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The Hidden Dimensions of Poverty
A six-country participative study

Note by the International Movement ATD Fourth World [*]

Summary

      The UN 2030 agenda for sustainable development require to eradicate poverty in all its forms and dimensions, by 2030 but the dimensions are nowhere specified. Reflecting the United Nation's aspiration that policy should be informed by 'the meaningful participation of persons living in poverty', participative research was undertaken in six diverse countries to identify the dimensions of poverty. People in poverty, as members of national research teams alongside academics and practitioners, were involved at all stages of the research with the methodology termed Merging of Knowledge. Nine dimensions of poverty were recognised in all countries: disempowerment; suffering in body, mind and heart; struggle and resistance; social maltreatment, institutional maltreatment; unrecognised contribution; lack of decent work; insufficient income; and material and social deprivation. Five factors influence the manifestation of the dimensions: cultural beliefs; identity; location; environment and environmental policy and timing and duration.

Introduction

It is officially recognised that, of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals: 'eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development' (United Nations, 2019a). However, poverty in all its dimensions has never been formally defined. Target 1.2 and Indicator 1.2.2 merely repeat the phrase 'poverty in all its dimensions' with the addition 'according to national definitions' that, in effect, devolves ownership and responsibility to nation states. Without even a definition, let alone a precise indicator or basis for meaningful comparison, this target is at best aspirational and at worst cosmetic.

With this deficiency in mind, the results of a six-country study that sought to identify all the dimensions of poverty are presented below. The approach to defining dimensions took literally the aspiration of SDG Target 16.7, namely 'to ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels', by engaging people in poverty in all stages of the research and by ensuring their significant representation in national research teams. The methodology, termed Merging of Knowledge, entailed recruiting persons experiencing poverty as respondents, their participation in extended group work to specify the dimensions of poverty, parallel group work with specialist academics and social welfare practitioners with the same goal and, finally, a 'meeting of minds' between representatives of all three groups to seek, if possible, consensus on the dimensions of poverty. Consensus was achieved at national level as was consensus involving representatives from all six countries, resulting in the specification of nine dimensions of poverty common to all six countries.

Methodology/process

This international research project titled *"The dimensions of poverty and how to measure them"* was initiated and coordinated through a partnership between the International Movement ATD Fourth World and the University of Oxford.

The research used an approach called the *Merging of Knowledge and Practice with people living in poverty* that has been refined for 20 years (International Movement ATD Fourth World, 2007, 2013). It is based on the distinction between three different kinds of knowledge; knowledge gained through life experience by people who endure poverty, knowledge that practitioners gain through action, and academic knowledge (Wresinski, 1980). The merging of these different kinds of knowledge results in what Amartya Sen called 'trans-positional' assessment – drawing on but going beyond different positional observations (Sen, 1995). Through considerable investment of time, this approach enables co-leadership of the research by people facing poverty, practitioners and academics.

National Research Teams (NRT) were formed in six countries: Bangladesh, Bolivia, France, Tanzania, the United Kingdom and the United States. The six NRTs had nine to fifteen members, comprising four to six people with direct experience of poverty, and two to four academics and practitioners providing services or advocacy for people in poverty. NRTs were usually facilitated by two coordinators and one research assistant. Highly experienced ATD Fourth World Volunteer Corps members accompanied those who had never participated in research before, supporting them in ways that enable their full participation.

A three-step process was used to collect data in each country. First, knowledge about poverty was generated in independent peer group meetings comprising either people with direct experience of poverty, practitioners employed in communities facing poverty, or academics researching poverty. Each NRT set up between 13 and 38 peer groups of people in poverty,

practitioners and academics, in urban and rural areas. A total of 1091 people participated in peer groups across the whole project, with a majority of female persons (60,3%), 665 adults and children in poverty (61,4%), 262 practitioners (23,5%) and 164 academics (15,1%). Each peer group met for at least half a day and most often two days to use a range of methods designed to enable the collective identification of characteristics of poverty, then group these into dimensions.

