

# WHY INVEST IN RESEARCH? <sup>1</sup>

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*Introduction to the acts of the seminar: “The Fourth World, Income and Essential Needs”, organized in collaboration with the Income Distribution Department of the International Labour Office (Geneva) on 9 and 10 November, 1978, at Pierrelaye (France).*

By organising this Seminar on Persistent Poverty under the auspices of the International Labour Office<sup>2</sup>, the Pierrelaye Institute<sup>3</sup> has revived a tradition going back almost twenty years.

Indeed, since 1960, the International Movement ATD Fourth World has taken the initiative to bring together researchers from all nations to discuss the subject of poverty.

The first symposium was followed in rapid succession by another two, which took place at UNESCO Headquarters in 1961 and 1964<sup>4</sup>.

The 1964 UNESCO symposium gave rise to the “Standing Commission on Poverty Research”, which brought together researchers from England, France, Denmark, Norway, the Benelux countries and the United States.

Why, despite our limited means, did we direct so much effort towards research from the very earliest days of the Movement?

Our goal was twofold:

To bring to light through appropriate research the persistence not only of poverty, but also extreme poverty, in countries which, at the time, were convinced they had eliminated this scourge.

Secondly, to revive research on poverty, renew its hypotheses, subjects, and entire methodology in such a way as to make it better able to explain the reality of poverty with a view to inspiring political as well as grassroots action.

With regard to these two points, the need to make progress during the 1960s was considerable. Even in 1964, when we organised the second UNESCO symposium, was it not true that many public institutions which were invited to participate told us that they did not see why it was relevant? Did poverty really still exist in western welfare societies? At the very most, they acknowledged the anachronistic presence, the lingering on, you might say, of some “pockets of poverty.”

Until at least 1968, Galbraith’s<sup>5</sup> theory that residual poverty could be absorbed by a few additional welfare measures held sway.

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<sup>2</sup> The International Labour Office is the permanent secretariat of the International Labour Organisation. It works to promote social justice, in particular to enforce human rights in the working world. Created in 1919 by the Treaty of Versailles, it survived the demise of the League of Nations, and in 1946 it became the first specialised institution of the United Nations.

<sup>3</sup> From 1965, the Institute for Research and Training in Human Relations (IRTHR) took over from the Social Research Bureau, created in 1960 by Alwine de Vos van Steenwijk, at the request of Father Joseph Wresinski.

<sup>4</sup> International symposiums on maladjusted families, 12, 13 and 14 May 1961, and 10, 11 and 12 February 1964, both held at UNESCO headquarters in Paris.

<sup>5</sup> John K. Galbraith, the Canadian economist, was an economic advisor to several American presidents, notably John F. Kennedy. In 1958 he published a book entitled *The Affluent Society*. In 1969, he published *The Nature of Mass Poverty*.

Our Movement thus found itself at odds with with the thinking and the struggles of the time. It found itself in a human “no man’s land”, faced with neither social nor political forces, since it was certain that poverty was, at most, a vestige of the past and that the word itself only retained any real meaning in the Third World.

We declared poverty – particularly extreme poverty, for which we use the terms “exclusion” or “the underclass” – as a social reality inherent to the structures and even the mechanisms of our welfare policies and institutions. We led the fight for housing, schools and the right to a spiritual life, with people seen virtually as aliens. To the extent even that our intervention seemed tainted by bad faith.

We also sought to revive research; we had gained insights, we had research subjects and approaches to suggest which would connect research with social and political realities in a better way than before, because, for various reasons, the research world had also failed to see that history was beginning to split into two, leaving aside that part of humanity which could not enter the working-class reality and engage in its battles.

Pioneering researchers did not fear original initiatives, such as insisting on the presence of men and women of action in their standing commissions, day-to-day witnesses of the realities of living in poverty in various countries.

I will not go into the details of ATD Fourth World's initial efforts to set up international scientific meetings. From our successes and failures, I would simply like to recall a few lessons which made a strong impression on us.

First of all, thanks to the presence of a handful of qualified researchers, there was a notable change in attitudes after our 1961 and 1964 symposiums. In practice, the relationship between our Movement – advocating a new approach to the situation of the underclass – and public authorities, was transformed. From that moment on, dialogue became possible because a significant international scientific debate had taken place in the presence of representatives from the ministries of Education, Justice, Interior, Public Health and others. Moreover, the repercussions were considerably greater and the actual impact far more tangible in France, where it was easier for all these authorities to send delegates, than in other countries in which our Movement is also established.

