

# **EXTREME POVERTY: A CHALLENGE TO HUMAN RIGHTS IN OUR TIME<sup>1</sup>**

By Joseph Wresinski

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## **INTRODUCTION**

During the 1960s, the idea gained ground that peace could not be assured without considerable growth in development. In the 1970s, this notion was reasserted. To ensure peace, development had to be fair, its profits equitably shared among all populations and between their constituent communities. In this way, a more precise image of the interdependence of peace, development and human rights took distant shape. It also heralded a better awareness of the inevitable interdependence of human rights. Indeed, when jobs, schooling and even food are not assured, what use do people have for their rights to community life or political participation? Thus, the international community found itself constantly spurred on to study how to apply human rights to the real life experiences of populations living in extreme poverty. But what is the situation today?

Indeed, whether human rights be approached through civil and political rights, through specific themes (such as racism) or through population categories (such as immigrant workers or indigenous populations), the experience of the poorest is seldom taken into account. Although we often talk about poor people, minorities living in extreme poverty generally seem to escape our notice.

## **WHO ARE THE POOREST?**

The term poverty covers a great diversity of situations of privation and insecurity throughout the world. But what these situations have in common is that when such conditions become excessive and persistent, they link up in such a way that those concerned are continually prevented from exercising the responsibilities and rights which are normally granted in their society.

Let us take the example of families uprooted from their villages in Sub Saharan Africa. They camp on the outskirts of the towns, not having the means to settle there. It becomes impossible for them to exercise their responsibilities and customary rights, to ensure their livelihood through work and the protection of their children through traditional housing and education. These families, who can no longer recreate social and community life, are not only poor; they can no longer assume either their responsibilities or their rights. When urbanisation spreads out to their makeshift shelters, they are forced to leave. Ultimately, they are in a state of extreme poverty which places them beyond the reach of any development programme.

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<sup>1</sup>„La grande pauvreté, défi posé aux Droits de l'homme en notre temps“, in: Joseph Wresinski, *Refuser la misère. Une pensée politique née de l'action*, Ed. du Cerf / Ed. Quart Monde, Paris 2007, pp. 209-214. Translated from French, February 2012, © Joseph Wresinski International Centre, Baillet-en-France, France.

Many long-time unemployed throughout the European Community also live in extreme poverty. Unqualified, lacking sufficient physical and social reserves, they are reduced to dependence. Their families are badly housed, they cannot afford their children's schooling. They cannot exercise their responsibilities as parents or their rights as workers or citizens, and are unlikely to find their place as independent citizens in today's information technology and communication society.

Thus, throughout the world, the poorest can be seen as excluded from human rights and development efforts. This reality is clear today in Western industrialised countries. It shocks us all the more there, as public opinion believed that fundamental rights had been acquired for good. It is in the wealthiest industrialised countries that extreme poverty most clearly calls into question our ways of controlling development and major changes in our times, whilst also respecting all the rights of every citizen. The existence of an entire segment of the population that is largely excluded from the employment market, and is reduced to assistance, free meals, housing, and alternative forms of education, with no access to trades, raises many questions for our democracies. Undeniable progress has been achieved for the greater number. But what rights and responsibilities are accorded to the most disadvantaged? The daily life of populations at the bottom of the social ladder teaches us the extent to which individuals and families can still be deprived of their rights.

## **EXTREME POVERTY: A VIOLATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AS A WHOLE**

For almost 30 years, the ATD Fourth World Movement has had teams of full-time volunteers in the field, keeping up to date daily accounts of facts and actions concerning extreme poverty. On a regular basis, they also conduct specific research in conjunction with the populations concerned. The Movement's Research Institute carries out more detailed studies on the basis of these core materials. Here are some observations that have arisen from this long-term work.

Often, families living in extreme poverty have no more than a roof, a shed, a disused truck, a tent or even a cellar, or dilapidated, unhealthy housing in an urban district needing renovation. The fathers are unable to secure stable employment, since their address does not inspire confidence among employers. Also, it is often an unregistered address without a letterbox. Families sometimes live there without any authorisation, which, paradoxically, results in the decision that their repeated demands for adequate housing in the district are unacceptable. But what becomes of freedom of movement if you cannot settle somewhere? In certain cases, it becomes an obligation to be constantly on the move, as the various municipalities send each other the families they do not want on their territory. Housing instability also prevents the poor from seeking employment, although work gives them their only chance of finding guaranteed housing. Moreover, consider the obstacles to employment when one lives somewhere which is not served by public transport, where a worker cannot get proper rest, wash, or keep his clothing presentable.

