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## A HUMAN RIGHTS CONCEPTUALISATION OF POVERTY.

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One of Joseph Wresinski's most important legacies is, I believe, the growing influence of what I call a human rights conceptualisation of poverty, which has underpinned the work of ATD Fourth World. Such a conceptualisation has been promoted by the UN, very much influenced by Father Wresinski as well as Amartya Sen. Although the UK lags behind France in this regard, there is today growing interest among anti-poverty organisations in the relevance and potential of human rights for their work. Moreover, the newly established official Equality and Human Rights Commission is showing interest in exploring how it can apply its human rights remit to the issue of poverty.

A report of a recent seminar, which brought together anti-poverty and human rights organisations, noted the recognition of the strong links between their respective agendas. To quote: 'At its most basic level, the starting point for both is a deep commitment to human dignity and the imperative of realising this for every human being. Both are focused on the fundamental conditions in which we live, and the things we need, as a very minimum to flourish as human beings'. This struck me as very similar to the spirit of Father Wresinski's text for the French Commission on Human Rights 20 years ago.

What I want to do in my contribution is, from a British perspective, spell out three ways in which I believe that a human rights conceptualisation of poverty offers a way forward for the politics of poverty: first, as a way of thinking; second, as a way of talking or a discourse; and third as a set of demands in relation to both process (how people in poverty are treated and silenced by the state) and outcome (the indivisibility of political, civil, socio-economic and cultural rights).

### A way of thinking

First, human rights, with its foundational commitment to the recognition of human dignity and flourishing, offers a way of *thinking* about poverty that goes beyond the material. The material is of course still crucially important – it is, after all, inadequate incomes and living standards which serve to define poverty and which measures of poverty typically attempt to capture. But, as members of ATD Fourth World constantly remind us, the experience of poverty is about more than this. It is not just a disadvantaged and insecure economic condition but it is also a shameful social relation, corrosive of human dignity and flourishing, which is experienced in interactions with the wider society and in the way people in poverty are talked about and treated by politicians, officials, professionals, the media, and sometimes I fear academics (as was discussed in yesterday's plenary).

Judy Walsh suggests that one way of thinking about rights is that they 'construct relationships: relationships of power, responsibility and accountability. In other words' that they are 'tools for giving expression to the types of relationships between individuals and groups that we value', thereby helping to counteract poverty as a shameful social relation.

The relational dimension of poverty has emerged in particular through participatory action research in the global South and, more recently, the North. This has highlighted the psychological pain all too often associated with poverty. Father Wresinski wrote of 'the violence of contempt and indifference...[which] leads to exclusion, to the rejection of one human being by other human beings'. It is, what I have described in my book *Poverty*, a process of 'othering' by which people in poverty are treated as 'other' i.e. different and inferior to the rest of society. And through that process, social distance is established and maintained.

### A language

Hartley Dean suggests that human rights 'represent a mode of discursive struggle' and this is illustrated by the way in which poverty activists, such as those involved in ATD, are using the language of human rights. In Europe, for instance, it underpins the strategy propounded by the European Anti-Poverty Network. In the US, people in poverty and homeless people have come together in the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign 'to raise the issue of poverty as a human rights violation'.

One reason why the language of human rights is being used increasingly by poverty activists is, I believe, because it offers people in poverty an alternative, more affirming discourse than dominant discourses which are often demeaning and disrespectful. It is as if the language of human rights is here being used to counter the negative associations that identifying as 'poor' typically provokes. At present many people in poverty do not want to be associated with what is perceived as a stigmatising term: 'Proud to be poor' is not a banner that many want to march under. But marching under the banner of human rights makes it easier to stand up and be counted as poor, as has happened in the States.

The language of human rights counters the process of othering because it is about what we share and have in common as human beings rather than about what separates us. Again, this comes out very strongly in the writings of Wresinski: what he called 'the right of all people, in particular the very poor, to be recognized and to have proof that they are recognized as human beings'.

As he made clear, at the heart of the idea of human rights is respect for the fundamental dignity of all human beings, which is so important when many people living in poverty feel that they are denied this respect. As one woman said in a study I was involved in 'poverty strips your dignity. You can't have any dignity with poverty'. However, the resonance of the language of human rights with the wider public is likely to vary according to national context. In the UK, there is evidence that it might reinforce a popular perception of poverty as a global rather than domestic phenomenon – i.e. that real poverty exists only in places such as Africa – and there are fears of some resistance to the language of human rights.

This in part reflects a political backlash against social rights in favour of greater emphasis on responsibilities. Here, Joseph Wresinski's construction of the relationship between rights and responsibilities provides a helpful contrast to the contractual relationship posited by the New Labour government. He wrote of 'the human being endowed with the right to responsibilities and to the means of carrying them out for the good of all'. And argued that rights 'enable people to be responsible beings, that is to say workers co-recognized as such, parents capable of rearing their children, useful members of a community...'

