

Comments on the UN Secretary-General's Report *In Larger Freedom*

International Movement ATD Fourth World

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In his report "In Larger Freedom," Mr. Kofi Annan gives us a compelling definition of freedom; freedom of development, security, and human rights. He presents this larger freedom as both the goal of this new millennium and the means of achieving overall social development for the next century. We strongly welcome this challenging and far-reaching statement, and also recognize that in order to realize true freedom, we need to include all the relevant social factors and mobilize every individual, including the poorest, to contribute to the realization of this goal.

Comments on the Report

Extreme poverty is a violation of human rights

The Secretary-General writes that every human being should be "free from want" and describes extreme poverty as "poverty that kills."¹ International Movement ATD Fourth World agrees that extreme poverty is a genuine risk to life. It ends the lives of people due to hunger, preventable diseases, violence and exploitation, and many other results of poverty. It prevents women, men and children from developing their full potential, being respected, and living in dignity. It excludes people from society and prevents them from participating in the social and political lives of their communities and nations.

The founder of the International Movement ATD Fourth World, Joseph Wresinski, defined extreme poverty as follows: "*A lack of basic security is the absence of one or more factors that enable individuals and families to assume professional, family and social responsibilities and to enjoy fundamental rights. Such a situation may become more extended and lead to more serious and permanent consequences. Extreme poverty results when the lack of basic security simultaneously affects several aspects of people's lives, when it is prolonged and when it severely compromises people's chances of regaining their rights and of reassuming their responsibility in the foreseeable future.*"²

Joseph Wresinski was born into poverty and throughout his life established major landmarks in the fight against the worst forms of poverty, in collaboration with other partners and primarily the very poor themselves, in industrialized as well as developing countries.

ATD Fourth World welcomes the fact that Mr. Kofi Annan discusses development from a human rights perspective in his report. It is crucial that a human rights based approach be emphasized in the fight against extreme poverty. Fundamental human rights must not be reduced to merely the satisfaction of minimal rights and must be based "on the universality, interdependence, indivisibility and interrelation of all human rights" whether civil, political, economic, social or cultural.³

¹ *In Larger Freedom*. UN Secretary-General's report. March 21, 2005, para 26.

² Report presented by Leandro Despouy to the Subcommission on the Prevention of Discrimination Measures and Protection of Minorities. UN, Geneva (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1996/13), Annex III.

³ Commission on Human Rights Resolution E/CN.4/RES/2003/24, para 9.

People living in extreme poverty must be recognized as genuine and essential partners in development and in the fight against poverty

Among the poor, the poorest experience the strongest social exclusion. They are often excluded from participating in social and political activities that affect and change their lives. In one region of the world, for example, the renovation of a railway resulted in the expulsion of many families who lived in the shacks alongside the platforms. They ended up in an isolated area where they were unable to have any chance of finding work or ensuring a future for their children.

However, the poorest are the first ones to resist extreme poverty. Every day they invent ways to survive and to try to participate in the daily life of their community. Some even go without food so that their children can go to school. Some parents explained: “Our children must not endure what we had to live through.” These experiences give them a unique perspective on poverty eradication. Undoubtedly, the right of people in poverty to participate in formulating strategies against poverty is critical for successful poverty eradication. As early as ten years ago in Copenhagen, a call was made to “enable [people living in poverty] to become genuine partners in development.”⁴ This call should be reaffirmed.

The recent statement by the Millennium Project that “Governments need to identify mechanisms to allow groups commonly excluded from the political process to participate actively in decision making processes”⁵ is thus welcomed.

The importance of family and community links

The strengthening of community and family links is crucial to support the fight against extreme poverty.

People living in poverty aspire to live as a family in a community that respects them, as children expressed: “Families can't live in homes or communities without friendship. Without friendship, there is no life.”⁶

As people living in poverty are constantly seen as mere recipients of assistance, their own efforts and hopes are often overlooked. However, “families all over the world remain the most vital force in the battle to eradicate poverty... The mutual caring, sharing and nurturing that family members provide for one another are often the essential elements that allow people living in poverty to survive each and every day.”⁷

In their efforts to protect their children, very poor parents continually find themselves faced with very unfair and inhumane choices in their daily life. These same choices can be so misunderstood that they lead society to condemn the parents. In one country, for example, a mother must leave her children alone and unsupervised while she works very long days to ensure that the family will not go hungry. And yet, she knows the dangers her children face because two of her children have already been killed in violent incidents in the street.⁸

In order to “make poverty history,”⁹ the vicious cycle that transmits poverty from one generation to the other must be broken. This can only be done if the poorest and most excluded feel that they are part of a community, which provides them with the support they need to build an identity and a family.

Poverty eradication initiatives must be carried out in a spirit of recognition and respect for the community's societal structures, of their culture, their values, their way of making decisions together, and for the sense of community with which they are living.

⁴ *The Programme of Action of the World Summit for Social Development*. March 1995, para 24.

⁵ *Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals*. Millennium Project. chapter 7, page 120.

⁶ *Friendship Wins Over Poverty*. Children's Appeal on the 10th Anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. UN, Geneva, November 20, 1999, www.tapori.org.

⁷ *How Poverty Separates Parents and Children: A Challenge to Human Rights*. International Movement ATD Fourth World, Foreword by Johan Scholvinck. 2004, page 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Forward by Nitin Desai, p. 6.

