

Executive Summary of “Partnerships with People Living in Persistent Poverty, the Missing Partners in Sustainable Development”

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Intergovernmental and stakeholder partnerships are key strategies for effective sustainable development. But what do these “partnerships” really mean? Just what role do the “target populations” themselves play in such partnerships? Even dialogues with relevant stakeholders tend to leave out extremely poor people, who are usually the most excluded from dialogue, even within their own communities. Sustainable development programs can succeed and build continuity only if the poorest are included from the beginning of the design all the way through implementation. They have a great deal at stake because they have the least means to protect their health from environmental degradation, and to earn a sustainable living. Including the poorest as architects of sustainable development means building a relationship with them and with those who live and work in solidarity with them.

- Part 1 of this paper, “Introducing the ‘Missing Partner’ to the Sustainable Development Approach,” addresses the identity of people living in persistent poverty, and why they are crucial partners.
- Part 2, “People Who Live in Extreme Poverty Can Contribute to Sustainable Development,” in reviewing a development project that did not include the knowledge of extremely poor people, highlights the necessity for establishing partnerships with the poorest.
- Finally, Part 3, “Conditions and Guidelines for Building Partnerships With the Poorest,” draws lessons from grassroots projects run by ATD Fourth World: in West Africa that helped urban youth return to support their families in rural communities; in Central America where women used micro-credit to purchase land; in North America where residents of a rural area who have suffered from exploitative development share their knowledge with people from other countries; and in South America that increased a rural community’s access to public running water.

From Part 1: Introducing the ‘Missing Partner’ to the Sustainable Development Approach

What is “extreme poverty” and who are the poorest?

A member of the Fourth World Volunteer Corps in Tanzania one day discovered a group of families whose existence was unknown by the neighboring communities and institutions. They lived in beached ships that were later to be sold as scrap. Only at low tide was it possible to reach these people. Through repeated visits, the volunteer was introduced to other people squatting in these shipwrecked remains. Many children living there had been dismissed from overcrowded drop-in centers for children living in the street. Some of the adults survived by selling diesel oil stolen from a nearby refinery. One of the men had three bouts of typhus and malaria fever over a period of one month. He described his efforts to find a regular job:

I had worked a whole day for just one meal as compensation. I was even lured into working for free, expecting to be hired longer if I worked well. ... Other

people pretend that we are content with staying there, but what do they really know? Do they know that we dream of living in a real house?

Extreme poverty is a reality that still exists in rich and poor countries, and which has universal characteristics that must be addressed and taken into consideration in all sustainable development initiatives. The preceding example demonstrates the condition of social, and often physical, isolation that is distinctive of extreme poverty globally. It also shows the multiple and interdependent challenges that face the most excluded.

From Part 2: People Who Live in Extreme Poverty Can Contribute to Sustainable Development

To better understand *why* it is essential that the very poor must be the motor of development, we will look at a development project in East Africa that neglected to include the poorest in the design stage, thus jeopardizing a number of poor vendors and market workers. ATD Fourth World has been present in an old market where many youths lived in the market and supported the market vendors. Recently, the local government planned to build a new and modern structure that would house the different vendors and services of the area. It was at this old market that many of the young adolescents living on the street could earn a bit of money doing odd jobs, such as cleaning produce, helping the vendors, collecting fire wood, and so on – jobs that may provide only enough money for a small meal or a piece of fruit. But with the plans for the new market – one in which booths and vendors would be organized according to service, and which would permit only some of the original vendors to be present in the market – many of these poor street adolescents, as well as other very poor market workers, were to become unemployed. [...] The repercussions of the diminished market have yet to be seen fully, but it is certain that a number of poor vendors and market workers who earned their meager livelihoods in the old market are now without jobs. Entering the new market now requires an identity card. Furthermore, the communal fabric of the market has been torn, as vendors from each trade were pitted against each other to be admitted to the new market.

Creating dialogue and partnerships with the poorest in achieving sustainable development is necessary for the following three reasons. First, very poor stakeholders possess a knowledge that is crucial to the efficacy of sustainable development programs. Secondly, such partnerships/dialogues offer an opportunity to encourage mutual understanding and dispel misconceptions between different stakeholders – misconceptions that may lead to opposing goals and initiatives. Finally, in bringing the voices of very poor individuals, families and communities to the decision-making table, the poorest themselves are empowered and encouraged to aid in the sustainable development effort.

From Part 3: Conditions and Guidelines for Building Partnerships With the Poorest

Partnerships of any kind require the time and investment of all actors. Building partnerships such as those called for in this document requires perhaps even more investment. Examples from ATD Fourth World initiatives in Burkina Faso, Guatemala, the United States and Bolivia illustrate a few of essential components for these partnerships, such as creating inclusive programs and goals, establishing confidence and trust among all stakeholders, and providing training and ensuring capacity building for all.

In this summary, we will cite just one of these examples, that of Guatemalan women seeking adequate shelter through micro-credit. In 1998, families living in shanties along the railroad tracks in Guatemala City were evicted, and also offered the possibility of buying land to build their own homes. Grants were available from the government to cover more than two thirds of the cost. The remaining sum was to be paid in monthly installments over two years. Several families in contact with ATD Fourth World made this purchase. In search of funding for the remaining one third of the land purchase, and with the support of a member of ATD Fourth World, a group of 14 women decided to

participate in a micro-credit project with the Institute for Struggle Against Urban Poverty (ISMU). ISMU made six-month loans to each of the women. In addition, ISMU offered the program participants assistance in finding and maintaining steady work and setting personal and family goals. However, given the difficulties of the women's daily life, the loan has been hard to reimburse. After moving in, the families faced many new challenges: finding new schools for their children (for those who were attending); paying off the land loan; participating in community projects; and building relationships with new neighbors, which was a particular challenge for those who had had negative experiences with other neighbors in the past. Yet for most of the women, the main challenge was one that remained from before – the daily struggle to feed their families. [...] Despite the fact that many of the women were not able to meet the six-month repayment goal, the ISMU agreed to continue supporting these women. Together with ATD Fourth World, the ISMU launched a new, more progressive and flexible project with the program participants, creating a more formal discussion group with the loan recipients, members of ATD Fourth World and representatives of ISMU. Through these discussion groups, the group was able to foster a mutual understanding between the women and the two organizations, as well as to provide a forum for the women to build relationships of support among themselves. Currently, the women, with the help of ISMU and ATD Fourth World, are continuing to help each other find work and adequate health care for their families. Additionally, the women receive support in their financial and administrative negotiations, including a request for the repayment of the land to be spaced out over a longer time-frame.

From the Conclusion

Building partnership with the people living in the worst forms of poverty requires many conditions, as detailed throughout this paper. Our own contribution to this process will focus on Africa, where NGOs committed alongside the very poor can benefit from more opportunities to support one another. Before the end of the International Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997-2006), the International Movement ATD Fourth World hopes to organize, together with other partners, a small seminar about the concrete conditions required for partnership with the poorest. Calling for this partnership is just a first step. The second step is to be specific about the conditions required for it to succeed, as we have tried to do by sharing in this paper some examples of our work. We know that NGOs and individuals who have invested themselves in building these partnerships have a great deal to share. We invite others to contact us about this seminar.

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