



ATD FOURTH WORLD

CONTRIBUTION TO THE COUNTRY VISIT TO THE USA

BY THE SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON EXTREME POVERTY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The International Movement ATD Fourth World main objective is the eradication of extreme poverty, using a human rights approach that recognizes the dignity of every person, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

The violence of extreme poverty, ignorance, deprivation, and contempt isolates people and locks them in silence to the point where they doubt that they are part of the human community. Recognizing the efforts made by people in poverty to ensure that no one is left behind, and combining our strengths to reach out to those still unreached, are essential steps on the path toward overcoming poverty and building justice and peace together.

We identified below some of the main issues that have been raised by people living in extreme poverty. We also suggest here a few places in the US where ATD Fourth World could organize encounters with people living in poverty, and some contacts that could provide valuable insights.

I. KEY ISSUES RAISED BY PEOPLE LIVING IN EXTREME POVERTY

- **Lack of recognition of extreme poverty as a cause and consequence of human rights violations, and of the structural causes of extreme poverty**

It is difficult to approach extreme poverty in the US from a human rights point of view, due to the fact that there is no legal recourse for many violations of an individual's economic, social and cultural rights. The US has signed, but not ratified, the Convention of the Rights of the Child, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Even if ratified, these international legal texts would require a law passed by congress addressing the specific violation before recourse could be addressed.

Lack of redress is compounded by poverty being seen as a moral failing or character flaw, by policy makers and the general public alike, as opposed to a result of system failures or inequity. This has left many of the people we work with expressing the sentiment *"how can I convince*

you to change policy, if I have to first convince you that I am human and am worthy of being treated with dignity?¹”

As a result of the failure to recognize the structural causes of poverty, as well as the hidden agenda to retain the current balance of power, little work has been done on the cost of NOT eradicating extreme poverty in the US. In Massachusetts, the Motel system is used for people that are homeless and ends up costing about \$3,000 a month to keep a family in a motel room – this is temporary until being able to find a shelter to put them in, when instead a voucher of \$500 may be enough to help them pay their rent.

- **Inadequacy of the current income-based definition of poverty, and inequities in the application of the social safety net**

The US does not take into account all dimensions of poverty when measuring poverty. Instead we use a federal guide based solely on income that has not been revised since the 1960s, resulting in millions of people falling through cracks or being trap as “working poor” with no hope of bettering their conditions. ATD Fourth World, in partnership with the University of Oxford, is currently conducting the Multidimensional Aspects of Poverty (MAP) participatory research project to determine the dimensions of extreme poverty in partnership with people with direct experience of poverty. Although the data is still preliminary, while determining the dimensions of poverty, several participants with lived experience of poverty have spoken of the stigma, humiliation, and marginalization. The combination of all those factors leads at the extreme, to a feeling of dehumanization characteristic of extreme poverty for people who experienced it.

Another aspect of extreme poverty in the US is due to the bureaucratic processes involved in the welfare system as having an effect on poverty as maintaining people in extreme poverty rather than providing the type of assistance required to help them lift themselves out of poverty. The Welfare structure in the US is shaped by a phenomenon described by the people themselves as a logic of “punitive support”.

One example of this would be the TANF safety net program. TANF funding is given to states by the federal government in the form of block grants, allowing the states to best determine how best the money is used; any money saved on TANF benefits can then be used by states for other purposes. Mississippi currently has an almost 90% applicant denial rate². Research by the Urban Institute has found states with larger African-American populations are more restrictive in qualification, while also being less generous in benefit amounts than states with a larger Caucasian population³. Recipient benefits for a family of three are below 50% of the Federal

¹ Maryann Broxton, ATD Fourth World Activist and coordinator of the Multidimensional Aspects of Poverty (see below).

² https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/tanf_spending_ms.pdf

³ <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/why-does-cash-welfare-depend-where-you-live>

Poverty Line in all 50 states⁴. Fifteen states have passed legislation requiring drug testing for prospective recipients while 20 states have proposed similar legislation⁵.

