The financial, environmental and social crises affecting our world have very serious consequences for people living in the most disregarded places on the planet. They pay a heavy price every day: at the same time their access to basic rights is lessening and suspicions about them are growing. They are even criticised for fighting to survive and maintaining their solidarity. They are also often accused of damaging the environment. Little is known about the impacts these crises are having on the poorest, who are excluded from the debate about how to define policies to remedy their worst effects.

Many families are obliged to live in vulnerable housing under bridges, on the edge of ravines or near to landfills, finding new uses for things that other people no longer want, but there is no consideration for what they have to teach us about ecology. In the same way, people living in a neighbourhood constantly at risk of flooding, resisting side by side with spades in their hands have a great deal to say about sustainable development, but they are ignored.

What about street sellers faced with the risks of selling without any insurance against theft, bad weather, inability to do business? What do they have to say about human activity? And the long-term unemployed, now excluded from statistics in certain countries, who refuse to accept that they will remain idle; what do they have to teach us about an economy that would enable all workers to be proud of earning a living and feeding their family?

These families are struggling with the urgency created by poverty, demanding support for their efforts and plans to open up a future for their children through schooling, healthcare, housing and culture. If our societies were to adopt them as their guiding light, aiming for economic development that leaves nobody behind, they would launch new policies. They would at last decide to invest in the growth of our true wealth, by enabling each child, youngster and adult to develop their potential in order to build a world for all, with all. To take up this challenge, dear friends and correspondents of the Forum on Overcoming Extreme Poverty, you have knowledge and a vision to share.

Isabelle Perrin, Director General, International Movement ATD Fourth World

To aim for development that leaves nobody behind, we need to bring together our experience from every continent. The experiences presented in this edition do just that. In Lebanon, we get to know another face from a distrusted neighbourhood with a bad reputation, where life is hard because of poverty, and yet where there is a strong sense of solidarity.

In Vietnam, we realise from the evaluation of a housing project that it is vital to involve future residents in the design, construction and management of the project. In Sierra Leone, we discover an initiative set up by four villages, combining to guarantee a daily living and income for all. In Peru, we find out about the long-term commitment made to ensure that a person is not left outside society because they do not have any ID.

At a time when the international community is preparing to define its anti-poverty objectives beyond 2015, what meaning would development have if people were excluded from it? We need to have strong guidelines, with input from the poorest populations all around the world. The Member States of the United Nations have defined these guidelines: they are the “Guiding Principles: Extreme Poverty and Human Rights”.

They have been compiled with people living in extreme poverty. They stipulate that it is vital to verify that anti-poverty programmes benefit those who are the most difficult to reach. They point out that because of extreme poverty, people are the victims of discriminatory treatment by other people or institutions, reinforcing their exclusion. They demand that the starting point should be equal dignity for all, to avoid creating new sources of insecurity. Let’s carry on sharing our experiences.
Poverty eradication projects ill adapted to people’s needs

Ms. Nguyen H. is a social worker in a southern province of Vietnam. She has worked in a community development project that includes schooling, livelihood programmes and access to housing.

Often, governmental and non-governmental organizations, put under pressure by the expectations of their funders or conditions of certain donors, execute their plan in a top down way. This is the case for the relocation of families who were living and working at the garbage dump. Local media showed all the good results and admired their nice new houses. What they didn’t mention is how much the families did themselves to overcome their difficulties.

The 70 new houses had been built identically and are 32 m² in total. There isn’t a garden and they were modelled on a family with 2 or 3 children, although most of the families have up to 7 children and many have grandparents staying with them. To save money, the houses were built in a way that every four houses share common walls and ventilation. Noises in one house can be heard as if people were sitting in the same room. You can climb up and jump into the house from the back. As a result, the nice looking houses are not quiet, offer very little intimacy and security.

When the families complained, they were told that they did not have the right to ask for more, since they got these houses at a very cheap price. People started to say that they would like to go back and live at the garbage dump because it was better there.

The lack of privacy and the cramped living space created tensions and even violence among family members and neighbours. Beforehand, they had never experienced quarrelling like this. They say that as a community they had felt like a family before.

Learning from this experience, we want to conceive new houses together with the families. There has to be space between the houses and the size of the family must be taken into account for the allocation of square meters. We have asked families to contribute to the building of the new houses, so that they can have a say at all moments of the process.

I dream for the people of the community to be the project creators and this project can rebuild trust and peace. I would like that whatever we do with the families is based on love, trust and honesty.