Thus a human rights approach does not, as some claim, construct people as passive recipients of rights. Rather it acknowledges and promotes the agency of people in poverty i.e. the idea

that even though their lives are heavily constrained by their socio-economic circumstances they still can and do make choices and act as agents in their own lives and fulfil their responsibilities as parents and members of society. Acknowledgement of the agency of people in poverty is also important to counteract the process of othering although there is a thin dividing line between acknowledging agency and holding those suffering poverty as responsible for their own condition.

### **A set of demands**

ATD's *Merging of Knowledge* report observes that 'the situation of the poor is a constant reminder that democracy is not just limited to theoretical proclamations of abstract formalized rights'. Rights have to be realised to be effective. They are realised both through tangible outcomes and through the very process of their realisation.

### *Outcome*

Starting with outcomes: If respect for the dignity of all is one key tenet of a human rights approach to poverty, the other is the indivisibility or interdependence of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights – a principle which is enshrined in the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and endorsed in subsequent Declarations. Again, it is a principle stressed repeatedly by Father Wresinski. In particular, people need social and economic rights to be able to realise to the full their political and civil rights. For example without some form of legal assistance people without money cannot have full and equal access to justice through the legal system. And more generally, it's difficult to exercise political and civil rights effectively if all one's energy is directed to getting by from day to day. The principle of the right to an adequate income, sufficient to enable people to live decently and with their human dignity respected, is enshrined in various conventions and treaties – though of course how one measures such 'adequacy' is a difficult question. In the UK, there is some pressure, including from the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee, for the government to add certain social and economic rights to its forthcoming Bill of Rights, in particular 'the right to an adequate standard of living'. Recognition of economic and social rights as human rights is particularly valuable for the most marginalised groups such as travellers and asylum-seekers, the latter in particular because they lack the citizenship rights enjoyed by others. Relevant too here is another important dimension of a human rights conceptualisation: that it builds in the principle of non-discrimination, which is particularly important when poverty interacts with social divisions such as gender, race and disability.

### *Process*

Turning to process: the growing use of the language of human rights in framing the demands of poverty activists relates also to *how* policies are implemented. It is helping to shape the politics of poverty so that it can be understood not just as a politics of redistribution, as traditionally represented, but also as a politics of recognition & respect (adapting the language of political theorists to take on board people in poverty's desire to be treated with respect). In other words, as well as demands which are directed towards improving incomes and living standards, poverty activists are also calling for changes in how they are treated by the state. One set of demands relates to everyday interactions with the state, which by and large looms larger in the life of people in poverty than the rest of the population. They concern how officials and professionals treat people – in Joseph Wresinski's words, to be treated as 'people endowed with rights' rather than 'as objects of official measures of assistance and control', identified by negative labels such as 'problem families'. As the British government's Social Exclusion Unit noted in a report on services for disadvantaged groups, 'lack of respect is a recurring issue' and 'being treated with dignity and respect is key to a positive...experience'. Part of the development of a human rights culture in public bodies has to involve an

understanding of what poverty means and the crucial importance of respectful treatment. The other set of 'process' demands is around participation and voice – being listened to, which again is at the heart of what Joseph Wresinski stood for and was discussed yesterday. Participation is central to a human rights based approach because it underpins the effective realisation of other rights. It acknowledges the agency of rights-bearers and their potential to play a role in the development of rights and services. And in strengthening that agency it enables people with experience of poverty to act more effectively as citizens and bearers of human rights.

The right of participation represents an important means of recognising the dignity of people living in poverty because it is saying that their voices count, that they have something important to contribute. It acknowledges the validity and value of the expertise borne of experience. This is one of the most consistent threads in the work of ATD Fourth World, crystallised in the Guidelines for the Crossroads of Knowledge and Practices. A participant in one of the European meetings of people experiencing poverty, based on the principle of participation, commented: 'I saw people who for the first time understood what it meant to have the right to dignity'. I was a member of an independent Commission established to explore the barriers to such participation. Half our members had direct experience of poverty; we called ourselves the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power and adopted a human rights framework. Lack of respect and lack of voice were key intertwined messages that we received from people with experience of poverty. We also learned that 'people experiencing poverty see consultation without commitment and phoney participation without power to bring about change as the ultimate disrespect'. But I also learned deeper lessons from the sharing of different kinds of knowledge which took place on the Commission, albeit at a less intensive level than in ATD's *Merging of Knowledge* project.

### **Conclusion**

So, in conclusion, human rights offers an inclusive way of thinking and talking about poverty and a framework for tackling poverty. The language of indivisible human rights has proved a valuable mobilising tool for some groups in different parts of the world. While there is still a wide gap between the promise of international human rights instruments and the reality of 'underfulfillment' particularly of socio-economic rights, the human rights conceptualisation of poverty developed by Joseph Wresinski and ATD Fourth World provides us with a potentially powerful weapon in the continued fight against poverty.