

Curbing the Reproduction of Extreme Poverty

Report by Joseph Wresinski to

Michel Rocard,

Minister of Planning and Territorial Development,

December 1982

© Joseph Wresinski International Centre
2, Rue de la gare
95560 Baillet-en-France, France
Translated from French, November 2012

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| FOREWORD..... | 3 |
| INTRODUCTION..... | 4 |
| EXTREME POVERTY AND ITS REPRODUCTION..... | 5 |
| THE UNDERPRIVILEGED CLASS: A HAVEN FOR IMPOVERISHED WORKERS..... | 5 |
| UNDERPRIVILEGED WORKERS REDUCED TO ASSISTANCE | 6 |
| THE MISUNDERSTANDING BETWEEN SOCIETY AND THE MOST DISADVANTAGED..... | 6 |
| INSECURITY TRANSFERRED TO THE WEAKEST..... | 7 |
| ASSISTANCE: THE WRONG RESPONSE..... | 8 |
| RESISTANCE AND STRENGTHS OF THE MOST DISADVANTAGED WORKERS..... | 9 |
| REPPRESSED RESISTANCE | 9 |
| DRAWING ON THE POWER OF RESISTANCE..... | 11 |
| FIGHTING AGAINST THE REPRODUCTION OF EXTREME POVERTY..... | 12 |
| A MINIMUM SAFETY LEVEL AND REGIONAL MONITORING BODIES..... | 12 |
| A MINIMUM SAFETY LEVEL..... | 12 |
| EXTREME POVERTY MONITORING BODIES..... | 13 |
| ECONOMIC SECURITY..... | 13 |
| WORK..... | 13 |
| FINANCIAL SECURITY..... | 14 |
| HOUSING..... | 14 |
| SPEAKING OUT..... | 16 |
| CITIZENSHIP..... | 16 |
| A VOICE FOR ALL | 16 |
| IN CONCLUSION | |
| POLITICAL DETERMINATION TO DESTROY EXTREME POVERTY..... | 17 |

Commissioned in October 1982 by the Minister of State, Minister of Planning and Territorial Development, Michel Rocard, as part of the preparation of the Ninth Plan, this report was written by Father Joseph Wresinski between October and December of the same year and was published in January 1983 by Documentation Française.

FOREWORD

Poverty is not inevitable. Yet, although citizens on the whole are prepared to deplore extreme poverty, not so many of them truly want to pay the price for its destruction. Attitudes are largely steeped in the idea that over-promotion of equal opportunities would be too great a risk for the country, all for the sake of citizens who, it is believed, would not know how to make good use of such opportunities.

The French happily employ all possible means to answer distress calls from competitors in the Paris-Dakar rally, yet they say nothing when families with children and babies are evicted from their dwellings in November. Examples abound in which it is patently obvious that we are all a party to the treatment imposed upon the most underprivileged.

Above all, we cannot claim ignorance that poverty is a reality: since 1974, economists, politicians and political parties have all referred to the millions of poor people in France. In 1976, Georges Marchais deplored the fact that there were 17 million poor. Certain government officials, such as André Trintignac, Gabriel Oheix and Antoine Lion, have done excellent work in describing the problems of the poor and suggesting institutional changes. Recently, Dominique Charvet was put in charge of a mission on "Poverty" at the Ministry of Solidarity. All agree that the lack of statistics on this question is regrettable: indeed, no definite figure can be provided. This is surely a sign that there is a lack of political determination to eradicate extreme poverty. Unfortunately, all these initiatives have done nothing to mobilise the country which, on the whole, has continued to ignore the poor. Among the many French people who are suffering from the present crisis, focus is placed on the "new poor", as if we did not know that, among these "new poor", there are many who have already experienced poverty, followed by a tenuous state of security during the period of prosperity, only to drop back once again because of unemployment. That is why, today, in 1983, in Paris, it has been possible to revert to soup kitchens, places of shame and disgrace for the poor, without anyone objecting that the country has gone back 25 years!

The Minister of State, Minister of Planning and Territorial Development has asked me to prepare a report on the persistence of extreme poverty, and to suggest policy lines serving as a basis for its destruction. I did not accept this mission as an expert. Other political figures and rapporteurs like those mentioned above have led the way. If I have undertaken to write this report, it is because I have one important advantage: over a period of 26 years within the ATD Fourth World International Movement, I have spent much time with the families of disadvantaged workers, and have thus been able to collect their thoughts and opinions on a daily basis. Furthermore, in 1982, thousands of them sent me "Fact Sheets" in which they described their situation, the injustices they suffered and their endeavours to fight back. Finally, thousands of monographs have been established by more than 300 full-time volunteers in the field over the past 25 years.

Thus, knowing what has already been written by others on the subject of poverty, my report is necessarily a call for the emergence of renewed solidarity with the underprivileged. I have endeavoured to put myself on the side of these workers and their families, to show how they withstand the exclusion and assistance they are subjected to by society. It is my intention to highlight the fact that extreme poverty may only be destroyed if those who suffer from it become catalysts for change.