Just as states have determined how to benefit from TANF block grants, private business also used it as a means of profit. Companies like J.P. Morgan, Chase, and Xerox are paid millions to implement Electronic Benefit Transfers, while at the same time charging recipients for balance inquiry, fines, and usurer fees for each transaction⁶.

- **Race, gender and geographic location as important determinants in levels of discrimination.**

In the US, the depth of an individual's experience of poverty is largely based on race, gender, and location. In African-American majority cities like New Orleans and Atlanta, majority Caucasian legislators are passing minimum wage laws "that circumvent legislation that would benefit communities of color"⁷. Twenty-eight states in the US have "right to work laws" preventing formation of unions, in turn lowering the wage potential for all workers, but having the greatest impact on the poor, people of color, women, and more specifically, women of color⁸. African-American and Latino women earn less, 65 and 58 cents on the dollar respectively, than their male Caucasian counterparts for the same line of work. The wage disparity does not improve based on comparative education levels, and can be worsened by "domestic gender roles."⁹

- **Family break-up as a key concern**

Several times the participants with the lived experience of extreme poverty in the MAP project spoke of the role perception plays in regard to poverty - the perception of people experiencing poverty being more prone to drug use and violence than the general public, and the general public's and social services' negative stereotypes of the parenting skills or ability of people with lived experience of poverty. One of ATD's members shared the story of having lost her baby child. Due to her socioeconomic status, the first assumption that was made by the police was that she was neglecting her child. She has to deal with the shock of her loss at the precinct. Families living in extreme poverty too often have their children removed from their homes, rather than receiving the assistance they would need to keep the family together – in opposition to the

⁴ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/family-income-support/tanf-cash-benefits-have-fallen-by-more-than-20-percent-in-most-states>

⁵ <http://www.ncsl.org/research/human-services/drug-testing-and-public-assistance.aspx>

⁶ <http://prospect.org/article/how-big-banks-are-cashing-food-stamps>

⁷ <http://www.forworkingfamilies.org/blog/states-preempting-local-laws-are-extension-jim-crow>

⁸ <http://www.ncsl.org/research/labor-and-employment/right-to-work-laws-and-bills.aspx>

⁹ <http://www.epi.org/publication/what-is-the-gender-pay-gap-and-is-it-real/>

recognition by the Convention on the Rights of the Child of the importance of the family to a child's normal development.¹⁰

- **The impact of hidden hunger in the US**

The US doesn't believe in the right to food. Although there is the social safety net program SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), it imposes the same punitive requirements as TANF, while only providing \$1.40 per meal, per person, per day. Children make up the largest segment of US SNAP recipients and therefore exhibit the greatest effect of the program's inadequacies. Research has shown that the test scores of children from SNAP households drop and the children begin to exhibit what is perceived as behavioral problems at the end of the month - the time the SNAP benefit runs out¹¹. Several schools systems have adopted a "no tolerance" policy towards what they perceive as behavioral problems when actually it is the result of hunger. More often it is children experiencing poverty who are labeled as problem students and become more susceptible to the "school to prison pipeline." Although this is commonly associated with young African-American males coming from a background of poverty, young African-American females have twice as high a suspension rate as their Caucasian peers. This also has a direct effect on the estimated 15 million children living in poverty, and 1.5 million homeless children in the US.

- **Issues from Arjun Sengupta's visit in 2006 that merit review**

Among Arjun Sengupta's recommendations - none of which the US has carried out - were three that are particularly important, and that it would be good to be reviewed:

- 1) *"The income poverty line, as it is defined today in the United States, needs careful re-examination, as has been pointed out by many national experts."* (paragraph 86)
- 2) Extreme poverty was already on the rise in 2006, when Sengupta filed his report, and so he advocated for the US to develop a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy (with the participation of people in poverty) instead of the piecemeal legislation it now has. (paragraphs 76, 80, 82 and 84)
- 3) *"The United States authorities should, in cooperation with civil society and expert organizations, identify a fraction of its population, say up to 10 per cent, as suffering from conditions of extreme poverty and most vulnerable to the challenges of modern living conditions. Such extreme poverty should be defined in terms of a combination of income poverty, human*

