

**‘The Role of CSOs in the fight against poverty:
an ATD Fourth World contribution’**

Note prepared by Monica Jahangir-Chowdhury, Aria Ribieras, Janet Nelson and Emmanuel Reynaud, for the Virtual Inter-Agency Expert Group Meeting on “Implementation of the Third United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (2018-2027)”, 16-18 May 2022

Introduction

Today, the global community is not on track to achieve the objectives of eradicating poverty and ending hunger set in the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and the Third Decade for the Eradication of Poverty. The pandemic has aggravated the situation of the 1.3 billion people already living in multidimensional poverty and for the first time in two decades, 150 million additional people were pushed into extreme poverty in 2020-2021. Structural inequalities have been exacerbated especially in the fields of decent work, healthcare and education.

In this context, the role of civil society organizations is clearer and more important than ever: not only CSOs are in a better situation to reach and serve those furthest behind who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, they also play a unique role in creating a bridge between people and institutions, by advocating on their behalf and when possible, by creating spaces for the direct and meaningful participation of the poorest individuals and communities in policies and decisions that directly affect their lives. It is crucial that their interests be represented and voices be heard in the context of ‘Building Back Better’, or rather, as activists living in poverty would put it: ‘Building Forward Together’.

In this paper, the International Movement ATD Fourth World argues that the role of CSOs in the fight against poverty is to bring the knowledge of the poorest individuals and communities to policymakers and institutions and transform their understanding of poverty as well as the power dynamics at play between policymakers and beneficiaries. This results in co-creating policies and tools that respect people’s agency and dignity, while ensuring that the available resources are used with optimum effectiveness in the fight to achieve SDG 1.

I. Shifting the narrative and understanding of multidimensional poverty

In recent years, the use of complementary multidimensional poverty indicators has become widespread, notably thanks to the development of the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) which tracks deprivations across three dimensions (health, education and living standards). Despite this welcome progress looking beyond the monetary only, efforts to achieve SDG1 would be better

served by a more complete understanding of poverty that encompasses the various and complex dimensions of poverty as well as the experience of poverty.

The human rights-based approach to poverty allows for a deeper understanding of it, based on the recognition that extreme poverty is a cause and a consequence of multiple violations of human rights. This key insight, shared by international human rights experts, formed the basis for the *UN Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights*¹, a set of global policy guidelines noted with appreciation by the UNGA in 2012 and intended as a practical tool for policy-makers to ensure that public policies (including poverty eradication efforts) reach the poorest members of society, and respect and uphold their rights.

In 2015, the adoption of Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development marked great progress, as eradicating extreme poverty in all its forms everywhere by 2030 was now a universal commitment grounded in international human rights and in the moral imperative of leaving no one behind. (A/RES/70/1 Paragraph 10).

In the UNSDG Good practice Note on ‘Operationalizing Leaving no one behind’, the principle of Leaving no one behind’ (LNOB) is described as ‘*the central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It represents the unequivocal commitment of all UN Member States to eradicate poverty in all its forms, end discrimination and exclusion, and reduce the inequalities and vulnerabilities that leave people behind and undermine the potential of individuals and of humanity as a whole.*’²

In this context, identifying what these multiple forms of poverty are, both in the Global North and South, should be the start of any reflection on poverty eradication. Even though multidimensional poverty is largely acknowledged and accepted, certain dimensions have gone unrecognized, and the ways in which the dimensions interact to shape the experience of poverty has not been properly understood.