Finally, I have not drawn up an inventory of required administrative or institutional reforms: government administrations and institutions are capable of making great changes,

and they are the best placed to know how to go about it, provided they receive strong political impetus. That is why, instead, I have chosen to suggest which battles to engage, assuming that all partners will stand by the Fourth World in the fight. Without their commitment and without the participation of the most underprivileged, we know from experience that reforms intended to fight against social inequality will be ineffective, or confiscated by other social classes.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years in Western countries, new concern has arisen about poverty. Poverty is perceived as a threat by many of those whose situation is deteriorating, and at the same time there are a growing number of articles, reports and studies on the subject.

The Minister of State, Minister of Planning and Territorial Development, has raised the question of extreme poverty, "which has seldom been the subject of specific study by planning authorities"¹, requesting more specifically that its reproductive mechanisms be brought to light and propositions made to curb this chain of events.

This report seeks to demonstrate that the continued existence and reproduction of extreme poverty, that is to say, the existence of an underclass, is essentially due to the way our society treats people living in poverty, blaming them for overall insecurity and relegating them to dependence: only a major change which gives them back an active role can reverse this process.

Speaking of extreme poverty and the underprivileged is breaking with the administrative approach by categories. It means talking about workers' families and their environment, not about welfare cases or individuals; about collective identity, rather than problems; of history, rather than deficiencies or handicaps.

For those living in poverty, for those who fear it, and for those who wish to destroy it, the core of the problem caused by poverty is the persistence and reproduction of extreme situations. This is where suggested remedies fail. The degree of insecurity which weighs upon the poor and all those whose situation is worsening is dependent upon the fate reserved for the poorest; whilst in the eyes of the very poor themselves, what is beyond bearing is to see their children condemned to living in the same state of poverty.

It is a matter of justice for victims of poverty to make the fight against the persistence and reproduction of extreme poverty a national priority. It is also a question of efficiency because the extremely poor can make an invaluable contribution to society as a whole. Moreover, it is a necessary condition if we hope to avoid a society in which some members of the population are ostracised and regarded as second-class citizens.

The elimination of underprivileged conditions would give the poor and those at risk of poverty tremendous hope, and would be advantageous for all citizens. To curb the reproduction of extreme poverty, the most disadvantaged populations must recover their capacity to denounce the human rights violations they constantly suffer and be given the means to speak out so that, in turn, they become the defenders of those rights.

¹ Engagement letter by Mr Rocard, 7th October 1982.

In part one, the report reveals an underprivileged population which is trapped in a state of persistent poverty. It shows the misunderstanding which exists between society and the least privileged workers, the insecurity foisted upon the least successful, with assistance being the only suggested response. It then touches upon their acts of resistance and their struggles to improve their condition.

The second part proposes the creation of extreme poverty regional monitoring bodies and the establishment of a minimum safety level in three key areas: economic security, knowledge, and speaking out. This would be the first step of a confirmed political determination to fight against extreme poverty.

EXTREME POVERTY AND ITS REPRODUCTION

THE UNDERPRIVILEGED CLASS: A HAVEN FOR IMPOVERISHED WORKERS

The underprivileged class in France comes from a background of urban and rural working families. It is thus a class that belongs to the working world, and has participated in all the vagaries of its history. This class of workers, unlike the working world in general, was unable to escape from social exclusion and poverty. Some of today's poorest descend from people who marked a cross on the list of grievances established by Abbot Larrard de Villary in 1789, stating their name and their trade. Dufourny de Villiers subsequently called them the Fourth Order, and attempted, in vain, to get them represented in the *États Généraux* in 1789.

In the following century, the same families and the same degrees of kinship appeared in the registers recording assistance or alms given to the poor. Already, small trades were not so much trades as occupations, and there were signs that more and more people were obliged to resort to expedients. This was the period during which Karl Marx pointed out the existence of various states of poverty. Surplus "workers", among whom a "stagnant population, repelled rather than attracted by the new centres of industry". And finally, the "Lumpenproletariat", citizens who had "neither a well-defined nor even a questionable source of income" and who, at least in some cases, "had no fixed address". We ourselves have done nothing other than to work back with the poorest workers of today along the lines of their family trees to their ancestors.

The underprivileged population is not static. The stable core group is joined by people cast aside by impoverishment. This is true, in part, for nomadic populations, immigrants or other groups more or less integrated into our modern societies, such as boatmen. A certain number of French workers are falling deeper and deeper into poverty. Unemployed today, they, too, face the risk of joining the underprivileged. They were already poor, as René Lenoir² and Lionel Stoléru³ noted in 1974, and Georges Marchais in 1976. The crisis struck them with full force and they lost their basic rights. In turn, they became victims of the same alienation process which relegates them to exclusion; thus, if the situation continues, they will adopt the way of life and attitudes of the underprivileged in order to survive. Indeed, to survive in the conditions imposed upon them, the latter were compelled to forge a way of life and attitudes which separated them even further from the world of recognised workers.

