

“*What we say should change our lives*”

Extreme poverty, participation and access to fundamental rights for all

Presentation of the working document drafted in the framework
of the Community Action Programme on Social Exclusion

One of the rights which the poorest people are often refused is the right to take part in the life of society, to express their experiences and their thoughts in oral or written form.

The lack of such participation makes it impossible for these people to exercise their rights as citizens. Most people who have to struggle against poverty are in this situation. All their energy is taken up by the daily battle to feed and house themselves, to keep their family life going, to take care of their health, to look for work etc. When one is faced with all these problems and has not had the chance of an education, it is hard to devote time and energy to the work of institutions where policy and action are planned, where often one is neither expected nor welcomed. It is not easy either to get oneself on the electoral register and to exercise one's voting rights.

Nor are people in extreme poverty consulted on questions which are of direct concern to them. They often depend on professionals and on the commitment of voluntary organisations.

If the absence of participation by people experiencing long-term poverty is a denial of their basic rights, it is also, still more seriously, a problem which prevents our societies from moving towards a situation where the basic rights of all are respected.

Those most affected by poverty are in the front line of the fight against the poverty they endure, and they are the leading activists for human rights in the communities in which they live.

They have the right to expect, then, that their efforts should be supported, that actions in the struggle against poverty should be grafted onto their efforts and should be based upon their experience.

*Participation in society by the poorest among us is **the basic condition for our societies to put fully into effect the ideals which we proclaim:** respect for the dignity of all, democracy, justice, peace... Whatever our efforts and the progress made, our societies have the greatest difficulty in implementing these ideals which are so important for us all.*

If we can find a way to meet people in extreme poverty, to let them express their understanding of the world, to listen to them and to engage in real dialogue with them, then we may be able to understand, together with them, what needs to be done to ensure that our institutions are really at the service of all. People experiencing poverty are not defending the interests of a particular category of citizens, but challenging our societies and each one of us about the way we treat our fellow human beings.

Extreme poverty: a question of human rights

In recent years the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and other institutions and individuals have asserted, as did Joseph Wresinski¹, that extreme poverty is a violation of human rights. It is the result, in fact, of an accumulation of fragilities which prevents the poorest people from enjoying their fundamental rights.

Placing the struggle against poverty on the same footing as the struggle for human rights sets it at the highest level of international law, at the level of the fundamental rights necessary to guarantee equal dignity for every human being. This faces us with a

social question which affects the very foundations of our societies and the aims we set ourselves, a question which concerns all citizens and should guide all policies.

Experiments in participation

For ten years or so, the importance of participation in society by people living in poverty has been recognised and initiatives taken in several countries both by governments and by NGOs.

The different projects carried out in recent years by the International Movement ATD Fourth World, usually in partnership with various associations and institutions, mean that the obstacles which have to be overcome have now become familiar.

¹ 1917-1988, Founder of the International Movement ATD Fourth World

Obstacles to overcome

- **Assisted but misunderstood, little is expected of them**

The position of individuals and families in extreme poverty is closely linked to the attitude which our societies have towards them. This attitude is too often based on misunderstanding, pity or condemnation - a condescending attitude, in fact.

Living in poverty means living outside other people's networks. Many professionals have only a fragmentary knowledge of the lives of the people they are dealing with. The same is true of many who work in the political, institutional, economic, trade union and religious fields. It is hard to develop relations and a dialogue with people one does not know, whose experiences and references one does not share, and where one has difficulty in understanding the logic of their actions.

One cannot say that the poorest are "abandoned", or that no one pays any attention to them. But very often the answer to extreme poverty is private or public assistance, which means that the people who have to accept it are dependent on the goodwill of others; this gradually fences them in and dangerously limits their freedom. One cannot have a dialogue between equals with people when one is dependent on them for one's survival, for access to housing or for getting one's child into school. The energy which those most affected by poverty have to spend on getting access to these various forms of assistance absorbs their lives and prevents them from putting effort into projects for the future.

Although assistance is necessary in emergency situations, when it becomes prolonged and institutionalised it does not meet the needs either of people living in poverty or of our societies. It prevents those who are dependent on it from fulfilling their functions as citizens and endangers democratic life as a whole.

And yet, people living in poverty are often accused of not doing as much as they should, of being content to live on public assistance, of being "scroungers", "bad parents", etc.