Secondly, the NRTs followed the Merging of Knowledge approach to analyse the outcomes from the peer groups: members of the research team with direct experience of poverty made a synthesis from the reports of the peer groups with people living in poverty; the practitioners did the same from reports made by the peer groups of practitioners; and likewise the academics. These three syntheses were the starting point for their deliberations towards Merging of Knowledge, resulting in the joint production of a single list of dimensions of poverty and their characteristics and some pending questions.

Thirdly, a Merging of Knowledge event was organised for two or three days with members of each peer groups to discuss the production of the NRTs. Across the project, 280 people took part in Merging of Knowledge events that usually lasted two consecutive days. The NRTs then put forward their analysis taking in account the new data produced in this event. The result of this process was not only a list of dimensions, but also new, enriched insights about the reality of poverty in each country.

Figure 1
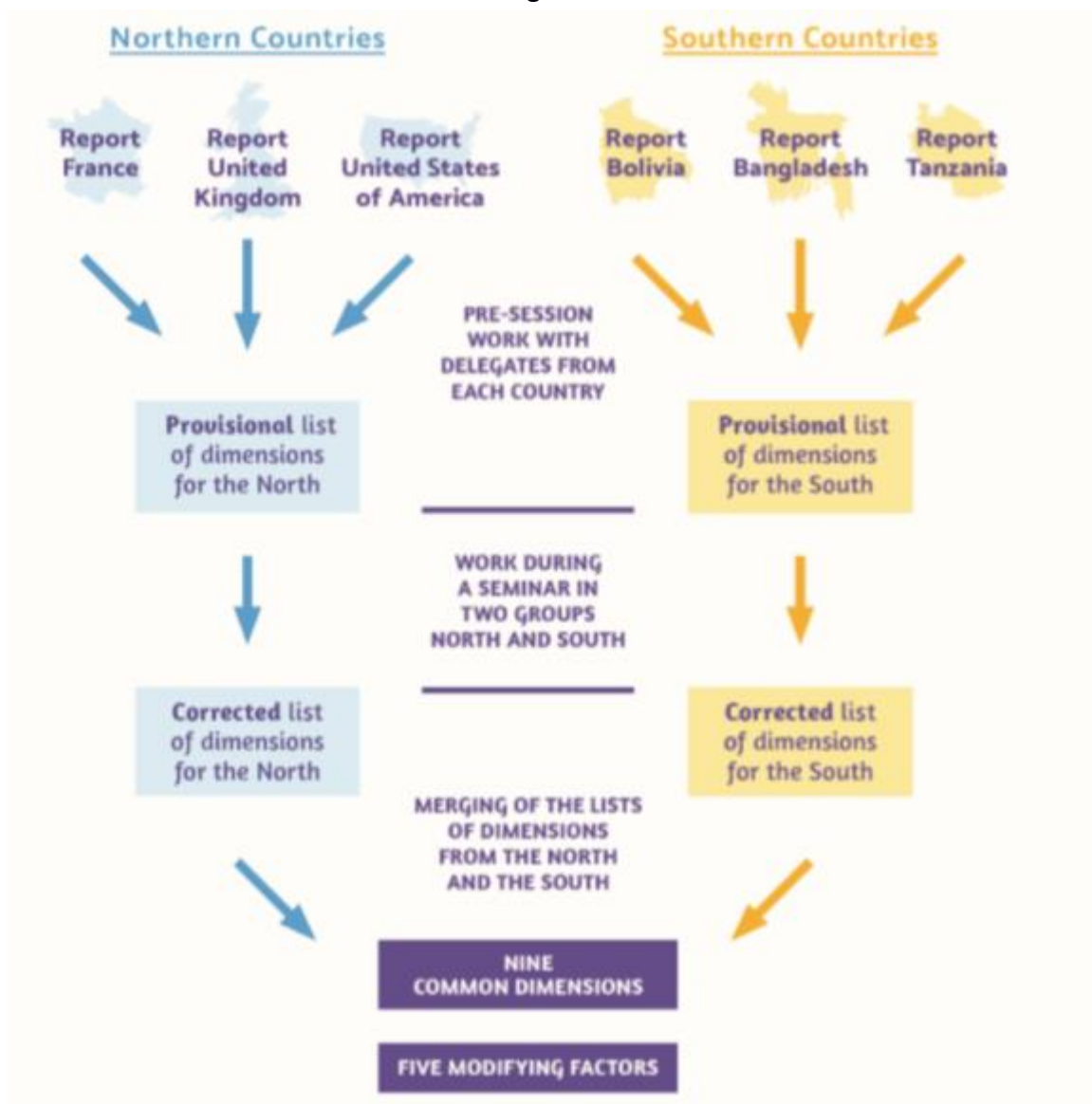
In September 2018, 32 delegates from the six NRTs gathered with the international coordination team to work together for one week. The six NRTs had identified a total of 71 dimensions of poverty. Project participants first worked in two groups, comprising delegates from, respectively, the global North and the global South, to see whether there were common elements in the list of dimensions identified by each national team. The two groups then convened in plenary to compare their lists. They were surprised to find out that, although the daily lives of poor people in the North and in the South are in many ways different, the list of dimensions they had identified were very similar. At the end of a seven-day session, project participants came up with a list of nine dimensions of poverty that are common to all participating countries, two country-specific dimensions and three modifying factors. Back home, all NRTs refined their findings, complementing them with a written account of the new insights about poverty that had emerged from their research. Their reports enabled the international coordination team to draft this international synthesis titled *"The hidden dimensions of poverty",* which describes nine common dimensions, their interactions and five modifying factors. The synthesis was then validated by the NRTs before completion.