2 René Lenoir, *Les Exclus*, Ed. Du Seuil, 1974.

3 Lionel Stoléru, *Vaincre la pauvreté dans les pays riches*, Flammarion, 1974.

Thus a social class has emerged from the working world which has inherited a long history of poverty. Its members recognise one another, having met in the same cycles of exclusion, suffered the same deprivations, experienced the same humiliations, including at the hands of mutual support organisations and administrations. Faced with the aggressive nature of extreme poverty, they have learned the same attitudes and the same responses.

Thus, there is the continued existence of an underclass with fluctuating borders; some join it, others escape for a time but fall back when times are hard, as is the case at present for a large number of those known as the "new poor".

What occurred in the Netherlands during the 1960s serves to illustrate these remarks. In that country, at a time when there was a reduction in the work force, we saw unskilled, underprivileged workers find seemingly regular employment. Holland had waited slightly longer than France to open its borders to migrant workers, but this short period of relative good fortune did not last and the arrival of migrant workers meant that the poorest Dutch workers found themselves out of work once again. They benefited from this brief resumption of their professional existence. Having had stable employment for a significant period of time gave them the right to unemployment benefits. They started to appear in the benefits registers, where their names had not been present before. But even this meagre financial security disappeared once again for their children. It did not last long enough to ease their path to schooling and training. Once again, the children of those underprivileged workers who briefly entered the employment market in the 1960s have no jobs today.

The underprivileged class is, in a fashion, the haven of those who have become impoverished. Although poverty extends well beyond this class, its existence bears witness to the fact that all manner of alienation and deprivation continue to threaten our industrial societies.

UNDERPRIVILEGED WORKERS REDUCED TO ASSISTANCE

THE MISUNDERSTANDING BETWEEN SOCIETY AND THE MOST DISADVANTAGED

A profound misunderstanding exists between our society and the most underprivileged workers. Our society sees needs which have not been met; the poor want their contributions⁴ to be taken into account.

Our society sees children who do not succeed in school, adults in poor health, and budgets in a constant state of imbalance. And it explains this by a lack of communication skills, by the fact that people do not know how to care for themselves, by their inability to manage a budget. But the children can sense that schools disregard their life experience and interests: adults in poor health know that the treatment of one illness will lead to the discovery of others because "the machine is worn-out" and it is dangerous to examine them too closely. People struggle mightily against constraints that others know nothing about: the threat of hunger, cold, family breakdown and the failure of all forms of solidarity around them. Faced with such anxiety, neither health systems nor social benefits can promise a solution. Our society offers health insurance for individuals or families; the underprivileged population knows that this is ineffective if it does not function as part of their social environment: their

4 This contribution will be further developed in the chapter entitled "Resistance and Strengths of the Most Disadvantaged Workers", p. 9.

true “social security” comes from people who have shared the same experiences and who say: you cannot leave a family on the street, because people are not animals.

Explanations, like suggested remedies, take only one aspect of poverty into account, namely, that the poor have less. The inequalities approach – at least when it takes everything into account – considers a multitude of areas: health, income, housing and environment, levels of education and skills. Benefits – health insurance or aids – seek to provide greater opportunities for the disadvantaged to gain access to healthcare, to cover children’s educational needs, and even food and heating requirements.

But day-to-day activity with the poorest workers and their families brings us up against the other aspect of extreme poverty; the obstacles which prevent them from calling attention to their knowledge and ideas, their know-how and deeds in a society which is quick to believe that no contributions can be expected of them.

A child with poor speech skills, who holds back the entire class, is labelled a moron – creating the justification for society's perennial acceptance that when these children leave school they cannot read, write, or do arithmetic – yet the child’s intellectual potential would develop if his experience was deemed a contribution to the enrichment of others.

The worker thoughtlessly treated as “unstable” is not considered a worthy employee or friend, because he jeopardises the efficiency of his boss and the other employees. He will be the first victim of job cuts, thus confirming his instability. But he will also be the last person for whom the employer has a vision for the future, a career plan. From one period to another, he will carry out completely piecemeal, subordinate work without having the right to become qualified and make good use of his acquired skills. In most cases, he will also be excluded in law or in fact from the advantages that go with long-term employment (collective labour agreements or the right to training).

The misunderstanding of the nature of poverty leads to a misunderstanding of the solutions. Assistance is viewed as a minimum safety level. It is no such thing: it does not guarantee freedom from hunger, cold, or from the destruction of family ties. If it does not guarantee the satisfaction of these needs, it is because it reflects a rejection of the contributions made by the poor and not a willingness to include them. That is why assistance is unacceptable, as much for the taxpayer, who does not see what he is getting in return, as for the beneficiaries, who are humiliated when the response given to their desire to be part of the information age is to provide them with a soup kitchen.

