, challenges faced and its international impact.

### **Where does Merging of Knowledge Come From and How Does it Work?**

*Le croisement des savoirs*, usually translated as the Merging of Knowledge (MoK), was conceived in the early 1990s by the non-governmental organisation ATD Quarte Monde (ATD Fourth World) to overcome implicit yet entrenched hierarchies of knowledge that

influence the way society thinks and acts in relation to poverty (Wodon, 2018). This organization believes that if policy formulation could start with people living in poverty sitting down and thinking together with policy-makers, business leaders, social workers and teachers, they would produce a much more powerful and effective collectively-agreed policy direction based on different forms of knowledge, including life experience, research, and concepts used in professional practice (ibid.). A defining feature of MoK is that it creates a structured dialogue of the kind that is often missing across most societies, by bringing together people of different background and experiences in ways that facilitate an honest exchange of insights and perspectives.

The MoK process comprises a series of set steps, designed to facilitate ease of self-expression and high-quality engagement within and between people who would not ordinarily converse to make joint decisions. Originally, the approach was designed for three 'peer' or 'reference' groups of people, comprised of those who share a similar social position: (i) people with direct experience of poverty, (ii) professional or volunteer practitioners, including service-providers, and (iii) academics (ATD Fourth World, 2013). Subsequent studies have incorporated policy-makers, business-leaders, people working in the media and the general public (Levesque *et al.*, 2009; Gupta and Blewett, 2008; Loignon *et al.*, 2013; Loignon *et al.*, 2015).

First, individuals are brought together within peer groups of eight to twelve people to get to know one another and build confidence to speak, as preparation for individual and collective work. This process of self-actualization requires a relatively safe space in which individuals feel able to challenge one another and themselves (Skelton and Kalisa, 2017). People with direct experience of poverty are offered the consistent accompaniment of someone who understands why the daily experience of living in poverty can present barriers to communication, confidence or self-worth, and who becomes an ally and support over the entire research period. With guidance from trained facilitators, participants within each peer group then reflect on the issues in question, contribute personal understandings and co-construct conclusions. Human sculpture, body-mapping, photo-voice, designing a personal shield or other such visual techniques are frequently offered to enable expression.

Step two takes place within these same peer groups and involves reflective discussion of individual understandings and collective knowledge-building in response to the research questions.

The third and final step involves two or three individuals from each peer group coming together in a new mixed group to co-produce new knowledge. Further time is given to building trust, for example in preparing and sharing meals, marking life events and meeting challenges, before each brings the conclusions drawn by their respective peer group. They then work together to jointly interpret overlaps and distinctions between the understandings held in each peer group, before discussing these at length, usually over several days. The process is carefully planned and facilitated to balance time working across peer groups with structured opportunity to work individually and within original peer groups. Conditions that allow equity in participation are prioritized so that this mixed group can identify areas of consensus and difference in understandings of the

issues at stake, and draw tentative conclusions. These results are then re-examined and refined through reflective questioning within and across peer groups (either in person, or through a series of written exchanges and discussion).

Through this process, the group is collectively able to reveal new insights into the realities of living in poverty, and therefore into the dimensions of poverty as experienced by people living in poverty and as shaped by other people and institutions with which they interact.

### **Where does ‘Merging of Knowledge’ Sit in Relation to Action Research?**

Participatory action research approaches can help address the limitations of participatory approaches to poverty (outlined earlier), because they are designed to access knowledge from diverse groups of people regardless of their power or position in society (Andersen and McLachlan, 2016). To do so effectively, they must first make space for a dual process of action and reflection through which new learning emerges (Levin, 2012), and then enable this iterative process amongst diverse individuals and groups who are simultaneously engaged in the research (Burchardt, 2014).

To make this happen, one must first ask, what does it mean to truly participate in research on poverty? Does this mean that people in poverty should have a say in all aspects of research, from conceptualization to dissemination? Osinski (2021a) poses these questions and offers three evaluative criteria for participation: 1) Consultation - which tends to be extractive and tokenistic, and does not allow respondents a say in how the research is conducted or used, 2) Collaboration - where participants are involved in the research study but not in the data analysis and dissemination, and 3) Control - where participants have control over each stage of the research process, including the way it is conceptualized, led and used (Godrie 2017 cited in Osinski, 2021a). Osinski argues that the last two criteria - collaboration and control - enable transformation at an individual or societal level. In her evaluation of the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty project, she notes that Merging of Knowledge could, in principle, be considered to meet these criteria of transformation.

