# LETTER TO FRIENDS AROUND THE WORLD

## FORUM ON OVERCOMING EXTREME POVERTY

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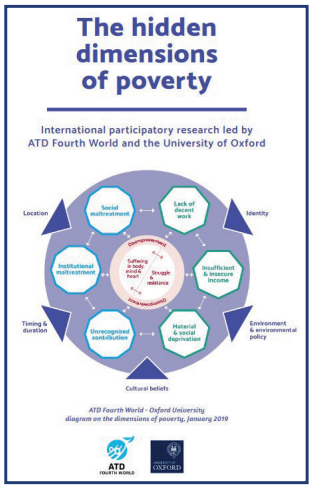
– LETTER N° 104 –

## AN AMBITIOUS, BRAVE, AND INNOVATIVE PROJECT!

Everywhere in the world, men, women, and children show tremendous bravery and resourcefulness to survive in extremely harsh conditions. Do we realize these people, who are confronted to the wall of misery, see beyond it, and reflect on the world? Are they credited with the intelligence, the capacity for reflexion, and the knowledge necessary to design projects, policies, and community building initiatives required by the challenges humanity is facing in our times?

Joseph Wresinski never stopped teaching us that people who experience poverty are indispensable partners to think the future. Their contribution is irreplaceable, as has been shown by the participatory research project on the "hidden dimensions of poverty", conducted by ATD Fourth World and the University of Oxford. Their involvement in this research, which rigorous methodology put them on an equal foot with academics and professionals, was instrumental in drawing out and naming the dimensions of poverty, reaching far beyond the sole issue of financial means. These dimensions are often disregarded by projects and policies aimed at reducing poverty. Because of that, these programs and policies don't reach their objectives, and fail to support those who are the poorest. Therefore, they push them into deeper poverty and isolate them further.




This research put words to a suffering that breaks the bodies, the minds, and the souls of those who are struggling with poverty on a daily basis. It highlights the obstacles to the eradication of poverty and underlines a paradox: those who are living in poverty keep on fighting, but their exclusion keeps their resistance, their struggle, walled-in, and prevents them from achieving the real changes they want for their children, and the generations to come. This haunts them days and nights. "Will our children profit from the fruits of our endeavours, or will they experience the same poverty as we do?" --- a mother from the Democratic Republic of Congo once asked me.

To put an end to this fundamental injustice we must learn to look at poverty in all its dimension, and to think and act with those who experience it. And so, we will be able to face with them the challenge of their life: overcome extreme poverty, for themselves and for all mankind.

**Isabelle Pypaert Perrin,**
**Director General of the International Movement ATD Fourth World**

## A WORD FROM THE TEAM

We are happy to share this research with you in this edition of The Letter to Friends Around the World because we are all part of the same effort to fight for a world without poverty.
This research offers new experimentation which proposes a dialogue about different types of knowledge: knowledge born from action, knowledge of the lives of people living in poverty, and academic knowledge.
The process has led to the identification of nine key poverty dimensions that, despite differences in the daily lives of people in poverty from one country to another, are surprisingly similar and closely interdependent.
*"At the international seminar of six research teams we were very surprised that an agreement was successfully reached on the nine common dimensions of poverty in the north and south, even though at the beginning we had 71". Xavier Godinot, research coordinator.*
In order to strengthen these results, it is important for us to know your reactions as input from people as diverse as you, our dear readers, and correspondents.

# The hidden dimensions of poverty

"End poverty in all its forms everywhere" is the overarching goal of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development(*). In order to achieve it, it is necessary to consider other dimensions, beyond monetary ones, when thinking about poverty.

The international participatory research "The Hidden Dimensions of Poverty" has been released in six countries. For three years, hundreds of people living in poverty, professionals and academics have worked together to identify nine key common dimensions of poverty in northern and southern countries. In addition to the dimensions, they identified **"modifying factors"** that can intensify or alleviate poverty.

## Nine dimensions: three that we know and six of which are new

Alongside the three more familiar dimensions, which are **a lack of decent work, insufficient income, and material and social deprivation,** six were previously hidden or rarely considered:

- Three relational dimensions which raise awareness about the way in which those who are not confronted with poverty affect the lives of those who are: **social maltreatment, institutional maltreatment, and unrecognised contributions.**
- Three dimensions which clearly reveal aspects that are too often ignored regarding the experience of poverty. These are: **Suffering "in body, mind and heart", struggle and resistance, and disempowerment.**

# Suffering in body, mind and heart, disempowerment, and struggle and resistance constitute the core experience

People living in poverty know great suffering in their body, heart, and mind: difficulties and hardship shorten lives and lead to depression, distress and sometimes suicide. These difficulties undermine the ability to survive day to day. Parents suffer for their children, children suffer for their parents, and they both reinforce the other's suffering.

*"When the state takes custody of a child because of poverty, the action is recognised but not the suffering, nor what people do to overcome it".* **United Kingdom**

*"You can't get to sleep, you're thinking 'what can I do?' What am I going to feed my children? You feel really bad; it hurts here inside".* **Bolivia**

In daily life, poverty is felt like an absence of control in the face of difficult choices, when the choices are not made by the person but by others. A process of "disempowerment", dependence, and a loss of autonomy is at the heart of the experience of poverty.

