



“Wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty,  
human rights are violated.  
To come together to ensure that these rights be respected  
is our solemn duty.”

*Joseph Wresinski (1917-1988) Founder of ATD Fourth World.*

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**Theme 3: Contribution of the United Nations to the research for equity in an interdependent world**

**Introduction**

In thinking about this morning’s theme, I wanted to put before you the thoughts of a woman in Ireland. She said this:

“I want to speak to you on behalf of the homeless. I have been on the streets half of my life and before me, my father and mother were homeless too. You have to have lots of strength, especially if you are a homeless family, to look after your kids, to keep them clean and nice. You have to walk the streets day and night. You are not considered a human being. No one wants to know you. We are families that are being swept under the carpet. Sometimes we bend under the heavy burden of poverty. But like the bamboo tree, we force ourselves to stand up again, to share again our hope so that our neighbor who is at the bottom can stand up again. All that suffering is hidden, as if it never happened. It needs to be said. It has to change.

The first thing we are saying is that poverty is an abuse of human rights and that it is important to recognize that people who struggle against poverty in the street, in their own homes, in their own lives, their own communities, are the first defenders of Human Rights.”

**That thought could have come from any country.** There are men and women, children and young people all over the world who are huddled on a bit of sidewalk, crowded into abandoned neighborhoods or isolated in countryside who all tell us:

“You are looking for peace. This is where it starts. You talk about the importance of sustainable development. It begins with us. You are concerned about human rights. Know that our desire for education is as fierce as our hunger.”

Because of them, the United Nations must make a contribution to the research for equity, first of all on an ethical level (part 1). But this research must extend to fundamental rights and liberties (part 2) and finally to a plan to mobilize civil society (conclusion).

**1. The greatest challenge facing the world today is the eradication of extreme poverty.**

Despite new forms of cooperation developed since the Earth Summit in 1992, the Millennium Declaration in 2000 and the Monterrey summit, the eradication of extreme poverty is still not completely linked to the search for peace and the promotion of Human Rights in the world. In order to contribute to the research for equity in an interdependent world, the UN must first of all make an ethical contribution. In other words the UN must remain the world's conscience. To do so means developing the comprehensive knowledge necessary.

**a)The UN must remain the world's conscience:** The UN must continue to signify a humanity in solidarity with its own. It means constantly reintegrating its most fragile members into the heart and fabric of our societies. This on-going process has to be reinvented time and again. Today, the United Nations is the last international bastion against a divided humanity, a humanity that moves on different tracks. There is the fast track where security will be imposed by the strength of the powerful. Those who lag behind, on the slow track are inevitably relegated to exclusion, whether in the north or in the south.

The exclusion of the poorest people is inherent even right in the objectives of the Millennium. I am speaking about the overall objective of reducing the number of people in poverty by 50% between now and 2015 (two thousand and fifteen). So what will become of the others? How could such an objective be acceptable in a human rights framework? **How can people living in a village, a neighborhood or even a whole country accept to be the other 50 percent, the other half that didn't get reached?** What possible ethical significance could such an objective have to them when everywhere we speak of the need for everyone's participation?

**b)To be the conscience of the world the UN must acquire a new comprehensive knowledge.**

This must take into account the reality of extreme poverty in the north as well as in the south.

It strikes us that the World Bank, for example, whose role is so important in the production of knowledge and the design of policies, does not take into account the persistence of chronic poverty in rich countries. We think that taking this issue into account has at least two benefits: -first of all, to remind rich countries that they have failed to eradicate extreme poverty within their borders and to prompt them to think how this is an affront to human dignity, to their ideal of democracy and a threat to peace.

-secondly, it might help rich countries to be more humble with developing countries, to consider them more as partners who share similar concerns than as beneficiaries of aid. In turn, it would also help developing countries not to copy the mistakes of richer countries.

