

**MAKING HUMAN RIGHTS WORK
FOR PEOPLE LIVING IN EXTREME POVERTY**
**A handbook for implementing the UN Guiding Principles
on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights**

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Poverty historically seen as a simple lack of income

When the world embarked on its second millennium several years ago, there was a feeling of optimism in international circles. The Cold War had finally come to an end ten years before, and now all countries could work together to address the challenges faced by too many people as they aspired to enjoy a decent standard of living. The UN General Assembly adopted a set of Millennium Development Goals, of which the first was to “reduce extreme poverty by half.” It was widely believed that economic development was all that was needed, and because it was a problem that existed primarily in the Third World, the standard that was used as the baseline was an estimate developed by the World Bank on the basis of their experience in developing countries – at least \$1.25 a day was necessary to meet basic needs for food, water, housing, and sanitation, and therefore the 2.8 billion people earning less than this amount were considered to be living in “extreme poverty.”

The goal was reached, primarily because of the major strides made by China. The UN puts forward the figure of over 800 million people¹ as the number now living in extreme poverty. However, this global figure does not take into account the growing numbers of people in ‘rich’ countries that have fallen into extreme poverty as a result of the financial crisis. In the US, for example, according to the Census Bureau the percentage of people living in ‘chronic poverty’ rose from 7.2 per cent in 2007 to 8.3 per cent in 2011, while over the same period the percentage subjected to ‘episodic’ poverty - in other words, that fall in and out of poverty – rose from 27.1 to 31.6 per cent.² In addition, this same period saw a continuing rise in the levels of inequality throughout the world. According to a 2008 study by the International Labour Organization (ILO), over the past two decades the income gap between the top and bottom 10 per cent of wage earners increased in 70 per cent of the countries for which data was available.³ These economic inequalities are often combined with “social inequalities,” as when people with higher incomes or their family members have more political power or access to better education, health services, or housing than

¹ See <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/poverty.shtml>.

² Brad Plumer, “One in three Americans slipped below the poverty line between 2009 and 2011, *The Washington Post*, January 8, 2014.

³ International Labour Organization, *World of Work Report 2008: Income Inequalities in the Age of Financial Globalization*, p. ix.

those with lower incomes. And these levels of inequality are often closely related to discrimination.⁴ The Nobel Prize-winning economist, Joseph Stiglitz, emphasized that “One of the most invidious — and hardest to eradicate — sources of inequality is discrimination, both ongoing discrimination and the legacy of past discrimination.”⁵

There has thus been a growing realization that economic development alone would not ensure a decent standard of living for all people. In addition, as pointed out above, the World Bank definition of the poverty line renders completely invisible the poverty that exists in emerging and industrialized countries.

A major breakthrough: the adoption of the UN Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights

The UN Human Rights Commission, and then the Council which replaced it, began looking at the relationship between extreme poverty and human rights in the 1990s.⁶ Realizing that the links needed to be made explicit and addressed, in 2001 it began working on a set of Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. The final draft was adopted in September 2012, after an extensive process of consultation with governments, human rights experts, NGOs, and people living in extreme poverty themselves. Their adoption represented the first time that a UN body recognized that extreme poverty is the result of multiple human rights violations. People can be poor, and still be part of the social fabric of a society. But there are some who are so marginalized, so socially excluded, that they become trapped in a vicious cycle that keeps them in a state of bare survival from generation to generation. As stated in the Guiding Principles:

- extreme poverty is more than a simple lack of income;
- it is both a cause and a consequence of human rights violations and is an enabling condition for other violations;
- it is a condition that limits access to basic services and prevents the enjoyment of many basic rights;
- it is the result as well as the cause of social marginalization and exclusion that is transmitted through generations.

A woman living in extreme poverty in Peru sums up what is missing in the World Bank definition: *“The worst thing about living in extreme poverty is the contempt - that they treat you like you are worthless, that they look at you with disgust and fear and that they even treat you like an enemy. We and our children experience this every day, and it hurts us, humiliates us, and makes us live in fear and shame.”*⁷

⁴ Philip Alston, Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, A/HRC/ 29/31, Human Rights Council, 27 May 2015, para. 24, p. 11.

⁵ Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future* (New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 2012), p. 18.

⁶ This work was initiated following an address by Joseph Wresinski, the founder of ATD Fourth World, to the Human Rights Commission in 1987. It was supported by a core group of NGOs, which Franciscans International joined after its Geneva office opened in 1995.

⁷ International Movement ATD Fourth World, *Extreme Poverty is Violence: Breaking the Silence, Searching for Peace*, 2012, p. 60.

Because of the discrimination, people living in extreme poverty have little voice in their communities and societies. And because of their feelings of shame, they often do not come forward to participate in and benefit from poverty-reducing projects. The distinction between poverty and extreme poverty is thus important, for the fight against extreme poverty requires affirmative action against discrimination and the crippling effects of shame and humiliation. People need to be actively sought out, and empowered through a human-rights-based approach. In addition, as recognized by the Human Rights Council, extreme poverty is a global challenge, and thus it endorsed the objective that the UN Guiding Principles “should be used by all countries and regions at all stages of economic development.”⁸

And so this time when the international community began to develop a new set of goals – the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the period 2015-2030 – this new awareness was reflected. The first Target is “By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere” – in other words, the SDGs apply to all countries. Furthermore, paragraph 74 of *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* recognizes the importance of integrating human rights into anti-poverty strategies: “Follow-up and review processes at all levels will be guided by the following principles: ...e) They will be people-centred, gender-sensitive, respect human rights and have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind.”