INSECURITY TRANSFERRED TO THE WEAKEST

Our society takes it for granted that the brunt of the prevailing climate of insecurity should fall on those the least equipped to cope with it. This *de facto* agreement is at the root of the persistence of extreme poverty and its reproduction within the same families and social groups. The crisis, and the distribution of the costs of the current economic adjustments illustrate this agreement, but it would be wrong to consider that this is a new development. For the post-war period alone, insecurity in relation to housing, knowledge and economic change could give rise to exactly the same remarks.

When downsizing is necessary to improve a company's competitiveness, it is the least efficient workers that are laid off.

The logic behind unemployment, through a series of selections, dismissals, then failures to rehire, or consecutive redundancies, allows less efficient workers to be removed from production. Thus the chances are increased that they will become even less competent, because they are less able than others to get training or change trades. For those with the lowest qualifications, where work and unemployment are shared through high employee turnover, temporary employment or other forms of insecure jobs, unemployment benefits are low. Job loss seriously compromises a worker's professional and social integration, which is often already fragile, and the loss of income compromises his ability to cover his basic needs.

In this situation, workers cannot use a period of unemployment to get training or acquire the assets needed for better integration in the future. This is aggravated by the fact that, for workers who have no career prospects, training only begins to have real benefits when it relates to current work and is linked to production.

Unemployment arises from the need to adapt the economic machinery to present and future conditions which are different from the past; this adaptation is undertaken by workers and businesses. Part of the cost of this adaptation is unemployment. However, for the most disadvantaged workers, it is not just a brief passage. They are relegated to lasting unemployment or more job insecurity, and excluded from the benefits of individual conversion which is their greatest need for the future.

During this period, as always, headlines about the poorest workers only mention the soup kitchens. But to fight extreme poverty, workers and their children must become familiar with tomorrow's technologies. Such a fight means that everyone must make efforts to prevent insecurity from being shifted massively onto the weakest. Will the day ever come when we have the courage to call on our most enterprising engineers, technicians, and workers to face the uncertainties of the future under good conditions, instead of requisitioning the least successful or the most under-represented and making them pay, through unemployment, for the destructive costs of failing to adapt and collective insecurity.

ASSISTANCE: THE WRONG RESPONSE

When workers and families adjust to survive extreme insecurity, our society intervenes, saying: we must educate them, or re-educate them. But they have already been educated, in the brutal school of life. If their lives, their work, their precarious housing, the threat to their family ties do not change, how can "education" change anything?

For example, managing a family budget that is permanently in deficit prompts mutual aid (in the form of gifts and loans) from certain neighbours, advances on salaries from employers, and possibly the soliciting of public or private assistance. It would be inadvisable to try to restrict this management to the narrow scope of the family, as our educational model suggests; families do not constitute a genuine reserve which offers security. The time-frames required for this management are even longer when health status, employment and family situations are constantly changing and more difficult to prove. Workers are ill-protected when circumstances are poorly defined, such as when unemployment follows an officially voluntary resignation or partial incapacity to work.

From that point on, the most secure choice is to maintain a variety of networks which constitute a safety net for survival. But this safety net remains limited. It does not allow any change because it has no social reach. The idea that we must educate a social class, protect children from their parents, and families from those they take in, reinforces the destructive element of assistance.

Assistance destroys and curbs the solidarities initiated by the beneficiaries instead of strengthening them. Yet it is these solidarity initiatives which give value to the contributions which one or another can offer.

From town halls to enterprises, including schools, unions, shops and churches, there is a sort of tacit agreement to direct "those people" towards social aid or charitable organisations, or even psychiatric hospitals or judges.

For such people raise the essential issues of political non-representation: that of the division of labour into "noble" and "non-noble" tasks, not to say, according to the historical term, "ignoble"; of the scorn shown by school, university and media elite for working class experience and the preoccupations of the less privileged; of the unresolved gap between the rhetoric advocating priority for the most underprivileged, and their absence; of the inadequate understanding of needs which have no money equivalent; and of the prohibition cast upon the spirituality of the poor. Faced with each of these questions, the solidarity established between peers (elected officials, managers and business executives, co-workers, etc.) loses some of its legitimacy.

By steering the poorest workers and their families towards assistance, which must take their needs and problems into account, we are clearly refusing to see how development in its current form damages the economic, social and cultural construction of part of our population.

Security for all is based on the belief that everybody has the right to contribute to a society's prosperity. But each must pay the price. Encouraging the French population to move in this direction is the best way to prepare for the future, at a time when the work and skills of many people are being downgraded by technology and social changes. In the same way, economic and social development in the past and present has utterly devalued contributions made by the people who have been reduced to the underclass, and kept there.

RESISTANCE AND STRENGTHS OF THE MOST DISADVANTAGED WORKERS

REPRESSED RESISTANCE

Underprivileged people resist their lot, and the manner in which they are treated. They cannot do this through organisations, but they do it individually. This can be to their detriment because, in the system of assistance in which they are trapped, others have become accustomed to thinking and deciding for them, and do not easily accept resistance. This is all the more true since they believe they know better what is good for those concerned, and are incapable of understanding why the underprivileged behave the way they do.