*In order to be effective in an interdependent world, this comprehensive knowledge must bring together the sources of knowledge of all those involved.* This means, in the first place the experiential knowledge that comes from those living in situations of human misery, that of grassroots workers and university academics. This **cross fertilization of the different sources of knowledge would allow a better global understanding of extreme poverty and the promotion of a human rights-based approach in the struggle against poverty.** This "cross

**fertilization” would make it possible to develop coherent, overall and forward looking policies in the context of globalization.**

**2. The second contribution of the United Nations to equity and equality is on the level of rights, specifically the fundamental rights and liberties.**

Because they are based on the equal dignity of all human beings, fundamental rights and liberties are not the sole property of workers. They belong as well to the unemployed workers as well as all those who, due to disability, will never be able to work. These rights belong to those who vote just as they do to those whose daily survival efforts prevent them from expressing or giving their opinion. Everyone agrees that human rights are indivisible.

**In fact, though, we are always pitting one right against another. Those in the situations of greatest poverty urge us to implement human rights in their indivisibility.**

**a) We are always pitting one right against another.**

We are watching a kind of race between economic globalization and the universal **application** of human rights. There are always two separate Pacts-- one for civil and political rights, the other for economic, social and cultural rights. Those living in the greatest poverty are not debating the difference between these rights. To them, they form a unit. What's important to them is to have a decent life, to live in dignity. That signifies having adequate means to live and the most noble reasons to live.

**b) Because the life of the poorest populations and families is in itself indivisible, it is a constant appeal to implement the indivisibility of human rights.**

This implies rethinking our policies. In collaboration with the UN Department of Social and Economic Affairs, the ATD Fourth World Movement conducted a study entitled « How poverty separates parents and children – a challenge to Human Rights.» In his preface former UN Under Secretary General Nitin Desai wrote the following:

“Many things can be learned from this document, but foremost among them is perhaps the realization of how many hidden efforts parents and children in extreme poverty make in order to stay together...What if this aspiration enabled us to create links among the many policies that can be so hard to harmonize at international, local and national levels? What if this aspiration brought together economic policies and human rights policies, employment policies and access to culture?”

**In Conclusion**

The legitimacy of the United Nations in its contribution to the research for equity in an interdependent world, is intimately linked to the possibilities we will offer the UN—the possibilities of making the eradication of extreme poverty central to its commitments, central to its policies for peace and to its responsibility for protecting and promoting fundamental rights and liberties. The commitment and civic mobilization the UN is trying to generate must open up to include the poorest people themselves.

This challenge that concerns all of us is inscribed in the text engraved since October 17, 1987 in the marble of the Trocadero Plaza in Paris. This is where the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed. Let me quote this text written by Father Joseph Wresinski:

“Wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty, human rights are violated. To come together to ensure that these rights are respected is our solemn duty.”

On that day in 1987, 100,000 people answered his call—people of all nationalities and social backgrounds, of all philosophical and religious convictions. They gathered to affirm that extreme poverty does not have to exist and to pay homage to the victims of hunger, ignorance and violence in the world.

Since 1987 many people who do not accept human misery and exclusion, gather on the 17<sup>th</sup> of October throughout the world to publicly reaffirm their convictions and their commitment.

This is how the World Day for the Eradication of Poverty came into being. It was recognized by the UN in 1992. Since 1996 a replica of the text I just quoted by Joseph Wresinski is in the gardens of the United Nations here in New York.

Today, after nearly 20 years since the World Day was proclaimed, we feel it indispensable to evaluate the impact of this Day. We want to see to what extent it has led to the development of a genuine culture of saying “No” to poverty and a new effort in mobilizing the civil society. We hope that the UN will get involved in the evaluation of this World Day that it chose to promote.

In the south as well as in the north, extreme poverty is not other people’s poverty, it is ours. The men and women who suffer from it are waiting for us to refuse the inequalities and inequities of this situation and with them learn to share the future, in an equitable way among all.

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