Without decent housing or work, and sometimes without an address, the poorest families also find themselves deprived of other rights, notably the right to health. In the most disadvantaged areas, we see young men crippled with rheumatism because they have spent their entire lives in cold, damp and draughty locations. We see mothers in inhuman conditions who are exhausted from maintaining a household single-handed. We see children in these unhealthy, often overcrowded surroundings, who get hurt, are unable to sleep and are continually sick.

This again calls into question the right to have a family, with children being placed into care on the pretext that they will be better protected. Ultimately, the parents may lose their parental rights. For these children, their right to education is also compromised, as has been clearly revealed by statistical studies. Despite numerous attempts to make education more accessible, academic failure results almost entirely from the socio-economic condition of the family.

We should also note that the lack of economic, social and cultural rights paralyses community life and participation in trade unions and political organisations. The long-term unemployed seldom continue to frequent labour organisations. Households reduced to public or private assistance hardly have the appetite, or the means, to organise themselves, nor to mix with people who are better-off. Parents of academically failed children do not dare to join parent organisations at school. Those without adequate, dependable resources cannot make their difficulties known to a consumer protection organisation. Thus, an entire segment of the national population is not heard when officially recognised social partners are consulted. Unable to read and write properly, these families also do not understand the political parties' programmes, or even their posters. And, lacking the basic means of communication, they are unable to explain their extremely insecure circumstances to politicians.

To sum up, families facing extreme poverty reveal that the lack of economic, social and cultural rights compromises civil and political rights, yet the latter are at first sight considered the easiest to guarantee. These families oblige us to look deeper into the question of the indivisibility of human rights.

## **THE POOREST AS AGENTS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS**

It seems clear that at this precise point in our history, the poorest invite us to make significant progress in the understanding and achievement of inalienable rights. They call on us to make a sustained effort to reach people who must devote all their energy to surviving with dignity on a daily basis, since even the right to survival under acceptable living conditions is not assured. This effort will necessarily lead us to a deeper study of the interdependence of rights, but also of the obstacles we face in making each of them effectively inalienable and thus unconditional. How, indeed, can it be that, while human rights are theoretically the rights of all humans, in practice they can only be exercised by people who can afford them? If this is the case, how can we ensure that everyone can afford them?

In raising these issues, we realise that, in this area as in so many others, the participation of the poorest is indispensable. The Commission on Human Rights must have access to the experience of the most deprived populations, not only because this is the rule of democracy, but also because the poorest experience situations which lead them to conclusions that others could not even imagine in their place. For the poorest, recognising this would mean a fundamental change in their situation. Being considered as indispensable partners in the advancement of human rights would put an end to their exclusion from everything which the international community is undertaking for the future of all people.

## **IN CONCLUSION: THE OUTLOOK**

Confidence and entrepreneurial spirit are damaged by exclusion and the long-term privation of the basic rights and responsibilities accepted as a country's values. The poorest; men, women and children; always believe themselves to be useless, suffer from a lack of self-respect and have little trust in their fellow citizens.

Therefore, there is another right to be promoted, the right of the poorest to find men and women who are committed and confident and who, through their own personal commitment and the risks they are prepared to take, are able to convince a community of its dignity and its capacity for change. "The remedy for man is man himself," is a saying from Sub Saharan Africa. And, for populations who have been undermined by profound poverty for far too long, the man who is a remedy for other men is not simply a professional expert. What is needed are men and women who offer themselves and a significant portion of their lives, and are ready to risk their careers for the advancement of others.

Thus, the poorest remind us that, as far as they are concerned at least, human rights remain a human affair. In trying to reach us with this call for fraternity, they also count on the Commission for Human Rights to help them, as only fraternity will ensure that inalienable rights penetrate to the very heart of even the most impoverished areas.