The human-rights-based approach to extreme poverty

A human-rights-based approach to extreme poverty is thus based on the recognition that extreme poverty will never be overcome simply through economic development, for there will always be population groups who will be left behind unless the human rights violations from which they suffer are addressed. All Governments have signed the basic human rights conventions that guarantee that all people have the right to live in dignity, and to enjoy civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. Anti-poverty strategies must therefore identify the many ways in which the rights of people living in extreme poverty are violated, and the steps that must be taken by Governments to protect and promote all human rights.

And in order for such strategies to be effective, they must from the beginning be based on the right to participation – in other words, they must be developed in close consultation with those who are directly affected by the violations. In her report to the Human Rights Council on the right to participation of people living in poverty, Magdalena Sepúlveda, UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights from 2008 to 2014, emphasizes that rights-based participation “promotes and

⁸ Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, *Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights*, A/HRC/21/39, p. 4. See http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/OHCHR_ExtremePovertyandHumanRights_EN.pdf. (Consulted on 15 December 2105.)

requires the active, free, informed and meaningful participation of persons living in poverty at all stages of the design, implementation and evaluation of policies that affect them, based on a comprehensive analysis of their rights, capacity and vulnerabilities, power relations, gender relations and the roles of different actors and institutions.”⁹

She goes on to say that “The right to participation is strongly linked with empowerment, which is a key human rights goal and principle. Effective participation can build capacity and rights awareness. It allows those living in poverty to see themselves as full members of society and autonomous agents rather than subjects of decisions taken by others who see them as objects of assistance or mere statistics.”¹⁰ Participation is thus the entry point for enabling people living in extreme poverty to realize that they are rights-holders and are entitled to live in dignity.

The objectives of the handbook on the UN Guiding Principles

Following the adoption of the UN Guiding Principles on Extreme poverty and Human Rights, ATD Fourth World and Franciscans International agreed that a handbook was needed to help community workers to better understand the implications of the Guiding Principles and to propose a series of affirmative actions to help people living in extreme poverty to claim their rights.

The objective was to create a handbook that would help people working at community level – whether in Government or in civil society – to assist people living in extreme poverty to identify and address their challenges by coming together as a community, and mobilizing broader social networks to help them enter into dialogue with local Government services. Ultimately, the aim was to translate individual challenges into collective action, empowering local communities to become agents of change. The importance of involving people living in extreme poverty in all decision-making processes is thus emphasized throughout the handbook. Only in this way will solutions be found that truly correspond to the reality of the challenges faced by people living in extreme poverty.

A core group of nine interested NGOs was created to guide and support the development of the handbook: Caritas; the Center for Economic and Social Rights; Edmund Rice International; the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; IBase; the International Catholic Child Bureau (BICE); the International Dalit Solidarity Network; the International Federation of Social Workers; and the World Organisation Against Torture.

⁹ Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona, A/HRC/23/36, 11 March 2013, para. 17, p. 5.

¹⁰ Ibid., para. 22, p. 6.

An initial text was drafted and then field-tested among a wide variety of constituencies on all continents. It was then extensively revised in keeping with the results. The handbook thus represents two years of consultation with inputs from some 200 people and over 50 organizations in 23 different countries. The respondents included human rights experts as well as activists working in urban slums or rural areas with little access to basic services; indigenous peoples who were losing their lands and livelihoods due to the operations of large corporations; and people working directly with women, children, migrants or refugees at grassroots level. The aim was for the handbook to include suggestions relevant to a wide range of country situations, out of which people could select the ones that corresponded to their priority concerns and their particular conditions.

The final version of the handbook consists of four parts.

Part 1 provides the background on the development of the UN Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, and then the drafting of the handbook.

Part 2 sets out the basic principles for reaching out to people living in extreme poverty: gaining their trust, assessing the risks they face if they challenge their situation, involving them in all stages of the process of claiming their rights....

Part 3 then puts forward suggestions as to actions that can be taken to help local and national authorities implement their obligations under international human rights law. It does not cover all of the sections of the UN Guiding Principles, but focuses on the actions that are within the range of people working at the grassroots level. And it groups some of the rights together in recognition of their inter-linkages. Part 3 is not intended to be a list of every action that can and should be taken, but to serve as a guide to the types of actions that can be taken, depending on the situation of the people concerned, and the issues that matter the most to them. The suggestions cover a variety of situations, in both developing and industrialized countries.

Part 4 then explains the importance of monitoring any actions that are initiated, and points to some evaluation methodologies.

Suggested steps for using the handbook

In putting the handbook into use, the following steps are suggested:

- 1) If community-level workers do not speak one of the languages in which the handbook is available, the handbook should ideally be translated into the national language. Alternatively, an extract can be prepared composed of Part 1, Part 2, the relevant recommendations from Part 3, and Part 4.
- 2) Because bringing about changes in long-standing attitudes and behaviours towards people living in extreme poverty often requires the long-term involvement

of a coalition of actors, potential partners should be identified and familiarized with the handbook and its approach.

3) In partnership with relevant actors, workshops should be organized to develop a thorough understanding of the human-rights approach to extreme poverty, and to evaluate the coherence of existing projects with this approach.

4) With the target group, some of the recommended actions should then be explored in keeping with the principles set out in Part 2; those considered to be of priority importance should be identified and possible actions discussed with key partners.

5) If local authorities are sympathetic to the situation of people living in extreme poverty, it can be useful to organize workshops with them to develop coherent action plans to address the priority human rights violations. In other situations, it might be necessary to first develop advocacy campaigns to raise their awareness of the need for change.

6) Once an action plan has been developed, mechanisms should be established to provide ongoing feedback from people living in extreme poverty; this will allow adjustments to be made to the action plan as necessary.

Throughout the process, if anti-poverty strategies are to be successful and sustainable, it will be vital for the principles set out in Part 2 of the handbook to be the foundation for all actions. They are the key to achieving real progress on SDG Goal Number One: “End poverty in all of its forms everywhere.”