¹⁰ See ATD Fourth World, How Poverty Separates Children and Parents. A challenge for Human rights. <http://www.atd-fourthworld.org/wp-content/uploads/old/pdf/howpov.pdf>

¹¹ <http://cde.web.unc.edu/files/2012/03/Gennetian-et-al-2012.pdf>

development poverty and social exclusion.” People under this line should be able to have legal recourse to courts of law. (paragraphs 86 and 87)

Also, it is very important to highlight that Sengupta “*regrets not having been able to visit any of the Native American nations.*” (Paragraph 74) Our team in New Mexico (see contact below) is willing to welcome the Special Rapporteur and to organize a series of meetings in Gallup.

II. MEETINGS ATD COULD ORGANIZE WITH PEOPLE LIVING IN EXTREME POVERTY AND LIST OF SUGGESTED CONTACTS

ATD Fourth World suggests that one criterion for selecting visit sites could be cities or states where the Special Rapporteur could have a positive impact on local conditions – in other words, places where local or state authorities are genuinely searching for solutions to the indignities of extreme poverty.

For a national overview:

We suggest that the Special Rapporteur meets with the US Research Team of the Multidimensional Aspect of Poverty who is working on identifying the dimensions of poverty since Dec. 2015.

The composition of this team is the following one:

Activists:

- Marlon Wallen lives in Boston (Massachusetts). He does activist work with immigrants, low-income communities and HIV-AIDS populations.
- Shawn Hasley lives near Gallup (New Mexico). He is Navajo and is working as an adult educator at the University of New Mexico.
- Yamasheta Wilson lives in Harlem (New York). He is a poet, an activist, and a human rights defender that finds in his own life the knowledge and experience that inspires his poetry and activism.
- Johnny Ocean lives in Queens, (New York). Father of three children, he has an in-depth knowledge of the social system and brings the hope of a better future for his family.
- Kimberly Tyre lives in Harlem, (New York). As a parent involved with CWOP (Child Welfare Organizing Project), she advocates for sustainable solutions to extreme poverty that keep the family together.

Academics:

- Donna Haig Friedman lives in Boston (Massachusetts). She is a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Social Policy of the McCormack Graduate School (UMass-Boston).

- Amelia Mallona lives in Boston (Massachusetts). She is an Associate Professor at the School of Professional and Continuing Studies (Springfield College) and works on participatory research.

Practitioners:

- Julia Sick: Currently a graduate student at the Silberman School of Social Work at CUNY-Hunter College, she studies Social Work and Community Organizing, Planning, and Development and Social Policy.

Coordinators:

- Guillaume Charvon lives in New York City (New York). As an ATD Fourth World full-time volunteer, he worked at the Research Institute of the International Fourth World Movement before implementing participatory research in Burkina Faso. He is currently in charge of the New York Office of ATD Fourth World.
- Maryann Broxton lives in Boston (Massachusetts) where she is a housing and food justice activist with a BA from Lesley University. She was a board member for Homes for Families, a housing advocacy non-profit, and was a member of their Constituent Advisory Team for eight years.

A meeting could be organized in New York City. Contact: Guillaume Charvon (gcharvon@4rthworldmovement.org)

For the Appalachian area:

ATD Fourth World team has been working in the coalfields of southwest Virginia since 1995. <https://4thworldmovement.org/where-we-are/appalachia/>

Contact : Fanchette and Vincent Fanelli, fvfanelli@comcast.net

In Gallup, New Mexico

An ATD Fourth World team has been present in Gallup (New Mexico) for the last 7 years, mainly involved with Native-Americans.

<https://4thworldmovement.org/where-we-are/new-mexico/>

Contact: Karen Stornelli, karen.stornelli@atd-fourthworld.org

In New Orleans, Louisiana

An ATD Fourth World team has been present in New Orleans for more than 25 years.

<https://4thworldmovement.org/where-we-are/new-orleans/>

Contact: Maria Victoire, victoiremaria@yahoo.fr