Published evidence indicates that Merging of Knowledge can be transformative in effecting empowerment amongst individuals and stimulating action in social spheres beyond the research team (Levesque *et al.*, 2009; Gupta and Blewett, 2008; de Boe, 2007; Loignon *et al.*, 2013; Loignon *et al.*, 2015). Testimony from people living in poverty suggests new (often unexpected) personal confidence in the value of one’s knowledge built on experience and one’s contribution to the analysis, the net effect of which is an unprecedented, rigorous co-examination of the issues at stake and lasting change in individual agency (Bennett with Roberts 2004; Tardieu 2012). Examples of social transformation stimulated by studies include changes in service provision to vulnerable people towards ensuring respect, care and empowerment and reducing exclusion, control or denigration (Gupta and Blewett, 2008; Lévesque *et al.*, 2009; Lévesque *et al.*, 2015).

The notion of research as a process through which to fulfill a social contract is fundamental to the premises of Merging of Knowledge, and helps situate this approach in

relation to other participatory action research methodologies. Participatory action research tends to identify excluded groups and develop processes for their voices to be heard and to shape new practices, with little or no attention to others in society whose ideas influence definitions of the issues under scrutiny. Merging of Knowledge incorporates this approach in its underlying commitment to individual and collective transformation during the research process for the group of people in poverty, and extends it by making the same commitment towards practitioners and academics as well. In a second paper, evaluating the Merging of Knowledge approach Osinski (2021b) argues that its research process could benefit from an analysis of the way that power dynamics emerge, persist and evolve to enhance awareness of different forms of power that coexist in research, and to ensure that imbalances present outside the research process are not reproduced within it.

Typically, participatory research invites people with direct experience of poverty into research in ways that overlook wider power dynamics and their silencing effects (Patrick, 2019; Greenhalgh *et al*, 2016). Prevailing social imbalances often act to marginalize and frustrate participants in consultative exercises, partly because they reinforce socially-accepted assumptions about where expertise lies (Brett *et al.*, 2014). Merging of Knowledge differs through provisions that anticipate and counter these forces. For example, people with direct experiences of poverty participating in Merging of Knowledge are offered a companion to accompany and support them throughout the research. Their presence can reduce the emotional burdens of recalling one's own experiences, listening to others recount theirs and any felt responsibility in bridging the worlds of lived experience and research (noted as problematic for service-users in other forms of participatory research reviewed by Brett *et al.*, 2014).

### **Reflections on the Application of Merging of Knowledge in Tanzania**

Tanzania was one of six countries to participate in the three-year research project to determine new dimensions of poverty and seek a "New Perspective of Poverty" (ATD Tanzania, 2019). Led by a local team (described below), this national study extended the investigation into the realities of poverty beyond the working age population to include children, young people and older people with direct experience of poverty. It was the first time that researchers and practitioners in Tanzania had used Merging of Knowledge (ATD Tanzania, 2019).

#### **Forming the research team and identifying peer groups**

The outreach stage required the identification and recruitment of people living in poverty, academics and practitioners to participate in the second stage. Local village and street leaders supported the outreach through their insights into who was living in poverty in their respective areas. The outreach consisted of the ATD Tanzania Team and local friends of ATD visiting prospective participants at their homes or their work places to verify whether they met project criteria (e.g. minimal assets, income, means of production, education). There they explained the objective of the research and the importance of their participation, invited them to peer focus group meetings and asked them to provide consent (via a signature or thumbprint).

The ATD Tanzania team used a similar outreach process to identify and approach social welfare practitioners and academics. They were selected on the basis of their professional roles and to achieve a mix of genders. From this process, the ATD Tanzania National Research Team (TNRT) was formed comprising six people living in poverty, three practitioners and three academics.

### **Early experiences: Fear and low levels of trust**

People living in poverty who were contacted to join the project expressed some hesitation and reservations about participating. Individuals lacked confidence and trust and felt fearful. They believed that research was a task done by academics, so when asked to join the project as co-researcher, they had a number of questions: they had no experience in conducting research, how are they going to do it? How are they going to express themselves before the professors because to them, professors knew everything? So, at the beginning people living in poverty did not contribute much - often they accepted what the professors said. Would what they say make sense within and across the peer group? Would the academics trust and accept what they say? How would they expose their experiences of shame to people they do not know?

Initially, the practitioners believed that there was nothing they would gain or learn from people living in poverty. They also had some doubts about the project and some questions. What are they going to learn from people who have not gone to school? What are they going to say before the professors? Would what they say make sense to the professors? How are they going to cope with working alongside people living in poverty and highly learned professors? So, the practitioners despised and belittled people living in poverty but feared the academics.