Nguyễn H., Vietnam

Communities can lift themselves out of poverty

Village Care Initiatives (VCI) is a NGO in Sierra Leone. VCI works directly with local groups and villages to show how communities can lift themselves out of poverty. These groups are made up of farmers, fishermen and local traders.

Four villages now have considerable links with one another, which may eventually develop into inter-group associations. These villages do joint planning and share food donations and seeds. They give advice to one another, and attempt to coordinate resources for community food banks and development projects. Increase in group membership came after the training and benefits of group work became obvious to members of the community.

Agricultural production continues to be the primary source of income for VCI groups. However there has been a marked shift away from groundnut farming and into swamp rice cultivation. Similarly, soap making has declined because the price of soap fell as production in the area expanded, and women were sometimes given very limited freedom to travel in search of inputs and markets.

Cassava grating continues to be profitable. The only machine bought by one group continues to function. Trained group members perform routine maintenance on the machine and groups supply their own fuel. Other activities are vegetable gardening, fishing or hunting, craft work (mats, baskets, and hats) for local markets. They would like to expand their marketing networks but have a lack of transportation and contacts.

The groups use their income to undertake a wide variety of projects. By far, most resources are devoted to community development projects which are subsidised by VCI. One group constructed plate racks, and introduced cloth linings in the village using local resources. Another was contracted to have a water well repaired and others have done road improvement projects. The well has also helped to decrease the workload of women and children, who sometimes walk miles to obtain water in the dry season.

Nguyễn H., Vietnam
Our Neighbourhood

Little alleyways, electric wires in every direction, drawings on walls, children playing on the pavements, the noise of cars and bikes, children crying, tiny houses crowded together, endless tales of misery... This is the image of the “Nabaa” neighbourhood that we all come away with, the image that the media circulates.

But to its inhabitants, Nabaa is beautiful! “It is a neighbourhood where people of different origins and religions (Christians, Buddhists, Muslims...) live together in harmony and respect. Not everywhere in Lebanon can you find this kind of coexistence... At first it’s scary but it is an asset because it opens up the world to us. This is where we live and where our children grow up.”

The “Beitouna” centre was created in 1999, set up through the initiative of local people, to give support to families in the neighbourhood with serious problems. Confronted with this situation, with the help of the Sisters, they created a little committee to support those in need. The centre started out as a small space to welcome them.

It is able to survive thanks to funds from local residents. Sister Thérèse explains, “One day, just before the end-of-year holidays, a girl came to see us and gave us 10 Lebanese pounds from her savings. A mother with several children in her care gives a little money from time to time. Some friends help us pay the rent. People love to help and we accept their support.”

“At first our intention was just to help isolated, marginalised people. Then we developed other activities to promote solidarity among people, such as the holiday camp with families, discussion groups on topics such as children’s education, dignity... a library for children and a cooperative to buy food in bulk, which is cheaper. This cooperative guarantees the food for 35 families.” They also organise festivities to celebrate the 17th October. Leila said about this day, “for me the most important activity is the celebration of the 17th October, where we are able to make our voices heard, demanding respect for justice and our rights.”

The end-of-year festivities also bring joy to the families in the neighbourhood. Sister Thérèse is in charge of listening to people, and a committee of mothers, fathers and volunteers follow up the different activities. Today the centre counts on 40 families. In the future they want to create a website where mothers will contribute by commenting on photos, and in that way learn to use a computer.

At 22, I finally have an identity!

In a society where all data, information and agreements are validated by recording them on paper, an identity card is the primary official document that allows a person to be recognised and able to exercise their rights.

When someone suffers from a severe physical disability, lives on top of a hill that has no steps, and also comes from a very low income family, years can pass by before they can get their identity card. This was the case for Anita.

A long road was travelled before Anita received her card at the age of 21. Numerous people were willing to help, along with institutions like the first aid station and the Trauma Hospital. The process took place in two stages, the first of which was obtaining a disability card from the National Council for the Integration of People with Disabilities (CONADIS).