With the intent of bringing the knowledge and experience of people living in poverty to policymakers and institutions, ATD Fourth World and Oxford University launched an international participatory research called *The Hidden Dimensions of Poverty*³, directly engaging people living in poverty as co-researchers, working alongside academics and practitioners. The research was carried out using the Merging of Knowledge methodology, that seeks to confront and combine theoretical knowledge held by academics, action-oriented knowledge held by practitioners, and experiential knowledge held by persons in poverty. The research took place in three countries in the global South (Bangladesh, Bolivia, and Tanzania) and three countries in the global North (France, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America). This process has been

¹ UN Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-poverty/guiding-principles-extreme-poverty-and-human-rights>

² Page 6, UNSDG Good practice Note on ‘Operationalizing Leaving no one behind’ <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/Operationalizing%20LNOB%20-%20final%20with%20Annexes%20090422.pdf>

³ Bray, Rachel, Marianne De Laat, Xavier Godinot, Alberto Ugarte, and Robert Walker. *The Hidden Dimensions of Poverty*. ATD Fourth World and University of Oxford (2019), <https://www.atd-quartmonde.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Hidden-Dimensions-of-Poverty-20-11-2019.pdf>

transformative not only for all participants but also with regards to the results: new sets of dimensions emerged, showing that even if poverty is different according to the context, the experience of poverty is similar in both North and South. This research provides the international community with a global understanding of poverty in terms of three interrelated sets of dimensions:

1) The core experience of poverty:

- Disempowerment
- Struggle and resistance
- Suffering in body, mind and heart

2) Relational dynamics:

- Institutional maltreatment
- Social maltreatment
- Unrecognized contributions

3) Privations:

- Lack of decent work
- Insufficient and insecure income
- Material and social deprivation

Pursuant to this research, ATD Fourth World and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Prof. Olivier De Schutter, have launched a new research project entitled the Participatory Policy Assessment (PPA) tool. The PPA project seeks to build on the results of *the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty* research by designing a participatory policy assessment tool that ensures the lived experiences of people in poverty influence policy decisions and that dimensions of poverty that are not generally highlighted in existing impact assessment tools are better taken into account in the design, implementation and assessment/evaluation of policies. The final deliverable of the project – to be released in 2023 - will be a handbook destined for policymakers and organizations. It will contain a set of general principles to guide users in assessing policies from the perspective of poverty (at the time of design, implementation and assessment of policy choices), outlining the key questions that should be asked at different stages of the policy process, as well as the conditions for ensuring the full participation of persons experiencing poverty in the process.

To accompany this shift of the narrative on poverty towards a more accurate depiction of its reality, the International Movement ATD Fourth World also promotes a change in language, shifting from Extreme to Persistent Poverty. The 1.90\$/day indicator is misleading as it implies that ‘extreme poverty’ only exists in the global South. And yet 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’. Which can unfortunately carry the connotation that it is the parents who are guilty of re-transmitting the poverty that they themselves inherited. It ignores the many structural and institutional barriers that trap families in poverty over many generations. ATD Fourth World thus calls 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.

II. Creating spaces for the direct and meaningful participation of people living in poverty

The UNSDG Good practice Note on ‘Operationalizing Leaving no one behind’ states that *‘Critically important to LNOB is to ensure the inclusive participation of those groups who are identified as being left behind in all five of the steps set out above, and in any processes intended to advance sustainable development, peace and security. Participation can be defined as meaningful when participants manage to influence decisions on issues that affect their lives. This happens when policymakers and service providers give serious consideration to their views and provide appropriate feedback on how those views have been taken into account. An important outcome of meaningful participation is participants’ strengthened empowerment, which can be defined as their capacity to exert control over their lives and to claim their rights.’*⁴

Empowerment is indeed central to unleashing the transformative nature of the Agenda 2030. The experience of ATD Fourth World demonstrates that participation of people living in persistent poverty is a key condition for their empowerment. But for participation to be effective and respectful, several conditions must be met to ensure a fair and non-exploitative process that enable them to speak for themselves and participate in decision-making processes that directly affect them.

These conditions include:

- building a feeling of trust,
- creating an environment that is safe and secure at the mental and physical levels,
- granting time to prepare for the process,
- verifying that the language used is understandable by all,
- ensuring that vulnerable groups not be put at risk, and guaranteeing confidentiality when needed.

It is crucial to acknowledge that these specific preparatory steps need to be taken by the practitioners or academics working with these vulnerable groups. As perfectly explained in the above cited UNSDG Good practice note, *“It should also be acknowledged that engaging meaningfully with the most marginalized and excluded groups may take extra time and resources on the part of UN staff themselves. This requires UN staff to build their own capacity and adapt their behaviours”*.