The whole **process of Merging of Knowledge** at the international level is described in the flow chart above (Figure 1).

Results

Figure 2 presents schematically the nine dimensions of poverty recognised to exist in all six countries and the five factors that subtly modify the way that are expressed both within and between countries. The nine dimensions embrace all 71 national dimensions apart from one, 'Environment pollution and the effect of natural calamities' identified in Bangladesh but not found to be salient elsewhere, which is captured by environment as a modifying factor. The diagram suggests the interrelatedness of all dimensions without attempting to differentiate their relative importance.

Figure 2
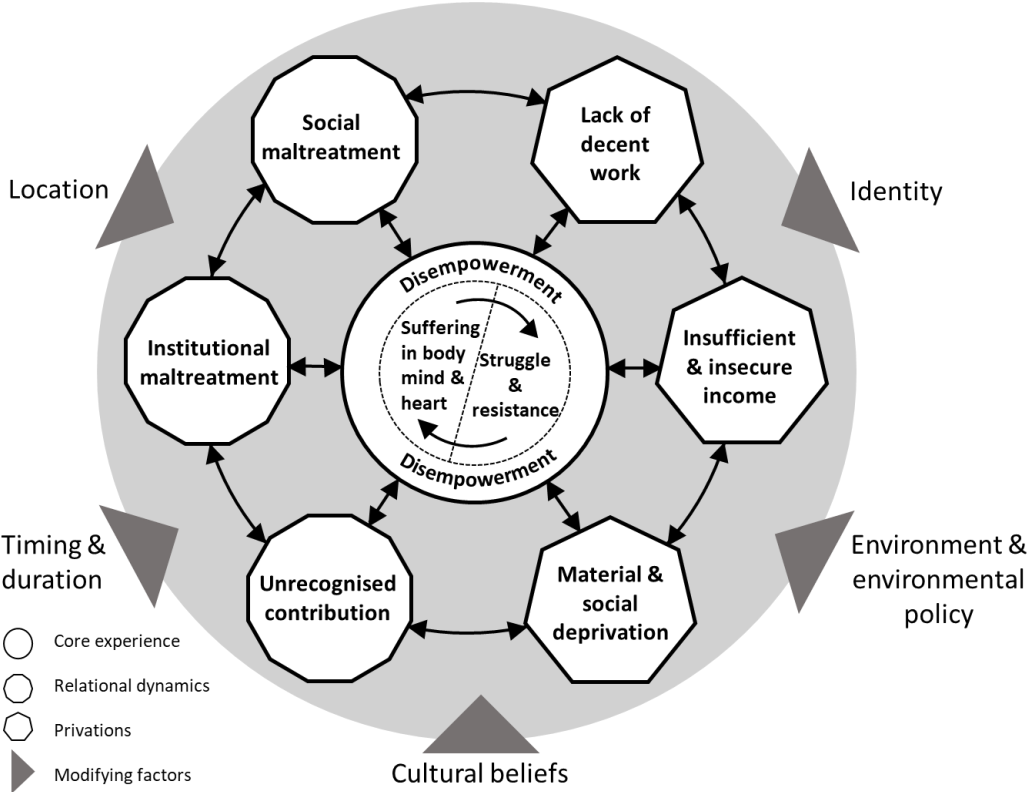
Revealing hidden dimensions

Three dimensions define **the core of the poverty experience** with '**suffering in body, mind and heart' at its centre.** Participants were deeply committed to this three-fold characterisation arguing that poverty very often reflects and undermines physical and mental health while also affecting the emotions. Poor housing, inadequate diets, arduous and unsafe work environments all contribute to deteriorating physical health while cost often precludes preventive care or early access to health provision when available which often it is not. The challenges of making ends meet, of securing and holding onto adequate resources, of coping with crises and uncertainties that are magnified by lack of security, can all lead to stress and anxiety. So, too, can the necessary pretence that everything is fine and under control, the guilt of not being able adequately to care for love ones and the shame of being poor, dependent on others and always seeking favours. There is also the fear of what tomorrow might bring, the risk of being forcibly separated from ones' children, the possibility of homelessness and despair that circumstances seldom seem to get better. Frustration, fear, anger, depression are common emotions provoked by poverty that can be internalised and experienced as moving from the mind to the 'heart', reducing the sense of agency, lowering self-esteem, undermining self-confidence and reinforcing the sense of being left to cope alone.

It is always a judgement call whether to illustrate emergent concepts with quotations drawn from fieldwork. With hundreds of thousands of words collated from hundreds of settings underpinning this research, quotations cannot be definitive or fully representative. Nevertheless, it is necessary to underline poverty as suffering since existing measures are so distanced from this core concept:

> "Poverty means being part of a system that leaves you waiting indefinitely in a state of fear and uncertainty. Poverty kills dreams and cages the dreamers".

> People in poverty, UK

> "You can't get to sleep, you're thinking 'what can I do?'. What am I going to feed my children? You feel really bad; it hurts here inside".

> Person in poverty, Bolivia

> "The physical and mental problems related to poverty leave a person fragile and vulnerable. When people say their age, we are often surprised because their appearance suggested that they were older".

> Practitioner, France

The second core dimension, 'Struggle and resistance' is the necessary counterweight to suffering and despair. People in poverty participating in the research were survivors, a product of struggle and resistance that enabled them to accommodate to, if not to overcome, the pain of poverty. Struggle is necessary every day, whereas resistance is a positive response that is possible at certain times. Both aspects address not only the practical challenges created by poverty but the need the achieve 'an inner balance' that enables people to cope emotionally. Struggle entails the development and application of survival skills, skills that might be termed 'managerial' and 'executive' within a work environment: resource generation, financial or people management and leadership. In a poverty environment, people: do it themselves; make do; double up; re-purpose, find out; lend; borrow; pay back and much more.

Where possible, people in poverty tend to share what little they have. This can exacerbate personal shortages but may contribute to a sense of agency and well-being as well as

potentially yielding benefits through reciprocity when things get even worse. It can also engender a collective sense of togetherness that acts as an antidote to the social isolation that can result from processes of social exclusion. Sometimes, this togetherness becomes a form of collective resistance: street cleaning, small group farming or even simply the planning of social gatherings to mark cultural events.

> "Sometimes I feel sad, I don't know where my next meal is going to come from, but when I think about my children, I gain energy, strength to find food for them. I hope that when they grow up, they will get out of this poverty".

> Person in poverty, Tanzania

> "If the state takes your child away because of poverty, what is left behind is immense suffering. The action is recognised, but not the suffering, nor what we do to continue, to overcome and to work together. These are two sides of the same coin".