Multiple medical examinations were necessary in order to precisely define the degree and cause of the disability which was evident at first sight. It took numerous hospitals, as well as

Maite C., Peru
Letters from Our Readers

- Allow me to tell you a story about an old man who lives in the same neighbourhood as me, in a house which has been given to him by a housing association. Every time I come across him, I see the sadness in his eyes. One day I asked him if he was happy in his new home. He replied with sadness, “Yes, it’s a house, but it lacks love; no one comes to visit me. Before, I was living under a bridge, but it was like a castle to me. There were people who surrounded me with love. Their love gave me such strength that I would forget where I lived.” In a place without a roof, he felt love and warmth; in a place with a roof, he felt the cold. Every Saturday, my son and I take the time to talk to him, to try to help him forget his loneliness. Leila D., Lebanon

- Thank you for publishing on the Forum’s website how I spent the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty (17 Oct). The way in which I celebrated this day could motivate people who think that you have to do something really big to combat poverty which attacks the world. A drop of water in the sea may not do much, but a drop of water in the desert can give life. The extreme poverty which surrounds us is a desert. Adonis M., Morocco

- What a truly heaven sent gift to me was page three of Letter to Friends No. 81. During the quiet solitary days of Christmas and New Year, reading books and piano music were (as you express it) “necessities of life”; for activities, ideas and escape from solitude. Reg M., New Zealand

- I am now living on a farm quite far from the town, and there is no post office to send mail. That’s why I don’t communicate as much as I’d like. But I can inform you that I receive all your Letters to Friends around the World. I now go into town where my mail box is once a year, in December, for the New Year’s Eve celebrations. I remain, and will always remain, bound to our Movement, if Almighty God allows it. Hervé A. H., Benin

- I live in the part of Manaus which burnt down, and the families who had their homes destroyed were my friends. I went to see the damage caused by the fire and I heard from their mouths their suffering and their fear. Maybe the government will now feel obliged to build houses which are safe and healthy for the poorest people. But the work will take more than a year... Paco A., Brazil

Guiding Principles: Extreme Poverty and Human Rights

On 27th September 2012, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted by consensus the Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. Through its adoption, member states of the Human Rights Council affirmed that eradicating extreme poverty is not only a moral duty but also a legal obligation under existing international human rights law.

In 2008, Magdalena Sepulveda was appointed as United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. She decided to give high priority to the principles in her mandate’s work. The objective of the Guiding Principles is to provide guidance on how to apply human rights standards in efforts to combat poverty. They are global in scope, recognising that extreme poverty is a phenomenon which effects all countries.

When asked how were very poor people involved in the process, Magdalena said, “It is fair to say that the situation of people living in poverty was the main trigger of the idea that there was a need for the United Nations to develop these principles. We must not forget that Joseph Wresinski himself pushed for the UN to develop mechanisms to protect the rights of people living in poverty.”

As a matter of fact, ATD Fourth World initially called on the United Nations to consider extreme poverty itself as a violation of human rights in 1982, collecting 300,000 signatures that were delivered to the then Secretary-General. Magdalena went on to say, “ATD Fourth World and other NGOs were consulted on various drafts, playing a key role in ensuring that the voices of the poor were heard in the process. I must say that for me, the formal and informal contributions of people living in poverty were essential in the development of these principles. People living in poverty are often neglected or overlooked by politicians, service providers, policy makers and others. Their lack of political voice, financial or social capital and their chronic social exclusion ensures that they are an almost invisible segment of the general population for the purposes of politics and policy.”

She concluded by saying, “The next stage is to begin to make the Guiding Principles known in order for them to be implemented at national and international level. We have to work together to ensure that the post 2015 agenda on the Millennium Development Goals truly includes the voices of the poorest and most excluded of our societies.”

You can also share your observations and your experiences on the website: www.overcomingpoverty.org or by email: overcomingpoverty@atd-fourthworld.org

Helène Perdereau’s commitment is to illustrate the texts of the Letter on a free-time basis

Page setup: Lydie Rouffet

The “Forum on Overcoming Extreme Poverty” is a network of committed people who want to develop friendship and exchange knowledge about what poor and very poor people teach us, i.e. people who suffer from multiple disadvantages in the areas of education, housing, employment, health and culture; those who are criticised and rejected the most. This forum invites people to join a worldwide movement to overcome extreme poverty, to rebuild communities with people living in extreme poverty, inspired by their lives. This movement expresses itself in the Letter to Friends Around the World, which publishes the texts written by its correspondents three times a year, in French, English, Spanish and Portuguese. The Forum on Overcoming Extreme Poverty is run by the International Movement ATD Fourth World, an international NGO whose headquarters are in Pierrelaye, France. Those who join the forum do so in their own right, and do not have to become members of ATD Fourth World. Our e-mail address is: overcomingpoverty@atd-fourthworld.org Internet: www.overcomingpoverty.org Subscription 6/8€ per annum - Support subscription: $10/10€ per annum. © International Movement ATD Fourth World - Printed by ATD Fourth World - Méry-sur-Oise - No 82 - March 2013.