This resistance finds expression in a variety of ways. It can appear as non-cooperation: like the child who, more or less subconsciously, refuses to work at school when he feels distrust directed at his family; or like the mother who does not declare her pregnancies to avoid disparaging remarks. It might be the family who leave their accommodation before being evicted, taking refuge in an illegal shelter where they have to hide and have no rights. In this case, we must call a halt to this system, where rights are granted only at the price of humiliation.

In a similar vein, resistance for survival can take unofficial forms: such as the unemployed worker who gets a little money by helping out here and there, who accepts undeclared work or sells what he can salvage from the tip; or the economic organisation within the group to cope with an irregular supply of money.

Another form of resistance adopted at times by the underprivileged is violence. It is blind violence, it is purely a rebellion against society, and is of no benefit to them. There is the youngster who steals solely for provocation, who insults the police or throws stones at the police station. There are the young people from a poor district who vandalise a brand new building created for them without consulting them or including them in the project. There is the shotgun brandished at the social worker whose arrival is viewed as a threat by the family. These acts may have far-reaching consequences for the offenders and add to the fear engendered by the underprivileged.

Resistance may also take the form of extreme servility. For example, the acceptance of excessive dependence on social workers, endlessly begging them for help, exaggerating how their children are taught to behave by punishing them in public for merely fidgeting. Or, they denounce their neighbour's doings in an effort to generate goodwill or attract assistance. They kowtow, they act a part. In this way, they become a party to that very dependence which, nevertheless, they utterly reject, as witnessed by the resale of clothes obtained from a charity shop, or offensive remarks about a social worker as soon as they have left her office.

Such resistance is not without consequences: on the one hand, the disadvantaged suffer the physical and material consequences of their refusal to accept assistance with its attendant scorn: the young people who drink on Saturday nights to escape boredom and hopelessness become alcoholics. Families on the run find themselves on the streets for months on end. Parents who have insulted a social worker are unable to obtain any further help, and are faced with hunger. Tens of thousands of young people leave school illiterate. On the other hand, resistance by the underprivileged frequently remains unnoticed or is misunderstood, since its members have no way of explicitly calling attention to their views. We reduce the underprivileged to the consequences of their actions, without seeking to understand why they act such parts. We say: "They are alcoholics, lazy, violent, unfit parents, untrustworthy tenants...", whereas the underprivileged have never thought of or seen themselves as such!

The underprivileged population very rarely speaks of this resistance, because they know it is not understood, except in their own circle. But we are witness to the thousands of times the underprivileged take up a position which shows how, while deploring the consequences of alcohol, violence, fleeing and non-cooperation like everyone else, they are tolerant of and responsive to such acts of resistance. An entire district will hide a child who is to be placed into care; a family living on the streets will be taken in although there is not enough room;

silence is maintained before the police; milk will be shared with the neighbour's children; the man who has been jobless for years will be asked for a helping hand.

Their way of resisting extreme poverty has no social impact, as it is not passed on by national solidarity, economic development factors or volunteer and union organisations. Relatively speaking, the poorest find themselves in the situation of the handyman who invents a device in his workshop, but finds no partners, technicians or finances to give his invention economic significance. As a result, the invention goes no further.

Not only does the way underprivileged workers and their families deal with extreme poverty fail to serve as a base for their partners in the fight against poverty, but it is constantly belittled by those very same partners.

DRAWING ON THE POWER OF RESISTANCE

The fight to destroy poverty cannot be based on knowing the weaknesses of the most disadvantaged, but on understanding and taking into account their resistance to their situation, since it reflects their desire for change.

Through their resistance, the poor are already players and partners in the struggle. The forces which the country must bring into play must join with this resistance, if we want our actions to free the most disadvantaged and avoid creating new forms of ostracism for them. They have an original contribution to make on account of their experience, which gives them a specific viewpoint on questions of society. They must be able to convey this point of view because they are the only people who hold it.

If they were acknowledged as asserting a value, misunderstood attitudes could lead to transformations beneficial to all. The rejection of needlessly hard or degrading working conditions could lead to the transformation of these conditions, so that they become unthinkable and impossible for all citizens. Rejecting intrusion into family life could give rise to new assurances of respect for the private lives of all families.

The goal of associations which bring together the most disadvantaged members of society is to demonstrate the resistance and the collective possibilities of individuals and families isolated by their failures. Experience has shown that those marked by an apparently conclusive failure are capable of astonishing achievements once they are offered favourable conditions and contact with someone who has confidence in them. Experience has shown that the underprivileged are ready to work together and conduct a public fight against poverty, provided that they are assured that their actions will not be systematically disregarded or misrepresented, that they will not result in increased controls or interventions, and that they could lead to change.