All this leads to our societies having few or no expectations towards people experiencing poverty. Thus the end result of extreme poverty and exclusion is being confined to uselessness, with the feeling that one has no place in the society one is supposed to belong to. This is the most serious obstacle to participation people experiencing poverty face.

One gets used to people in extreme poverty being left out of our thinking and to us speaking on their behalf, thus depriving ourselves of the particular contribution they might make.

People living in poverty get accustomed to not saying what they really think, to not talking about their plans for the future or the support networks they build up

among themselves.

- **The extent of insecurity to be overcome**

The kind of life those most affected by poverty lead is itself an obstacle to participation.

Unlike what many people think, those living in poverty are not satisfied with the insecurity that goes with their life-style.

Throughout their lives they must struggle with their feeling of shame and the fear which comes with it. They cannot do this alone. Only alongside others in society can people living in poverty regain pride in their own lives and those of their peers.

Finally, many people in "established" society are afraid of relations with those experiencing poverty, and particularly of being powerless or failing in the face of the difficulties to be overcome.

Society as a whole needs to mobilise to initiate a dialogue and to give people in extreme poverty the chance to participate in it.

- **A desire to establish relations and to participate**

People in long-term poverty are anxious to participate in society, and take definite steps in that direction.

It is on these expectations that we must base our efforts to ensure that their participation is possible, real and useful, both for them and for the societies they are part of.

Conditions for a participation leading to partnership

The "participation" talked about here is part of the search for a relationship of equality, where people experiencing poverty are treated as partners and are free to use their experience, opinions, and thinking, both in daily life, in the struggle against poverty and in dealing with more general social questions.

1. **A common purpose**

- **Demanding a society which respects the basic rights of all**

The question which those most affected by poverty are asking individuals and institutions asking for their participation is whether they are willing to commit themselves to a society which respects the basic rights of all?

- **Recognising the contribution of people living in poverty and for working together to be a learning opportunity for all**

For the process of participation to be productive for all, we must be willing to learn from each other. Professionals and politicians sometimes have difficulty in admitting that they too have much to learn. It is not always easy to accept that the knowledge which people

living in poverty have acquired through experience is necessary in order to understand extreme poverty and to build a society without exclusion.

- **Respecting and guaranteeing the freedom of everyone**

The various participants in society start off in unequal positions. It is unfair that to this inequality should be added a lack of freedom. For this reason structured dialogues should be set up which are to a certain extent disassociated from the daily life of the people concerned.

- **Measuring risks**

In starting up new projects together with people living in poverty one must be well aware of the risks they are running.

To this end at least three conditions must be observed :

- Do not press people to talk about aspects of their lives too intimate or too harsh which no one would normally reveal in public.
- Ensure that people do not have to keep telling their own story; let them rely on examples which are not from their own lives and let them set out their thoughts on these.
- Undertake to keep confidential everything which is said and written.

2. Necessary safeguards

- **Positive experiences and the need to take time**

In all the programmes referred to in the document, participants living in extreme poverty stress that they have needed a lot of time to venture to reply to requests to participate. Their decision to join in dialogue often comes after several years of participating in various activities by the organisations they belong to. Unless the time and the resources are invested in these initial meetings, people in very difficult situations will be unable to take part in the discussions, at whatever level they are arranged.

- **Linking with other from similar backgrounds or to a reference group**

When discussing with others, a professional person, a trade unionist or a politician can rely on a collective identity which gives a feeling of security. People experiencing poverty also form part of a group, but an unstructured group which within their social background. They rely on relations with their extended family, without which they could not survive.

They need these links with their background to understand their own lives and to escape from the situation in which they are trapped.

3.

4. Collective dialogue

Our societies work through discussions between partners belonging to organised groups. Participation by people experiencing poverty has to follow the same pattern.

- **Setting up the meeting**

For holding a dialogue, thinking and working together, people first have to get to know each other, to create a favourable atmosphere for getting together.

This needs particular care, because people who are not in the habit of working together in discussions or working meetings need to feel that they are in an atmosphere of respect and equality to be sure of being comfortable in the group.

- **Ensuring that everyone understands each other**

One of the problems for people living in poverty is not understanding other people and not being able to make themselves understood.