> Person in poverty, UK

Disempowerment, the third core dimension, is experienced as a lack of control over most aspects of life. Events and circumstances constrain options and choices and people often find themselves responding to choices and instructions made by others, typically by people with authority over them. The result is sometimes a sense of helplessness as if like a boat tossed on tempestuous seas; on other occasions it is the loss of dignity, even the feeling of being no longer human, that comes from the forced dependency on others. Lack of control engenders fear derived from uncertainty and creates a lasting sense of insecurity and inadequacy. Repeated unsuccessful attempts to take control can lead to a sense of impotence and futility, even an unwillingness to fight any longer. Having frequently been made voiceless, there is the risk of choosing to be voiceless, bringing with it a collapse in confidence and a sense of worthlessness. In seeking to engage in the research people in poverty, it was necessary to address these feelings and to reimport belief in the value of their ideas and in the possibility that they could help to effect change.

> "Poor people are powerless in society. They cannot raise their voice because they know nobody listens to them. Rich people control everything".

> Practitioner, Bangladesh

> "Poverty feels like a tangled web that you can never escape".

> Person in poverty, UK

The second three dimensions are all explicitly relational and implicate much of society in contributing to the negative experience of poverty. **Institutional maltreatment** refers to the common failure of public and private institutions to respond appropriately to the circumstances, needs and aspirations of people in poverty. This includes the limited voice allowed in decisions made by government or in civil society, a lack of access to law and justice, and a failure to listen that mirrors the sense of powerlessness felt by people living in poverty. Institutions frame public discourse about poverty and often reflect and amplify discriminatory attitudes instead of confronting them. They frequently fail to tackle poverty, to prioritise the needs of people in poverty or to adequately fund initiatives to alleviate poverty. Instead, people experiencing poverty are often treated without respect or as second-class citizens, feel heavily stigmatised, receive substandard provision and suffer the consequences of persistent corruption. Frequently unable to access services as a right, they are subject instead to interrogation, conditionality, judgement and sanction with the result that support services become institutions associated with fear and punishment.

"A person in poverty might even have a school to go to, but the question is: what quality of teaching are you going to get? The problem goes beyond families in poverty being unable to access schools. Government and wider society don't give them opportunities. They fail to offer quality services or show a sincere desire to help them escape from poverty".

Academic, Bolivia

"People no longer dare to go to the town hall because they are not well-received, they no longer want to go there to process administrative formalities".

Practitioners, France

Social maltreatment is the informal counterpart of institutional maltreatment and simultaneously a consequence and a cause of it. It refers to the way in which people in poverty are typically treated within and by the community. Most often the public views people in poverty judgementally, readily willing to blame and stigmatise a group perceived to be a threat and/or a financial liability. The process of othering is commonplace in which people in poverty are thought to be different in kind and socially inferior, engaging in disreputable behaviour either as a cause or a result of their poverty. Social maltreatment is not confined to distant acquaintances but can occur within families when relatives experiencing poverty are shunned, on the presumption that will ask for money or else bring the family into disrepute. It happens in the school playground as children sort themselves into affluence groups, repeat stereotypes heard from parents and engage in bullying their peers, often those who are least affluent.

"Here in the US, who you are is defined by what you have. When you have not much, you are not much. And then you are not treated like you belong".

Person in poverty, US

"There is discrimination because we haven't got any money; we're not well-dressed; we haven't studied; we're not professionals; we don't speak properly".

Person in poverty, Bolivia

Unrecognised contributions, the failure to recognise the contributions made by people in poverty could be seen as an aspect of either social or institutional maltreatment. However, participants argued fiercely that it was an independent dimension characterising poverty, one that acknowledged a positive in the lives of people in poverty that was characteristically denied or ignored. People in poverty survive through their resourcefulness using initiative and skills acquired through their struggle to subsist. They often successively perform roles as parents and relatives and have social lives albeit constrained by lack of resources. Their lack of resources is usually not for lack of work but for lack of accredited skills that might enable them to secure well remunerated employment. They often occupy jobs unwanted by others at wages that effectively subsidise consumption by the more affluent. All these multiple contributions typically go unrecognised or are treated with indifference by society, indifference that can cause people in poverty to underestimate their own ability and skills.

"The skills that are learned from experience by people living in poverty are not valued or considered marketable. In the economic sphere, people in poverty are considered and treated as disposable, and this creates uncertainty and instability in their lives".