This is a fundamental point that needs to be emphasized. To allow for the meaningful participation of people living in persistent poverty, adequate conditions of participation need to be in place, including a transformation on the side of institutions claiming to bring this change. This requires a change not only in practice in terms of extra time and resources, but also in mindsets, values and true commitment to inclusive processes so the change in power dynamics between policymakers and people living in poverty can lead to more complete and integrated knowledge.

⁴ Page 61, UNSDG Good practice Note on ‘Operationalizing Leaving no one behind’
<https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/Operationalizing%20LNOB%20-%20final%20with%20Annexes%20090422.pdf>

To bring more participation and inclusion in policy processes, policy makers and institutions should partner with CSOs who are already working with people, families and communities that are most left behind and who already have relations of trust and confidence with them. Partnerships with civil society organizations are crucial to not only connect with individuals experiencing poverty as beneficiaries of programs, but also for institutions and agencies to learn about the process and conditions for participation and shared thinking, so that people in poverty can propose and co-create solutions based on their own experience and needs.

In Focus: The Service to fight poverty, precariousness and social exclusion in Belgium.

(Service de lutte contre la pauvreté, la précarité et l'exclusion sociale).

The *Service* is an independent and inter-federal institution in Belgium providing a platform for a long-term and continuous dialogue between people living in poverty, civil servants, and policymakers. This agency looks at the effectiveness of fundamental rights for people living in poverty (such as the right to affordable housing, right to family life protection, right to social protection, right to healthcare, etc.). To do this, the agency organizes in-depth consultations between NGOs working with people living in persistent poverty, public assistance centers, social partners, professionals from various administrations, etc. On the basis of this work, the *Service* formulates recommendations intended for political leaders, with a view to restoring the conditions for the exercise of fundamental rights. The reports are then presented and followed up on in the federal and local governments and parliaments of Belgium.

The ninth report produced by the agency was published in 2019 on the theme: "[Sustainability and poverty](#)", in the context of the Agenda 2030. In order to write this report, consultations were organized once a month with 30 to 60 people, some of them with the experience of persistent poverty. Each time, the group of activists with direct experience of poverty gathered before, to understand the theme and to prepare their participation in the consultation.

Hector Guichart, activist with a lived experience of poverty, said: "*We are here to reverse the mentality of public opinion. Without our contribution, we would write a report that would not be quite right.*"

See a video on this work [here](#).

III. Encouraging and co-creating effective policies and programs tackling poverty all the while respecting people in poverty's agency, dignity and inclusion

Poverty is the result of deliberate policy choices. Conversely, only pro-active and pro-poor policies can reverse decades of disinvestment in social sectors and of exclusionary measures built upon misconceptions and biases about people living in poverty. It is indeed essential to acknowledge that systemic discrimination and ill-designed policies are at the roots of the many

injustices that have been exposed during this pandemic. The post-recovery agenda should be the opportunity to build forward an inclusive society based on a new social contract and on a human rights approach, which place dignity and inclusion at the center.

Promoting a revolution in mentalities by combating the stigmatization of people living in poverty:

- Respect and dignity should start in institutional and UN documents (i.e. write ‘people living in poverty’, not ‘poor people/the poor’, ‘people experiencing homelessness’, not ‘the homeless,’ etc.) so the situations in which people find themselves do not define who they are as human beings. The agency and contributions of individuals and families should be acknowledged and recognized both in resolution language and in policy design.
- Provide trainings to institutions, policymakers, civil servants, and social workers about how to acquire and then use the knowledge of firsthand experience of poverty to end discrimination and stigma in policy and practice. (e.g., in France, a law passed in 2016 bans poverty-based discrimination).
- Raise awareness on the issue of non-take up of rights: most people in poverty entitled to social protection and social benefits do not access them because of a lack of access to information, a lack of legal identity (especially in developing countries), a fear of humiliation by the social services and stigmatization within their community, digital hindrance, etc.
- Encourage campaigns in mainstream and social media to change the narrative on poverty and people experiencing it. By breaking down stereotypes and bias, CSOs can help the rest of society, policymakers and institutions to change their views on individuals and families living in difficult situations. (e.g., ATD Fourth World USA launched a report on Poverty Myths to debunk myths and misconceptions related to poverty in the US⁵).