Attention must therefore be paid to a number of conditions :

- Sufficient time for preparation.
- Use of easily understandable language, while explaining more difficult concepts.
- Determination on all sides to give people living in poverty the time and the resources to make themselves understood.

- **Recognising differences**

Those taking part in discussions have not all had the same experiences in life and they will have developed different ways of thinking.

To benefit from the wealth of differences, succeed in the “pooling of knowledge” and arriving at a broader vision of particular problems and of the world as a whole, it is essential to develop an understanding of the differences between our ways of thinking.

- **Respecting people's timing and rhythms**

The timing of meetings and the pace of work should be adapted to the experience of people living in poverty, to their need for time to prepare and to the efforts they have to make to fit into the dialogue.

- **The need for accompaniment**

People living in poverty need to be accompanied by people they have confidence in, and who can devote the time required to help them to overcome obstacles and to make their own contribution. In the same way, one of the surprises produced by the experimental programmes “Fourth World University” and “Fourth World Partnerships” was the realisation that the other participants, academics or professionals, also needed accompaniment.

- **Ensuring the necessary funding**

It is essential to provide funding for the preparation - which can take some time - and the accompaniment of people living in poverty. There must also be funding for the organisations in which people suffering from exclusion feel at home and where they can get together to acquire training.

5. **Requirements for carrying through participation and its follow-up**

• **Agreeing on first principles**

It is a good idea to lay down a clear outline for the project and to agree on its aims and working methods. As far as possible terms of reference should be written down.

• **Joint responsibility for the results**

If people experiencing poverty are to take part in a consultation, a working group or a training course, they must be involved in the thinking, the guidelines and the decisions which result from it.

It must be ensured that participants from a background of poverty are involved in the work of the group all the way through and, of course, share in the preparation and presentation of its results.

• **Reporting on follow-up**

Those taking part will want to be kept abreast of the follow-up to their work, to know what the practical effects of the work have been, what has been done with it... This feedback is essential to show the usefulness of the efforts which have been made and to raise the morale of those taking part.

Participation of people living in poverty: effects and potential

• **For people living in poverty, taking part in dialogue brings added confidence and opens up a new world**

By taking part in dialogue and making a contribution, people experiencing poverty regain confidence in their own abilities, open up new relationships and thus undertake a real course of social development.

• **Participation by some gives a chance to others and all those around them**

Participation of people living in long-term poverty has immediate effects on those around them. The first effect is to spread confidence.

Participation and the preparation for it give people a different attitude to their own backgrounds: they are

able to take on responsibilities and to develop new relationships within this background. Taking part in a discussion as a representative of one's own circle or the group or organisation one belongs to means, little by little, becoming a spokesperson for other people in difficulties, calling attention to their experiences and the things they are seeking, as well as the questions they are asking of society.

• **Their presence and their input can make a difference to their partners in the dialogue**

A number of professionals, academics, politicians, economists and trade unionists who have spent some time working with people living in poverty and exclusion say that this was the first time they had taken part in a dialogue of this kind. Many stress that this has brought about a change in the way they look at people living in poverty, at the struggle against poverty and at their work and responsibilities.

They find that this work encourages them to carry out their responsibilities in a different way.

• **A contribution which challenges and brings about change**

The participation of people living in poverty and exclusion provides an opportunity for everybody to learn from each other.

But does it change policies? Does it bring about lasting changes in the way our societies are organised?

Examples over the past twenty years, in France, in Belgium and at the European Union level, show how decisive the contribution of people experiencing poverty has been in bringing about important policy changes in the struggle against poverty.

However, the influence of statements made by those living in poverty and of their thinking is still very inadequate, in Europe and elsewhere in the world, at all levels of society. We must not be naive. Often little or no account is taken of participation by people living in poverty and exclusion, even when this takes place.

The examples quoted show, however, that the contribution of people experiencing poverty can shake up societies for the common good, if all the partners concerned undertake to act together.

Further information:

The full report "What we say should change our lives: Extreme poverty, participation and access to fundamental rights for all", includes a detailed description of projects and programmes carried out in recent years by the International Movement ATD Fourth World, in partnership with various organisations and institutions. It makes reference to European exchanges within the framework of Phase II of the Transnational Exchange Programme initiated by the European Commission and can be downloaded (in French) at:

www.atd-fourthworld.org

This publication will also be available in English and Dutch before summer 2006

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