*"Poor people are powerless in society. They cannot raise their voice because they know nobody listens to them. Rich people control everything".* **Bangladesh**

It is vital that the fight and resistance of those who live in poverty are recognised. These people are not passive, they actively fight to overcome difficulties in life and they in fact need a lot of creativity to get the most out of the very rare resources they have at their disposal. They work together to face challenges and constraints.

*"(...) when I think about my children, I gain energy and strength to find food for them. I hope that when they grow up, they will get out of this poverty".* **Tanzania**

*(*) The Sustainable Development Goals are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. They address the global challenges we face, including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace, and justice.*

# Relational dynamics: Institutional maltreatment Social maltreatment and Unrecognised contributions

Poverty is rooted and shaped in everyday relations between people, social groups and all the different kinds of institutions. People who are blamed, whom we make feel ashamed because of their poverty suffer social abuse. Those whom institutions treat as numbers are victims of institutional abuse.

*"An elderly woman in poverty testified how she is excluded from almost all social events such as weddings in her neighborhood. Her neighbors know that she is unable to contribute financially, so they do not invite her."* **Tanzania**

*"People no longer dare to go to the town hall because they are not well-received, they no longer want to go there to process administrative formalities".* **France**

People who are in poverty contribute to our society. But their contributions are often not recognised.

*"We're very skilled in finding ways to earn money; we know how to knit; we know how to do so many things, like recycling. But nobody values these skills. Nobody says, 'They make an effort.' Our skills are made invisible".* **Bolivia**

## Poverty is influenced by what we call "modifying factors"

**Identity:** People in poverty suffer discrimination based on stereotypes, prejudices, and ignorance. Like other groups, they are treated negatively according to their gender, ethnicity, physical appearance, sexual orientation and migrant or immigrant status.

**Timing and duration:** When experienced over a long period of time, and depending what point in life someone is at, poverty entails an accumulation of pressures and demands with more severe impacts on all dimensions.

**Location:** Disadvantaged areas, both rural and urban, shape the lives of people experiencing poverty.

**Environment:** Environmental policies are often shaped without reference to their impact on people in poverty.

**Cultural beliefs:** They affect how poverty is defined and understood and can shape the way that people are treated because of their poverty.

## Poverty in childhood

Groups in Bangladesh and Tanzania carried out explorative research in order to find out whether poverty is experienced and defined differently by children.

The majority of the dimensions of poverty during childhood that were identified are the same as those defined for adults. Children in poverty also suffer for their parents and so they carry a double burden. They see their parents, whom they love, struggling to face the situation and fight to support their family, all while feeling helpless. With a lot of courage, many children find their own ways of supporting their parents, which gives the whole family more strength.

*A child explains "my father works very hard. There is no one who can help my father. I want to help my father, but he doesn't agree to this because the work is tough and could harm me".*

*Hearing about this research, one Forum correspondent relates the words of a child, "When I express myself, I feel alive, I feel like a great man...".*

# 17 OCTOBER 2020

**On the 17 October, several groups demonstrated a lot of creativity in the face of restrictions due to the pandemic. They called on technology to come up with gatherings that would comply with health restrictions in order to try and maintain our links and convey the theme of this day: "Acting together to achieve social and environmental justice for all". Here are some extracts of messages written about the celebration for the World Day for Overcoming Extreme Poverty.**

*"Normally we are in the streets on the 17 October so that the voices of the most impoverished people are heard. This year, what with the pandemic, we spoke in a different way..."* **Switzerland**

*"There is a prison where detainees die each day because they are forgotten by the authorities and the people. The living conditions are alarming, and rights are trampled on. On 17 October, we went in a small group and made a plea for the improvement of their living conditions".* **Uvira's video, DRC**

*"When we go out to work in very difficult conditions, we do not do it because we think we can make savings or develop the economy, but because we choose to look for life in spite of everything".*
**Extract of a message from Latin America**

*"Putting hands and heads together brings wealth to the world, a different image of people in extreme poverty. All of this is a source of innovation and action to transform our societies".* **Extract from Uvira's video**

*"It isn't possible to work alone in society. We are responsible for those who have been abandoned. We must take time and progress together. Together, it is possible."* **Canada**

*"A lot of people in the area don't have access to the internet. We cannot abandon them. This is why we have invited some of the neighbours to come to the Casa de la Amistad... "* **Bolivia**

*"This day provided the opportunity to meet with children at an orphanage and gather brothers and sisters together who live separately due to different sexes being separated."* **Palestine**

*"I am not only fighting for myself but for everyone. We are not of equal strength. Today, we have an obligation to support each other, to unite our thoughts and our actions and to get out of this".* **Senegal**

*" With a proper education and good training, I will be able to create opportunities to fight poverty and misery in my village".* **Cameroon**

## Letter from readers:

*"I was very happy with our discussion. You have encouraged me to go further with colleagues at our organisation in order to fight against poverty in our region".*
**Fathia M., Tunisia**

*"Since the beginning of the rainy season in Niger, there has been very heavy rainfall which has caused flooding. The situation is alarming and requires humanitarian support".*
**Issa, A., Republic of Niger**

*"Having myself lived in a poor family, I decided at some point in time to change my story; my past is my strength and also an important tool to help others".* **Priscilla B., France**

*"I successfully managed to get the message across to people who work in government because they are not confined and constantly keep in touch with those who are most in need".* **Elvira C., Colombia**

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