To us, it was clear that we had to continue increasing opportunities for a form of scientific dialogue that was intelligible and useful to politicians. This was our idea in creating the “Standing Commission on Poverty Research”, which should have become the driving force behind this undertaking.

On this point, however, we failed, and it seems important to understand the background to this failure. Our Commission had the good fortune, or perhaps the misfortune, of attracting the attention of the International Sociology Association<sup>6</sup>. They opened their doors to us, offering us the status of a standing working group which could become a permanent Research Committee in the near future.

Our mistake was to believe that the security and prestige of the International Sociology Association was preferable to the solitude and insecurity that, nonetheless, ensured the independence and originality of our Commission.

Subsequently, we felt the full weight of tradition suffocating our originality, carrying with it all of the risks of what we have called “skimming”: slipping upwards so that we turn imperceptibly from extreme poverty towards less difficult realities because they are closer, and by analysing these inequalities we believe that we have reached the essentials because the number of citizens included in the analysis is larger.

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<sup>6</sup> The International Sociology Association (ISA) is an international group of sociologists with a variety of goals and approaches. The Association seeks to facilitate sociological research and increase international visibility. It was founded in 1949.

It must be said that we did not feel comfortable in this atmosphere which was otherwise very pleasant, or in the melting pot of ideas which is characteristic of large gatherings of sociologists from around the world. We nevertheless held firm for a long time, thanks to the excellent presidency of our friend, Professor S.M. Miller<sup>7</sup>, but we gradually saw all of our pioneering researchers becoming discouraged.

The motivation, the significance, the stimulating dialogue with those who were living the reality of poverty gradually vanished. We had chosen security, but we had lost innovation, enthusiasm and activism.

However, through this combat and this experience, the Movement saw the confirmation of its scientific vocation and decided to adopt a research doctrine. This process made every activist a collector of knowledge, a detector of poverty and a transmitter of ideas based on a precise knowledge of reality.

Although there was the intention to make us into a Documentation Centre, these symposiums taught us that we needed to be a Research and Study Centre.

The initiative we achieved on 9 and 10 November 1978, with the help of the International Labour Office, helped us to renew our ties with the past and rediscover our initial motivation, namely, to make a genuine contribution to ending exclusion.

We also had to reestablish the dialogue between those for whom exclusion is a reality and those who, through their scientific discipline, can explain it and wish to learn how to explain it using language adapted to practical, local and general achievements.

As you know, we attach significance to this dialogue, all the more so because it is difficult and seldom established. Today it is not unusual to gather researchers, politicians and field workers around the same table. But, in the first instance, the researcher has no reason to take the field worker's intentions, observations and interpretations seriously. When studying the reality experienced by the poor, it is just as easy for the fieldworker to be on the wrong track as for the researcher to have his head in the clouds. The fieldworker's knowledge is only credible if he also shares their living conditions, as a trained, participating observer. If this is the case - and this is what all of our Movement's full-time activists have attempted to do - it is in the researcher's best interests to listen to what he has to say and include him in his research from the outset, not merely as a provider of facts, but as a genuine, critical participant in developing the avenues chosen for the research.

Since the founding of our Movement twenty-one years ago, we have observed countless research projects on poverty throughout the world. We ourselves have participated in a significant number of them and we have also conducted our own research. Over these twenty-one years, we have come to understand how difficult it is to conduct good research on the underclass condition. It is a condition which has not yet been appropriately integrated into sociological thinking, and is far from anything that anyone who has had the privilege of a university education can imagine. What we have found is that the main guarantee of an effective research approach is found in the flow - I would say as equals - between the researcher and those who witness the day-to-day realities of poverty.

If the researcher accepts this, it will allow him also to become a genuine spokesperson for this reality without departing from his role as researcher, thus becoming a true activist against the worst injustices.

I write these things quite simply, as a man born into the underclass. In expressing these expectations to scientists as a person responsible for fighting extreme poverty, I speak on behalf of all those who need the most qualified researchers to join with them in order to translate their reality into other terms.

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<sup>7</sup> Samuel M. Miller, Professor of Sociology at Boston College, Boston University and the Commonwealth Institute in Massachusetts.

Researchers have a responsibility to the Fourth World. They are trained to look at the world and give order to what they see, therefore they can help us to break down the barriers to mutual learning, and reconnect the man of the underclass to the rest of mankind.

People of the Fourth World are barred from quality thinking, for they are deprived of self-understanding through the immediate constraints of extreme poverty. Their history and thinking are rejected, and their lives are manipulated and controlled for stakes which are not theirs. And yet, whose views about essential needs are more justified than theirs?