

EXTREME POVERTY, A CHALLENGE TO HUMAN RIGHTS¹

By Joseph Wresinski

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Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

THE POOREST TEACH US THAT HUMAN RIGHTS ARE INDIVISIBLE

Everyone recognises the progress we owe to your Commission in the understanding of Human Rights. You have indeed helped the advancement of international awareness of human rights, for you have helped us understand that they are interdependent, that they form a comprehensive programme where no single right can be achieved unless all rights are achieved.

By furthering our awareness of this fact, your Commission has made an alliance with the families and groups of people submerged in extreme poverty throughout the world. It is in the name of these groups of people who are your allies that it is my role to speak to you about the interdependence and indivisibility of rights; since, because of their unique circumstances, the poorest teach us, better than anyone else, that these rights are interdependent and indivisible.

THE POOREST ARE DEPRIVED OF FREEDOM AND RIGHTS: THE EXAMPLE OF A FAMILY IN THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY

Allow me to speak about families living in extreme poverty in the industrialised countries in particular, although, in the experience of the International Movement ATD Fourth World, what I am about to say is, relatively speaking, equally applicable to the poorest people in developing countries.

I shall take as an example a family living among other families in a village in ruins beside an airport somewhere in the European Community. The land has been bought by the airport, and the houses in this village are bricked up. Yet homeless families have sought refuge here. The family I am thinking of moved into a basement without running water or electricity three years ago. The father, aged 36, is 30% disabled due to a work-related accident. Having no professional qualifications, he has been out of work for three years. He receives a paltry pension. The mother, a packer, sometimes earns a little money doing interim work at night.

Lacking sufficient income, without water or means of transport, the parents struggle to keep their children clean and send them to school regularly. Without a recognised fixed address, they cannot obtain their voting card and thus exercise their political right to vote. Poorly

¹ „La grande pauvreté, défi posé aux Droits de l'homme“, in: Joseph Wresinski, *Refuser la misère. Une pensée politique née de l'action*, Ed. du Cerf / Ed. Quart Monde, Paris 2007, pp. 203-207. Translated from French, January 2012, © Joseph Wresinski International Centre, Baillet-en-France, France.

housed, with neither work nor money, what good are their civil and political freedoms? Indeed, without a recognised address, this family, these children, cannot be aware that they have the right to exist and live on earth as free men. The International Year of Shelter for the Homeless is a forceful reminder of this state of affairs.

This family I am talking about, in fact, represents several million households throughout the industrialised countries. It represents groups of families who live in dilapidated buildings, run-down streets, districts and housing estates, and scattered makeshift accommodation. In these places, adversity piles up: to inadequate resources, unemployment, a limited level of education, training and a lack of professional skills, must be added poor health, due to the absence of hygiene and healthcare.

It is in these groups that economic, social and cultural rights as a whole are at risk. However, because of chronic under-employment or long term unemployment, these people and families are not actively present in labour organisations and political parties either. We can also note that they find it difficult to become involved in community activities or to create their own associations.

What is no doubt even more serious, the children in these poverty-stricken areas grow up surrounded by adults who have no stable professional situation, and no social, cultural or political life. These children and young people live with adults who are never asked their opinion, even in matters concerning their own family and their children. The rights of these children to education and the elementary means to exercise their intelligence, to get information and to form their opinions are also compromised. All the statistics confirm that when they leave school at the age of 14, 16 or 18, depending on the country, they have a low standard of education. They have not been introduced to new technologies, they have no trade and are sometimes illiterate, as confirmed by studies conducted by European Community countries. How will these young people enter the labour market, how will they use their rights to obtain recognition in trade unions or political life, or even feel free to start a family? From their childhood, they have been made to feel outsiders, not only in school but also in the society in which their parents have no role nor even a space to live and work. As teenagers, they find themselves with no trade, unemployed without ever having worked. Since vocational training programmes seldom reach them, all that remains is to follow in the footsteps of their parents.

This means the vicious circle of dependence and non-participation, characteristic of extreme poverty, should now be closed, but the poorest populations themselves refuse it, and prompt us to do the same.

DOUBLE INTERDEPENDENCY

In fact, extremely poor individuals and families reveal that there is double interdependency. Firstly, they show us that rights and responsibilities are interdependent, since, without economic, social and cultural rights, they cannot assume their professional, family and social responsibilities. Yet, being unable to exercise their responsibilities, they are considered as second-class citizens, who can be deprived of the economic, social and cultural rights that all other citizens enjoy. And this can indeed happen, since they possess none of the economic, social or cultural assets which would allow them to exercise their rights and their freedom of speech. In this way, these individuals and families reveal the

interdependence which exists between civil liberties and political freedom, and economic, social and cultural rights. To sum up, families living in extreme poverty in industrialised countries reveal that, without socio-economic security, their rights are compromised, while without the exercise of these rights, their socio-economic security is not assured.

KNOWLEDGE TO BE GAINED

It thus becomes obvious that to combat extreme poverty, human rights must be considered as an indivisible whole, that is, all rights must be pursued simultaneously. I should like to point out that the French *Conseil Economique et Social* (Economic and Social Council) has recently confirmed this interdependence and indivisibility of rights.

Indeed, based on my report for the Council *Grande pauvreté et précarité économique et sociale* (Extreme Poverty and Economic and Social Instability), it approved by a very large majority a recommendation on 10 and 11 February last. This recommendation notes that extreme poverty concerns human rights as a whole. It affirms that the actions taken to restore these rights must be carried out simultaneously. In fact, it confirms that civil and political rights are as essential as employment, resources and schooling. It confirms that housing and healthcare are as important as learning about human rights. It confirms that all urgent action on the ground must include people and families at risk, and act as a springboard allowing them to manage the aid they receive and escape from dependence. And finally, it confirms that the most underprivileged human groups must be considered as citizens who hold rights, and thus as partners.

But the *Conseil Economique et Social* in France also expressed the desire that extreme poverty should be increasingly understood as meaning the absence of rights and the impossibility of assuming responsibilities. This is a necessity that applies to every country in the world and we are confident that your Commission shares this concern.

That is why the International Movement ATD Fourth World would like to request the Commission on Human Rights to ask the subcommittee to undertake a study which, in the context of the interdependence and indivisibility of civil, economic, political, social and cultural rights, would explore how human groups in situations of extreme poverty in industrialised and developing countries could effectively enjoy these rights and exercise the liberties they are theoretically granted.

If the Commission adopted such a project, it would allow the international community to take another step forward on the path towards the actual achievement of human rights. For poverty belittles individuals, families and human groups by sapping all their strength, and renders null and void the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights. Thus, every effort to eradicate poverty represents another essential step towards guaranteeing fundamental rights to all people.