Together, the underprivileged have been able to find satisfaction in collective action: obtaining the replacement of a teacher on sick leave, opposing the eviction of families or ensuring that alternative housing be provided for them, supporting families who are victims of the "tragedies of extreme poverty" in court, ensuring that children are not permanently separated from their parents, and that the latter can henceforth count on the support of their neighbours and social services.

Some gatherings have allowed the underprivileged population to affirm their collective identity and claim a recognised place in society. In 1977, members of the underclass

publicly committed themselves to overcoming their ignorance, issuing the challenge that in 10 years' time there would be no more illiteracy or unemployment among their members. Since then, illiterate adults have formed the group "*Lire et Ecrire*" (Read and Write) in order to learn basic skills together. In 1982, 10,000 representatives of Europe's most disadvantaged populations met in Brussels to proclaim themselves defenders of human rights. It is through its most disadvantaged members that society may find the path to new respect for human rights for all, by first and foremost emphasising the experiences of those who must, daily, win the dignity which is denied them.

FIGHTING AGAINST THE REPRODUCTION OF EXTREME POVERTY

A MINIMUM SAFETY LEVEL AND REGIONAL MONITORING BODIES

A policy which seeks the eradication of extreme poverty must fight the mechanisms of its reproduction and reverse the current which makes insecurity rest upon those least equipped to confront it. Instead of resorting to assistance, it must act to ensure that the weakest workers are not permanently deprived of their basic rights.

Such a policy must take its inspiration from the workers' constant struggles. Before any action is undertaken to change the condition of the most disadvantaged, their working-class identity and the rights related to that status must be recognised.

Poverty and extreme poverty will only disappear when the poor are no longer deprived of economic security, access to knowledge and the right to speak out. This does not mean spelling out to politicians and bureaucracy what they must do. They have the means and the expertise to create another kind of society with the fight against the evils of extreme poverty and social exclusion as a priority.

In the following pages, our intention is merely to set out some lines for political action which the country must adopt if it truly wants to take action against the poverty it denounces.

A MINIMUM SAFETY LEVEL

A policy to fight against the reproduction of extreme poverty must primarily aim to establish a minimum safety level. Such a level is not a guaranteed minimum subsistence, cultural or social level, but a level below which no citizen can descend without prompting indignation in the national conscience. It is a level which exceeds that of mere subsistence, providing the citizen with a starting point for social, economic and cultural development and the means to restore every opportunity for advancement in the fields of economic security, access to knowledge and the ability to speak out.⁵

Such a minimum level cannot be established simply through State resolutions: the existence of extreme poverty, as shown above, is a matter of national consensus. Similarly, its destruction requires a national effort. The minimum we mean will only be guaranteed when

⁵ We shall not mention here two other essential fields - health and justice - because they are currently the subject of research and reforms which should move towards a right to health care and the defence of the most disadvantaged.

politicians, trade unions and community associations, acting as partners, make it a priority. It will only be effective if they consult with the underprivileged and build on their experiences, and give full recognition to their initiatives against poverty and draw on them. The most disadvantaged working class families must be considered from the outset as being players in the fight against extreme poverty.

EXTREME POVERTY MONITORING BODIES

Prior to any action or measures, the first step is to understand extreme poverty. However, despite everything which has been recently written on poverty, ignorance of this subject continues, owing to the marginal position of the very poor in society and the low level of interest they generate in university and research circles.

That is why it would be appropriate to create permanent regional monitoring bodies not only to study extreme poverty and its development, but also to evaluate the degree of success achieved by the measures adopted to eradicate it. All studies of extreme poverty should be carried out at the request of the people concerned and with their participation, taking into account what they want to know to understand their situation and change it. Therefore, these poverty monitoring bodies should work primarily for associations supporting the underprivileged. I shall speak about them later.

ECONOMIC SECURITY

WORK

Economic security means financial security, secure housing and, above all, job security.

The most disadvantaged workers must not bear the brunt of the present state of overall job insecurity. They must be able to prepare for the future. All work must be recognised as such. Every worker must be able to find a job in keeping with his potential, and the skills he has acquired by working regularly in the same branch of activity should be duly recognised. The most disadvantaged workers must benefit from progress in work techniques and organisation; they must be able to participate in the changes in the working world and in the elaboration of new forms of organisation.

Without waiting for general reforms concerning employment and unemployment based on a guaranteed right to work, there are some projects and significant practices which could be put into place promptly at little cost.

Unskilled workers have the right to the professional training which allows them to gain, through age and experience, a growing set of skills.

Continuing education should offer everyone the opportunity for the professional and cultural advancement that comes from having a trade. Regardless of the size of the business, this should include workers in precarious situations and those on the margins of the job market, in particular those without basic training.

New methodologies must be tested. The usual order of learning could be modified, with reading and writing no longer being a prerequisite for acquiring complex skills but a part of the learning process.

At the same time, new forms of knowledge sharing should be developed in industry. For example, qualified workers could be seconded part-time to pass on their experience and know-how, thus helping others to achieve a higher level of skills.