Research team report, US

"A farmer cultivates paddy and others crops for our country. If he didn't, then rich people would not get food easily. The hard work of farmers is a very important contribution for our country; yet we never give much respect to the farmer for his work".

Practitioner, Bangladesh

The final three dimensions refer to a lack of resources; monetary, material, cultural and social. 'Lack of decent work', 'insufficient and insecure income' and '**material and social deprivation'** are more familiar in scholarly and policy debates and touched on in some of the metrics already in use. Social deprivation embraces lack of access to affordable and quality health care and education included in the MPI but adds a range of other infrastructure resources including transport. Material deprivation encompasses lack of sufficient, nutritious food, basic utilities such as clean water and reliable energy supplies. These utilities together with quality housing with good sanitation could provide for the security and privacy that is so often denied people in poverty.

While **'insufficient and insecure income'**, less than necessary to meet basic needs and social obligations, was seldom the first dimension to be identified, agreed and discussed, participants nevertheless recognised its importance. Low income not only led to unmet need, hunger and ill-health, it drove indebtedness, often simply to cover basic needs, that in turn increased insecurity, created dependences and exposed people to exploitation. It could also mean children missing school to add to family incomes with long term and potentially intergenerational consequences. It was agreed that insecure income was also deeply problematic, preventing meaningful financial planning and systematic saving and encouraging 'hand to mouth' spending, spending money as it became available.

'Lack of decent work' refers to the prevalent experience of being denied access to work needed to provide the necessary resources to survive and provide for one's the recognition. Poverty is often characterised by unregulated, casual or self-employment that is often undignified and sometimes dangerous. People are vulnerable to exploitation of many forms, failure to pay wages, dismissal without warning or explanation, sexual and physical abuse. Often people have to travel long distance in search of, or for work, with migration and living away from home bringing additional hardships.

In sum, the research identified a total of nine dimensions recognised as meaningful in all six countries.

Modifying factors

Perhaps because most of the attention paid to the dimensionality of poverty has been in the context of measurement, there has been little prior discussion as to how the dimensions find their expression. Starting from the perspective of lived experience, it became evident that undeniably the same dimensions differed subtly in specific contexts. As mentioned already, **five broad factors seemed to modify the expression of dimensions**. These are now briefly considered.

Identity proved to be very important, especially identities that attract discrimination and stigma: for example, race, ethnicity, migration status, gender and sexual orientation. People in poverty are often subject to discrimination on grounds of their lack of income; there is much truth in the epithet that a service received by people in poverty is a poor service and this is partly due to discrimination. When a person in poverty is identified with another stigmatised groups the stigma is cumulative, the phenomenon of intersectionality. In New York, an African American who is poor will face discrimination on the grounds of both race and poverty; they

are likely to be treated late in the welfare queue, a manifestation of administrative maltreatment and also to encounter social maltreatment within their own African-American community.

Location is another modifying influence justifying the decision to conduct the research in both urban and rural areas, although it is important to reiterate that the same dimensions were expressed in all six countries, despite the cultural influences which are identified as a further modifier. Two scenarios from Tanzania illustrate the complex interrelationships. In urban areas, violence against women, both within intimate relationships and beyond, is prevalent but disproportionately affects women in poverty. Living in or near violent neighbourhoods and needing to travel for work in antisocial hours, low income women are at risk of assault. Within intimate relationships, money shortages and the low status of males are known triggers of violence while poverty means that women are more financially dependent with fewer routes of escape. In rural areas, violence is much less prevalent, but women are more susceptible and less able to resist early and forced marriages, often forms of income generation for extended families. In both kinds of location women are more prone to social abuse arising from assumptions about the worthlessness of people in poverty and both exacerbated by the powerlessness stemming from adequate individual resources.