The academics had confidence and they considered themselves as the creators of knowledge. During discussions, they wanted to dominate the discussion and had forceful arguments within and outside their peer groups, which did not suit people living in poverty. In a meeting that was held in Dar es Salaam to introduce Merging of Knowledge approach, a huge difference of knowledge between academics and people living in poverty became very vivid. While academics mentioned international issues as causes of poverty, people living in poverty mentioned simple issues that surrounded them. Academics believed that nothing valuable would come from people living in poverty - some of whom have not gone to school and lacked exposure. So, during merging of knowledge, academics dominated the discussion often using English words, which were not known to people living in poverty. One professor refused to join the project simply because he did not know how he would cope with people living in poverty. "How can I discuss issues concerning poverty with a poor person?", he asked.

The above perceptions of different peer groups underscore the need to conduct empowerment training as a way to build confidence, trust and fearlessness among individuals in the peer group. The empowerment was able to uplift people living in poverty and humble the academics to become equal partners in conducting research.

### **Measures taken to empower the research team**

After the identification and recruitment of the ATD, TNRT was completed; the team went through a series of training within and outside the office to empower the team members, particularly those living in poverty. One person living in poverty indicated that he felt shameful to express some of his experiences of living in poverty to other people. This team-building process was key to MoK since self-expression, which was the main source of information, particularly for people living in poverty, depended solely on building confidence; trust and fearlessness within the team.

### **The role of Merging of Knowledge in producing findings**

Despite several empowerment and training programs to understand MoK and build confidence, trust and fearlessness among members of different peer groups, still there were some challenges, which rose during the implementation of MoK. At the early stage of the project, there was a debate on whether to involve people living poverty or not in merging the information collected. Some project staff thought merging of knowledge was their responsibility, while people in poverty thought that since they also gave the information they should be part of the merging process. Later, it was agreed that since people living in poverty were co-researchers, they should be fully involved in MoK. This was particularly the case when dimensions from different peer groups differed. In such a case, all peer groups were required to participate in the process of MoK.

The debate came about when the project staff presented merged dimensions, which did not involve people living in poverty. People living in poverty asked questions after noting that the dimensions they brought forward have changed. So they asked questions like: who did the merging, what is this dimension, where does it come from, when did it appear? So with these kinds of questions academics and practitioners could see that they really knew what they were doing and they were able to defend their ideas and positions. In a meeting that was held in Dar es Salaam, people living in poverty refused to allow some of their dimensions to be attributes in dimensions brought by academics and practitioners, because they thought what they have given is what affects their lives most. Such debates enabled academics to understand them better, because what they said made a lot of sense, and the other peer groups concurred with them. Often when they stuck to a certain dimension, they would not give in easily, signifying that these dimensions touched their lives the most.

Often when people in poverty were asked what their arguments were, they gave very sensible arguments. So, the other peer groups concurred with them, rather than forcing them to accept their arguments. Bearing in mind that people in poverty are the ones who have experienced poverty and therefore knew better which dimensions affects them most, we had to make sure that they were fully involved. The best way to involve people in poverty was to ask them to give their views first and to bring the academics and practitioners in later. This was done to avoid leading them into academic and practitioner thinking, and to ensure that academics and practitioners did not dominate the discussions, for example by speaking for most of the time. The other peer groups asked sharpening questions to know more about why people experiencing poverty made the decision.

On the contrary, when academics were allowed to start giving their views, there were tendencies for people living in poverty to simply give in saying, “I concur with what the

professor has said”. If that were allowed to happen all over, it would be the professors’ opinion that has been taken, and not of the other peer groups. For instance, during ranking of dimensions, there were three questions asked: which dimensions most shape poverty? Which dimension is intolerable? And which dimensions should be tackled first to have great impact on people’s lives? In answering these questions, the three peer groups answer them using different angles. People living in poverty answer them based on their experience living in poverty, practitioners base them on what they see from people living in poverty because they work with them, and academics base them on research they do and what they have learnt in school. This example shows why it is important to rely equally on knowledge from people in poverty, and to design the research process specifically to address power imbalances that normally prevent their full participation.