All workers should have the opportunity to improve through their jobs. Is it possible to imagine that, below a certain skill level, a worker may not be made redundant if he has not been able to increase his skills within the company?

Steps to regularise illegal employment should ensure that all work provides access to social welfare protection and workers' rights.

Underprivileged workers should be able to participate in testing new forms of work organisation such as current changes in the cooperative sector and the tertiary sector in general, so that these developments take into account their participation and aspirations.

In peripheral employment areas, similar experiments should take place, based on how the workers who resort to this type of work organise themselves. While undertaking a review of long-term job seekers' files, the National Employment Agency brought to light the situation of the most isolated workers. In the same way, all organisations with a public service mission in the field of employment, training, or workers' advancement should also, within the framework of the preparation of the Ninth Plan, review needs, policies and their results in relation to underprivileged workers so that these workers are taken into account.

FINANCIAL SECURITY

In our country, financial security is based on job income and welfare benefits. Every worker should have a salary which corresponds to the general needs of the French population today. Below a certain income level, unemployment should never be penalised by a loss of money. Every unemployed person has the unconditional right to replacement revenue, for as long as he remains unemployed, regardless of his work status or the period worked. Like a salary, it must be sufficient to meet the needs of today's French families.

Family benefits must be paid on a reliable and regular basis. Every worker and every family has the right to know the total amount of benefits due to them, and to know, in advance, when they will be paid. Family benefit offices must be required to guarantee regular payments, with any readjustments being carried out after payment. Beneficiaries must have the possibility to appeal if these requirements are not met.

Every individual must be able to receive necessary medical care regardless of his financial situation. Refund and payment systems for hospital treatment and medical staff must be organised in such a way that a patient without resources is always able to obtain treatment without having to pay the costs of the medical examination, medicines or transport in advance, or pay any bills after leaving hospital.

HOUSING

Like the loss of work or income, the loss of housing is one of the causes behind the continuation and reproduction of extreme poverty. Without waiting for more fundamental reforms, we request that public housing organisations be required to provide housing which complies with present-day standards to any family which

requests it. Existing public assistance (housing allowances, housing benefits) must be used to keep families without any income in their homes.

It should no longer be possible to evict a family, for whatever reason, without offering them alternative accommodation, just as it should no longer be possible to cut off water or electricity supplies when debts start to accumulate.

KNOWLEDGE AND SHARING OF KNOWLEDGE

Ignorance is one of the deep-rooted reasons for the continuation of extreme poverty. Nevertheless, the underprivileged population has the desire and, as experience shows, the ability, to learn when they are placed in conditions in which their own experience is recognised and valued.

Yet for children, as well as young people and their families, schools – be they public or private – are like foreign bodies. They cannot fathom them, they do not understand their language and feel they treat them with disdain.

This is not, of course, the teachers' intention, but they are just as ignorant of the children's environment as the children, young people and families are of the academic world. This leads to a deep lack of understanding, which results in many underprivileged children leaving school illiterate.

Promising reforms are under way, provided they take into account the situation of underprivileged children and young people.

We would like to suggest that teachers step beyond the school walls and create a “school in the streets”. This does not mean creating a school for the poor, but a school in which teaching methods are based on a child’s character and the collective experience, and are devised in collaboration with the families. Teachers who volunteer should be assigned to local schools, receive appropriate training and have the necessary creative independence to carry out similar educational projects successfully without breaking ties with the school system.

In all events, a school’s objective must be to prepare the most disadvantaged children for life in tomorrow's world. The handling of tools should be introduced into the primary school curriculum from the age of eight and new technologies, in particular computer science, should be introduced into all programmes, starting with the National Education Priority Zones and special teaching, in order to ensure that these children do not miss out, as their parents did, on the new phase of technological and industrial development. They must receive the training to enter straight into this world in their own right.

For the vocational education of the very poorest young people, we should favour programmes which include direct contact with the working environment.

Adults on whom ignorance and, for some, illiteracy has been imposed, should be able to gain the basic skills necessary for modern daily life and social and political participation during working hours, in addition to professional training.

As a starting point, the nation must embark on a far-reaching campaign against illiteracy.

SPEAKING OUT

In order to gain access to basic rights, workers initially demanded the right to be heard, both individually and as a group. The very poorest among them are still effectively deprived of their rights, including the right to speak out. The enforced silence of the most underprivileged is one of the causes of the persistence and reproduction of extreme poverty.

CITIZENSHIP

A citizen's right to voice his opinions implies the recognition of his citizenship. For members of the underprivileged population, citizenship is often limited by many obstacles owing to their wanderings, the repercussions of past difficulties, and their dependence on the government or social services.