The example from rural Tanzania also illustrates how **cultural beliefs** can shape the experience of poverty and the expression of particular dimensions. Culture, of course, defines many of the social expectations that define the opportunity sets and financial demands that people experiencing poverty need to negotiate. They define those expected to undertake paid work and who should engage in unpaid labour; who should receive assistance and in which circumstances and who should not. They determine the volume of public expenditure and the priorities that influence how much is spent on poverty prevention and poverty alleviation. Such resource allocation decisions are, in turn, shaped by presumptions about the causes of poverty and the role of government in addressing it. In France, for example, governments have long accepted the importance of structural determinants of poverty and sought, nominally at least, to need to construct support systems to protect those affected. The regime in the USA is very different affecting the nature and levels of suffering, disempowerment and institutional maltreatments:

> "America takes pride in describing itself as a land of opportunities where anyone, regardless of their socio-economic status, can pull themselves up by their bootstraps and achieve upward mobility. People are judged by the extent to which they have achieved the American Dream based on their material possessions and the ability to provide a better life for their children. These cultural assumptions foster a sense of failure and inadequacy for the more than 40 million Americans who live in poverty and are striving to better their families' lives without seeing results, most often for reasons out of their control."

> US research team report 2019

The timing and duration of poverty also nuance the expression of poverty dimensions. Research with elders was undertaken only in Tanzania with very little difference in the dimensions identified but elders felt the lack of respect even more sorely given their lifetime contributions. Similarly, they felt their growing dependence on others more acutely than others, while the presumed inevitability of dying in poverty tended to lessen their commitment to struggling on, adding to their suffering. Exploratory research in Tanzania and Bangladesh suggested that there may be two child-specific dimensions to add to the other nine that were still in evidence. One related to fear of danger or abuse in the absence of protective care from family members who live elsewhere or are busy working. The other is the painful experience

of sacrificing personal goals to meet the family's immediate needs, accompanied by extreme anxiety about one's future prospects.

A final influence was **'environment and environmental policy**' including factors such as resource degradation, manifestations of climate change and the effects of pollution to which people living in poverty are often more exposed and less able to resist or avoid. In some rural areas, these factors were making traditional livelihoods riskier and income streams less dependable, adding to financial stress and struggle, while in urban areas especially, pollution was having a direct impact on health and suffering. Policy neglect of these issues might serve as examples of institutional abuse, given that their personal and social costs with were disproportionately borne by people in poverty, the suspicion being that would have been policy would have been more responsive had more affluent groups been more affected.

First comments from experts on this participatory research

On 10 May 2019, the research was presented at the OECD in Paris by a delegation of 35 co-researchers to 350 attendees. Here are two comments from experts:

"For too long, discussion about poverty has been characterised by a gulf in how poverty is measured and analysed in poor and rich countries alike. The conventional metrics that are used to measure extreme poverty, based on the $1.9 per day threshold, tell us that extreme poverty has long been eradicated in most OECD countries … This conclusion is at odds with what people with direct experience of poverty report about their lives and it reflects the inadequacy of these metrics. Now, for the first time, the ATD – Oxford University research places a bridge across this gulf in the measurement approaches between rich and poor countries … allowing us to see poverty through a single perspective … At the OECD we will work hard to develop additional measures that capture the most intangible and pernicious dimensions of poverty such as disempowerment and stigma."

Angel Gurria, Secretary General of the OECD

"In Nature, one of the two leading scientific journals in the world, an editorial titled a few weeks ago: "The best research is when scientists co-elaborate the research with the communities involved." But unfortunately we don't have enough examples of what is now called participatory science or citizen science, such as this study by ATD Fourth World with Oxford University ... What really struck me in this study is that a number of things you say converge with some of the most groundbreaking advances in global science. For example, with their own tools, the most experienced and famous neurobiologists are bringing to the fore the emphasis on emotions that is at the heart of the project you have presented. We will propose in the Global Report on Sustainable Development to curb the dynamics of the global scientific community to do more of what is called sustainability science. In other words, a science that emerges from the problems encountered by people on the ground to mobilize each other's knowledge, scientific knowledge but also the other forms of knowledge, in particular the one related to the living experiences of the most vulnerable, needed to move forward and find solutions. »

Jean-Paul Moatti, Member of the United Nations Global Sustainable Development Report Expert Group

The process and finding of the research will be presented in March 2020 at an international conference in Washington, convened by the IMF and other partners. The aim of the conference will be to establish a dialogue between co-researchers and participants in order to discuss how to move forward in the areas of measurement, policy and action.

Acknowledgements:

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