Some dimensions were identified by the majority of people living in poverty but were not well-understood by other peer groups and international community. One of the dimensions mentioned by those who own small businesses was insecurity, which they described as the absence of peace (“amani”). They explained it as a situation where they are not settled or lack peace of mind in their business life because at any point in time the police or municipal guards can come and take their assets, food or the fruits they sell and throw it away. Hearing these accounts was very touching. Imagine a woman who cooks porridge or food to sell in the street. She is expecting to earn a little money to feed her kids. But all of a sudden a policeman comes and takes that porridge and throws it away. Isn’t that painful and touching more than the dimensions of poor education, and even more than income poverty? Not having any peace of mind makes life hectic, because one cannot know whether one will eat today or not, or whether one’s business will be thrown away or not or even, when there are customers, whether one will earn or not, because the police may come before the customer has paid. All this makes for a lack of peace of mind, as defined by people in poverty.

This dimension was not identified in any of the other five countries in the international study or reported in any published international studies of poverty, yet it was a major problem faced by Tanzanian people living in poverty. The president of the fifth government, the late John Pombe Magufuli, gave top priority to that dimension: he did not want to see people living in poverty to be troubled when doing their small businesses. His attention to this dimension is why he was so beloved by people living in poverty and why so many gathered on the roads to mourn for him.

### **The role of emotions in the research process and its outcomes**

There were a number of occasions where people living in poverty were narrating their cases while crying. These cases show how badly people living in poverty were treated and how actions of other people deepened their poverty. In one case, a woman whose job was selling food narrated a story where while selling food in the street, municipal guards came and confiscated her food and took it away. The woman said that the business was what enabled her to support her family to live and without it they go to bed without eating. This woman narrated the story while crying like a child. In another case, a woman described how, following her husband’s death, all her assets were confiscated and she was kicked out of the house by his relatives. She also cried as she spoke.

With such emotional expression came a powerful message about what it is to experience poverty. When participants became highly emotional they were offered time to sit with a team member in a neighboring room to provide comfort, reassurance and support, until they were ready to rejoin the team discussions.

One thing was very clear - that emotion had something to say. Emotions showed how people in poverty were touched by the things they were describing. There were some cases where even men cried. They would say, “imagine how I struggled to buy cooking kettles and food then someone comes and takes them and throws them away, how do I start again?” In such a situation, one cannot cry if it is not real. You look at someone’s face and you realize that it is not acting or hypocrisy but it is real.

### **Ethical considerations**

Two ethical and epistemological principles underpin MoK: First, every person who has direct experience of poverty has potentially the means to understand and interpret his or her life situation (ATD, Tanzania, 2019). This personal life experience will remain fragile until it can feed into the common life experience of a social or professional group (*ibid.*). It is the sense of belonging to a social or professional group that reinforces and consolidates the knowledge that each person possesses (*ibid.*). Second, MoK ascribes equal status to the knowledge built by each group of individuals regardless of their background or social position.

Participation in a MoK process brings together people of diverse backgrounds, very often people who have never met or worked together. In that regard, the participants agree to respect certain fundamental principles, to regulate the relationship between them. The principle of reciprocity of knowledge applies to all the participants. As each is a supplier as well as a receiver of knowledge, it is crucial to ensure that different types of knowledge are successfully integrated, and everyone recognizes that other people’s roles are complementary to their own, unique and therefore not interchangeable.

All participants come to understand that the main aim in a MoK process is not to teach but to be taught. Knowledge is offered by way of personal expression. There is no other way of accessing it than through mutual recognition and respect between all concerned. Thus, knowledge becomes a symbol of mutual awakening, resulting from joint production of knowledge. Listening to one another and accepting differences entailed analyzing how one’s understanding is affected by another person’s knowledge. Each party’s knowledge is intertwined with that of the other and involved a reciprocal listening process that links them together as a pair.

Discretion is a key element in the process. Everything that participants say or write that has not yet been published is confidential and must not be quoted or used at any time. As participants are from diverse backgrounds, MoK insists on conditions that allow fair expression for all professionals, academics and people living in extreme poverty, including equal speaking time, and equal weight given to the words and vocabulary used. In some cases, people living in extreme poverty need more time, or more moral and

physical support, to keep up with a work schedule that is considered normal by academics and professionals.

It is therefore fundamental, when seeking to define the conditions that allow true and genuine participation, to consider the complex links and relationships between the participants that may include dependency, the presence or absence of social recognition and other barriers to mutual trust. True freedom of speech and the ability to contribute fully rely on the assurance that any freely-expressed point of view will be heard for what it is, rather than interpreted or turned against the speaker. So how do participants try to overcome all these obstacles? A posture of openness to change makes it possible to adhere to a shared understanding that fruitful disagreement is core to the process of knowledge production. In such a context, expressions of difference are welcomed with curiosity and kindness because they are recognized as essential to genuine participation.