Placing agency, participation and dignity at the center of policy design in the post-Covid period in order to empower people to contribute to the country’s recovery:

- Encourage the direct participation of affected individuals and communities in the design, implementation and monitoring of the development of social and environmental protection programs in order to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of the programs.
- Ensure that any new development interventions increase solidarity in the community, do not socially exclude nor discriminate, and reach the furthest behind first. As such, when designing a policy or program, the following questions could inform the process:
 - *Do these solutions enable people most affected to have control over their own lives and so to take initiatives that contribute to the lives of their communities?*
 - *Do these solutions create connectedness across class, race, ethnicity, social identities and other divides and therefore reduce social tensions and promote greater cooperation?*
 - *Do these solutions recognize and support the contributions that people living in poverty are already making in the community?*

⁵ Poverty Myths, ATD Fourth World USA, <https://atdfourthworld-usa.org/poverty-myths>

- Encourage partnerships and collaboration between local civil society organizations, affected communities, UN country teams and agencies and international organizations.

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

- A global recovery can only be achieved when COVID-19 preventive measures will be available, efficacious and affordable for all. Investing in human capability (via education and healthcare) in a way that is free, universal and without obstacles, is essential for people's wellbeing. In accessing education and healthcare, combating stigma and discrimination is essential to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty.
- Pandemic recovery measures should equally cover workers in the formal and informal economy, as well as migrants and women involved in the unpaid care economy.
- Strong social protection systems allow for basic needs to be met and form an effective tool against poverty. A Global Fund for Social Protection should be set up to increase the level of support to low-income countries.
- 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 would at the same time increase food security and stimulate economic development. Care should be taken to ensure that adaptation strategies do not further impoverish vulnerable groups.

In Focus: Integrated social protection and healthcare in Haiti: an example of integrated care placing the needs and interests of the poorest families and communities first.

In Haiti, ATD Fourth World launched in partnership with a local organization the [pilot project entitled Knowledge-Health-Participation](#). Through a “health insurance card”, families in deep poverty are specifically targeted for inclusion to the project. The card gives them access to a center providing primary health care including vaccinations, family planning, and care for tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. Card-users can also obtain second-line care through a network of predefined institutions: public hospitals, some non-profit community structures and some private structures with which an agreement is signed.

The insurance is financed by a solidarity fund to which the families contribute the equivalent of one dollar fifty per year, allowing them to be involved in taking charge of their own health care. By participating in this project as stakeholders, they have the opportunity to share their opinion about how it works.

Since 1997, this program has covered 1,100 families - that is, almost 4,000 people. This health insurance program is part of a larger integrated approach providing access to birth certificates, early childhood development within the family environment, and education and training, particularly for young girls. This pilot project ensures the implementation of the right to social security in a very practical way that can be reproduced because it is anchored in local realities and local resources as well as those of the State. It is able to reach the poorest families in a country in which poverty is widespread.

Conclusion

The United Nations system-wide plan of action in the context of the Third Decade for the Eradication of Poverty promotes operational and policy integration across UN agencies and between international, national and local stakeholders. In a similar fashion, the International Movement calls for integrated action directly involving individuals, families and communities experiencing persistent poverty and discriminations in the design, implementation and evaluation of these programs. This should be done first through a change in the understanding and narrative around poverty, which allows for new ways of measuring all dimensions of poverty, including the experience of poverty. Based on this knowledge, new approaches putting at the center the contributions and agency of the affected communities should be developed, putting in coherence not only plans and programs across agencies and sectors but also people's needs and aspirations, within the best possible use of public resources. This cannot happen if international, regional, national and local institutions do not transform their methods of work. A true commitment to changing the ways in which policies are designed and implemented can make a difference in lifting lives out of multidimensional and persistent poverty.