Every citizen must be able to join a local community in which his condition, his ideas and his voice are taken into account without delay. The very poorest households, constantly pursued, relocated as a matter of course, nomads, must be given shelter immediately and receive full status as residents of the district in which they ultimately reside the longest, regardless of their housing conditions. This right must enter into effect from the very day they present themselves at the appropriate local authority to request housing or social assistance or any other rights to which they are entitled as residents of the district.

The reputation of a citizen accused of an offence, or sentenced, should be protected. It should no longer be possible to refuse a job or a position of public responsibility to a person who has been convicted, apart from certain exceptions set forth in the regulations. The private life of the accused and his family should not be on public display. The judicial system should move in this direction.

In any case, it would be preferable if the media could no longer cite the names of offenders, even if they are of age, without their authorisation. Imprisonment for priority debt should be abolished. Appeals against administrative decisions should be facilitated, by making simple information available to everyone about all their options, using methods which render them truly accessible to all. Would it be advisable to consider the setting up of a mediator in the *régions* or *départements*⁶, who would be responsible for protecting minorities' rights as well as the rights of the very weakest?

Social action should be based upon the aspirations of the very poorest and their resistance to their situation. In this sense, it would be advisable to recruit and train social workers who come from this background.⁷

A VOICE FOR ALL

The right to speak out is still not enjoyed by all. There needs to be a genuine desire to give all those who have something to say the chance to speak, and not only those trained in dialogue. This would restore real meaning to the consultation process.

6 The *département* is the basic territorial administrative unit in France. *Régions* consist of several *départements*. (Translator's note)

7 One such attempt was made at the *École de Formation d'Animation Sociale* in Lille, which is a school for training social workers as coordinators of social, cultural and educational activities, at the initiative of Dr Marty and the ATD Fourth World Movement.

All partners should be on an equal footing. Although, for example, the *Union Nationale des Associations Familiales* (UNAF, National Union of Family Associations) is recognised as representing all families in France, the tutelage of family benefits should no longer be entrusted to the *Unions Départementales* (UDAF, Departmental Unions⁸). Indeed, families in difficulty live on housing estates where the UDAF cooperates in placing a considerable number of them under tutelage. These families, who are often victims of and always witnesses to this reduction to a state of dependence, can, under no circumstances, recognise the UNAF as being their public representative.

At the same time as existing channels open up, citizens without the ability to speak out should be allowed to become special partners.

There should be room for the creation of new associations providing a voice for the aspirations of the very poorest. They would comprise people in extreme poverty as well as other citizens who chose to belong to such a body for their own personal reasons. Solidarity agreements could be drawn up between these associations, local authorities and the State to create a social development plan targeting the most underprivileged. These associations should join together in a *Conférence nationale des minorités* (National Minorities Conference), a body which would remain in contact with the nation's political and administrative officials. An annual meeting would be arranged with the Head of State. Working groups would remain in permanent contact with national and regional planning authorities.

Finally, the representatives of these minorities should be appointed to a certain number of bodies: the *Conseil économique et social* (Economic and Social Council), the *Comités économiques et sociaux régionaux* (Regional Economic and Social Committees), the *Commission nationale de Planification* (National Planning Commission), etc.

IN CONCLUSION

POLITICAL DETERMINATION TO DESTROY EXTREME POVERTY

As true citizens, the most disadvantaged must be able to influence the nation's decisions, and see their concerns taken into account in France's political objectives.

In all areas, public affairs must firstly draw inspiration from the living conditions of the underprivileged. The intent is not to create special channels for these populations, but rather to reintroduce the most disadvantaged into the mainstream. If specific measures are required, they must be included within the scope of general policy. The difficulties faced by the very poorest must be indicative of changes to be made that would be meaningful for all citizens.

In particular, the fate of the very poorest must not be placed in the hands of the ministry of solidarity alone: the rights which they have not yet obtained concern all aspects of life, and involve all ministries. One way to show change in this respect would be for each ministry to undertake a specific project in the fight against poverty.

Nothing will be changed in one day, or even in ten years, it will take one or two generations.

8 C.f. footnote 6.

The consequences of poverty are too enduring, and the required changes are too deep-rooted. What the most disadvantaged members of society expect is that initial steps be taken to demonstrate the Head of State's political commitment to abolishing the underprivileged condition. Among the possible actions which could be undertaken despite the crisis, and which are necessary because of the crisis, we have set forth only a few. If they were pursued, not only the very poorest, but the whole population would gain.

Everyone would gain, but there must be a way for this to become public knowledge. Perhaps the clearest sign that a new era has begun is the stipulation in the 1789 *Déclaration des droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* (Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen), that a government must publish its accounts. A government which is not on the defensive, a government which is able, in complete confidence, to submit its accounts to the nation. This is not because everything is going well or because everything is done for the best, but because this government has adopted a compelling moral and social position: that of taking both original and reasonable steps to extend democracy to the very poorest.

Publicly assessing the benefits of French policies for the most disadvantaged workers and their families and reporting to the organisations in which these workers are represented will not make up for the past, but it will be a new step towards the future.

Poverty is the work of man. Only man can destroy it.