### **Challenges faced**

The application of MoK in Tanzania proved effective in enabling people in poverty to be true research partners, with others, to identify dimensions of poverty that touch their lives most. At the same time, the following challenges were faced (Wetengere *et al.*, 2022):

#### **(i). Persistence of lack of trust and confidence, and fear**

Despite extensive training and efforts to empower and solidify the team,, build trust and confidence and remove fear among team members, still there were some elements of lack of trust, confidence and fear within and across the peer groups. People experiencing poverty did not trust each other or have confidence among themselves, and the situation worsened when they came into contact with educated people. On the other hand, academics and practitioners felt that there was nothing about poverty and society they could learn from people living in poverty. The main concern here was how to facilitate effective team work and, in particular, to enable people living in poverty to air their views freely, and the academics and practitioners to listen and to see people in poverty as co-researchers.

#### **(ii). Some important dimensions vanish in the later stages of merging knowledge**

During the course of the research, certain dimensions that were initially identified and considered important in rural and urban areas had vanished by the later stage of merging the dimensions. For instance, people living in poverty identified water shortages in the rural areas and lack of peace in the urban areas, but these did not appear in the final, agreed set of dimensions. There is a need to develop a way to incorporate dimensions that feature strongly in specific areas and less so in other areas, within the overall analysis.

#### **(iii). Differences in understanding of poverty**

There are significant differences in understanding about aspects of poverty - a gap between people experiencing poverty and people without that experience. Whereas people in poverty have experienced poverty and therefore know better what poverty is and which dimensions touch their life more; practitioners only work with people living in poverty, and academics are only informed about poverty through indirect means. Their knowledge about poverty reflects differences in life experiences, perceptions, and priorities for addressing poverty, yet has tended to shape understandings of poverty to

date. With this in mind, there is a strong argument for the knowledge of people with lived experience of poverty to have greater weight in the analysis whenever differences occur.

**(iv). Merging of knowledge consumes considerable resource and time**

The financial and human resource investments needed to conduct new studies or to replicate existing research using Merging of Knowledge may constrain its adoption. For example, equipping all co-researchers to participate on an equal footing involves preliminary work over several months, and sustaining their participation throughout data collection, analysis and dissemination entails support systems run by those with relevant expertise. Furthermore, enabling colleagues with direct experience of poverty to speak with confidence and to participate fully in conferences or meetings with influential organizations (such as OECD and UN meetings) required considerable time investments by many team members to support their preparation, and in negotiating with host institutions to achieve conducive physical settings.

**International Impact**

The purpose of this section is to illuminate the role played by the use of Merging of Knowledge in catalyzing or extending the impact of research conducted in Tanzania and the other five countries comprising the international study to determine dimensions of poverty (described above). It provides an insight into several research, policy and practice decisions, either within countries or internationally, that were attributed to, or can be traced back to, the value that external audiences identified in the approach, alongside any engagement they had with the findings. We recognize that impact is contingent on a combination of factors that are more or less within the control of any research team. Attentiveness to research rigour, advocacy and its timing can make a difference, yet so too can factors inherent to the individuals who hear about the study, as well as aspects of the social, political and emotional climate that are extrinsic to both the research products and the audience (Belfiori and Bennett, 2007).

In 2019, members of each of the six national research teams participating in the international study (including Tanzania) were invited to contribute to special sessions at the UN High Level Policy Forums, one of which was a workshop titled *Participatory and Inclusive Tools to Build Capacities in Leaving No One Behind* (July 2019: New York). Co-researchers from Bolivia and the US with backgrounds in poverty, community service and academia were asked to reflect critically on how Merging of Knowledge worked on the ground, what was required in terms of human, financial and other resources, how those typically 'left behind' were retained in the analytical processes, and what new learning occurred as a result. They referred to several dimensions of poverty that would have remained undetected or neglected without Merging of Knowledge including - poignantly and ironically - 'unrecognized contributions', meaning the everyday experience of one's hard work being overlooked or even dismissed by wider society. The dimensions of 'disempowerment' and 'struggle and resistance' were also explored, contested, re-visited and agreed upon within and between peer groups, and across country teams, as a result of a structured approach to equity in contribution from design to delivery and beyond.