⁹ *In Larger Freedom*. op.cit., para 38.

A grassroots worker in a Caribbean community commented that "people must feel that you are a brother, that together we all form a true community, and that the participation of all is necessary. All must be able to speak, and no longer accept that the educated man does not meet the illiterate one."

A long-term commitment and an ongoing process

The scandal of inequalities in our world demands immediate action and we agree with the Secretary-General when he advocates the "launch (of) a series of 'quick-win' initiatives so as to realize major immediate progress towards the Millennium Development Goals."¹⁰

At the same time, the report notes that "development successes cannot take place overnight and many countries suffer significant capacity constraints."¹¹ At the country level we mustn't forget that the fight against poverty and extreme poverty is a long-term and ongoing process which requires the commitment of all; notably States, intergovernmental agencies, the private sector, civil society, and citizens.

This long-term process particularly requires:

- the building of a better understanding of extreme poverty and exclusion, considering the poorest as important experts in this field and the entering into a genuine dialogue with them,
- the development of laws and policies which take account of this knowledge and expertise,
- the continual evaluation of the policies in the framework of the following questions: What is the social impact of these policies on the most vulnerable? Who is not being reached by our actions? What must be changed within our actions in order to reach them? If evaluations are conducted by looking at average situations, only those who are close to the threshold of poverty will be taken into account and the most fragile will be overlooked.
- the support of those who choose to fight against poverty alongside the poor and the poorest, so they are able to continue and expand their efforts in the long term.

These principles apply to action in both industrialized and developing countries. The persistence of extreme poverty in industrialized countries shows that a high general level of wealth is insufficient alone to eradicate extreme poverty and social exclusion, and that ambitious reforms are "the necessary tools in a democracy to unceasingly build policies that are rooted in the realities of the most excluded."¹²

These points should be incorporated into the discussion about the reform of the Economic and Social Council¹³. They should be explicitly stated in its missions.

Development as a broad-based movement

International Movement ATD Fourth World agrees that development should be a "broad-based movement,"¹⁴ and also welcomes the Secretary-General's statement in support of encouraging the more active involvement of civil society in formulating global policy. Civil society organizations already play a crucial role in international social and economic development. They are able to contribute their frontline experience to the design, implementation, and monitoring of development strategies and policies. However, we also see that civil society, as a useful resource and actor, has not been fully taken advantage of and its importance recognized. The United Nation's reform policy should include the genuine involvement of civil society, such as the promotion of dialogue between civil society, government and the private sector.

We emphasize that this mobilization of civil society should be done in such a way that the experience of the poorest is fully taken into account.

¹⁰ Ibid., para 52.

¹¹ Ibid., para 31.

¹² *Refuser la misère à l'échelle d'un pays*. Geneviève De Gaulle-Anthonioz, former President of Mouvement ATD Quart Monde France, Editions Quart Monde, April 1999, page 7.

¹³ *In Larger Freedom*. op. cit., para 171.

¹⁴ Ibid., para 38.

This broad-based movement should include all the citizens and all sectors of society and could be supported by initiatives such as panels to evaluate action against poverty, gatherings of people from diverse backgrounds, and campaigns such as the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty.¹⁵ Organized by various NGOs, governments and international institutions, the day invites the public at large to hear the voice of people living in poverty, and encourages all to consider ways to combat poverty. All gatherings which take account the experiences of people living in poverty and enable people from diverse backgrounds to share their experiences and opinions have the potential to truly change the way society works together. In New York, the desires of very poor parents to have a meaningful dialogue with teachers about education led to a seminar in which the participants shared and learned from one another. Classroom teachers; parents, some of whom have lived in poverty; university academics in education and social work; and grassroots community workers each shared what they do to help children learn.

All of these events contribute to fight indifference, to create public awareness of poverty in society at national and international levels, to change our outlook towards those who are socially excluded and to develop new modalities for living together, in order to overcome social exclusion and extreme poverty in all countries of the world, both North and South.

Conclusion

This year, 2005, is a landmark year in the quest to eradicate extreme poverty. As we also look forward to 2015, the United Nations must make 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, enabling them to become genuine partners in the fight against poverty.

“For centuries, (extreme poverty) has been regarded as a sad but inescapable aspect of the human condition. Today, that view is intellectually and morally indefensible.”¹⁶ International Movement ATD Fourth World absolutely supports these words of the United Nations Secretary-General, which meet the expectations of the poorest people and families of our world.

International Movement ATD Fourth World

The International Movement ATD Fourth World is an international non-governmental organization that challenges individuals and institutions to join people living in extreme poverty in their daily efforts of to move out of poverty. ATD Fourth World’s objectives are for the wellbeing of each individual and the progress of society as a whole. It is not affiliated with any political party or religion. Today, ATD Fourth World is present in 30 countries on 4 continents and is in contact with people in more than 100 countries through a network of exchanges and sharing of experiences called “The Permanent Forum on Extreme Poverty Around the World.”

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¹⁵ Observed every year on the 17th October and recognized by the UN General Assembly in 1992 (A/RES/47/196), the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty was observed for the first time in 1987 by the International Movement ATD Fourth World.

¹⁶ *In Larger Freedom*. op. cit., para 27.