In terms of practical impact, several decisions have been made to integrate the dimensions of poverty made visible in the international study into poverty measurement and policy, some of which can be traced back to individuals hearing directly about the role of Merging of Knowledge in setting the stage for new learning. For example, having participated in the OECD conference in May 2019, the Director General of INSEE, the French national statistics office, decided to try and measure ‘administrative difficulties’, a limited and soft form of institutional maltreatment, one of the six new dimensions identified. Members of INSEE designed a questionnaire, submitted it for review by members of the research team in ATD Fourth World and the University of Oxford, and made the majority of the proposed changes. This questionnaire was used in the April 2021 Resources and Living Conditions survey and INSEE is now matching these data with tax and income variables, in order to calculate the standard of living of surveyed households (available from mid-2022).

In China, where a subsequent study guided by Merging of Knowledge principles produced dimensions of poverty that were very similar to those identified in the international study, albeit with some cultural nuance (Yang *et al.*, 2020). Several months later, Li Keqiang, prime minister and head of the State Council, initiated a meeting with Robert Walker, one of the international advisory team now affiliated to Beijing Normal University, in which the needs to improve social protection and further reduce inequality were discussed as pivotal to addressing relative poverty in its many dimensions. Following this meeting, Li released a policy statement advocating investment in parenting skills to eradicate the corporal punishment of children.

The principles of Merging of Knowledge feature strongly in a current global initiative stimulated by the international study findings to produce a new Poverty Impact Assessment tool. Led by Olivier de Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, and the International Movement of ATD 4W, the rationale for this participatory research is to ensure that poverty impact assessments take into account lived experience of poverty, and are “genuinely participatory and empowering, which also implies that they should be effective in shaping the end content of the economic reform or the development project under consideration” (PIA Roadmap Draft: 2021). Research comprises a mapping of tools used to assess international policy regarding human rights and the environment to assess the inclusion of new dimensions of poverty identified in the international study and the modifying factors, and three case studies to interrogate the related appropriateness of questions used to determine amounts awarded through the Revenue to Solidarite Active (basic income grant) in France, policies for supporting children living on the streets in Burkina Faso, and the design of a so-called ‘model’ housing estate in Mauritius. Results of this work are expected at the end of 2022 or early 2023 (*ibid.*).

In the USA, the contribution of Merging of Knowledge as a research approach has been formally acknowledged at state level: In January 2019, a resolution was passed unanimously by the Massachusetts State House of Representatives to recognize the National Research Team’s findings and methodology as a benchmark (Godinot, 2021). The effectiveness of Merging of Knowledge in engaging people living in poverty in research on an equal footing has also stimulated new partnerships with universities, state

and local actors and influential think tanks, with the purpose of creating conditions for training on experiencing poverty, and on how to involve people with direct experience of poverty in research and advocacy. The goal of this work is to influence the way professionals interact with people living in poverty, uphold social policies or conduct research (ibid.).

## **Reflections and Conclusion**

The manner in which Merging of Knowledge was applied in Tanzania fulfils both of Osinski's criteria for participation; collaboration with people in poverty, and equal control for people in poverty at all levels of the research process in ways that enable individual and societal transformation. The case study demonstrates that introducing and developing MoK in range of rural and urban settings in Tanzania enabled individual-level transformation in the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour of all three peer groups, and a more gradual societal transformation evidenced by the rippling levels of international impact stimulated by the work of this and other national teams using the same approach.

As noted in the literature review, participatory research typically seeks to include people in poverty without always accounting for the wider power dynamics and tendencies towards marginalization inherent in such processes. The way Merging of Knowledge was applied in Tanzania actively sought to address these power imbalances by training and empowering all three groups of participants at each stage of the research, building trust, confidence and fearlessness in a sustainable manner. We therefore conclude that Merging of Knowledge holds great promise for future research on topics where strong hierarchies of knowledge exist, and where the physical inclusion of participants in data collection is not readily translated into intellectual inclusivity in the analysis and dissemination of findings. It provides a set of principles and a structure in which participants can engage with each other as human beings, allowing emotional expression and identifying social barriers that tend to remain hidden in research that is restricted to inviting opinions on a pre-defined issue. The challenges faced when using Merging of Knowledge in Tanzania can help plan strong action research initiatives, for example by considering how best to ensure that people in poverty are supported and empowered, and how to ensure that their insights and perspectives are valued throughout the research process, including in building consensus towards conclusions. There is work to be done in developing the approach in ways that allow its more consistent use, for example creating expectations amongst the policy and research community of such high levels of participation and, in parallel, legitimizing appropriate resource allocations to prevent compromises to such participation.

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