policy and practice

The hidden dimensions of poverty: reflections on NGO/academic partnership[1]

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Introduction by Fran Bennett

ATD Fourth World is a human rights based international anti-poverty organisation working in partnership with those who experience long-term poverty. Recently, it worked with Oxford University to conduct research in six countries, including the UK, into the dimensions of poverty. The research employed an approach pioneered by ATD Fourth World known as 'the merging of knowledge'. This usually involves initial discussion meetings of different peer groups with an engagement with poverty, made up of people with lived experience, academics and researchers who investigate it, and professionals and practitioners working with those affected. The methods used and the support provided aim to enable those with a background of poverty to take part as equal partners. The 'merging' of knowledge takes place when members of these peer groups subsequently co-construct a shared understanding based on inputs from those discussions.

The research report resulting from this project was launched at the OECD in May 2019. It found that, across all six countries (in the global north and south), three dimensions make up the core experience of poverty: disempowerment; suffering in body, mind and heart; and struggle and resistance. Insufficient resources – including a lack of decent work, inadequate and insecure income, and material and social deprivation – prevent people from living with dignity. But relational dynamics were also found to shape the experience of poverty profoundly, including mistreatment by institutions and society, and a lack of recognition of the contributions made to society by people living in poverty. A range of factors affect the experience of poverty, including the environment someone lives in, their identity and location, the timing and duration of poverty, and cultural beliefs within the society in which they live.

Findings from participatory work using the 'merging of knowledge' approach have been used in the past to develop initiatives in different countries. The follow-up from the recent research was unfortunately affected by the pandemic; but it has already resulted in presentations in over 20 countries, and academic articles,[2] as well as various forms of action. Most importantly perhaps, those who took part themselves have built on that experience in other contexts. In addition, the French statistical agency is

developing a measure of mistreatment by institutions, which the research found was often central to the experience of poverty, as part of a national survey. In the USA, the findings have been used in training on the conditions required in order to ensure the equitable participation of the most excluded populations in the development, implementation and evaluation of policies that affect them. In the UK, issues identified by the research – in particular, institutional mistreatment and stigma, judgement and blame – have been incorporated into the training given to social work students by people with lived experience of poverty. In addition, ATD Fourth World is currently working with the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights on a two-year project to design a 'poverty impact assessment' tool to analyse policies based on the outcomes of the research.

An international team coordinated the research across all six countries. The discussion, conducted in January 2021, was intended to focus on the partnership between an international NGO (ATD Fourth World) and an academic institution (Oxford University).

Discussion between **Fran Bennett** (**F**), long-term supporter of ATD Fourth World (facilitating); **Xavier Godinot** (**X**) (ATD Fourth World, International Coordination Team (ICT) member), **Marianne de Laat** (**M**) (ATD Fourth World, ICT member, and national research team, France), **Robert Walker** (**R**) (then Oxford University, ICT member).

Rachel Bray (Oxford University) and Alberto Ugarte (ATD Fourth World) were not able to take part in the discussion, but were both also members of the ICT.

F: We want to look today at three areas of the collaboration between ATD Fourth World and Oxford University. You've said you decided to work together for various reasons. For ATD Fourth World, working with Oxford University perhaps brought academic credibility and scientific rigour to the research; and for Oxford University, ATD Fourth World had an international network and existing relationships with the international institutions responsible for poverty measurement. So first I want to explore what you thought about the added value of working together, and any possible difficulties. The second question is how this worked out in practice. And then finally the outcomes and the impact, in relation to both the research process and the findings.

Working together – in principle

F: Marianne, I wanted to ask how you saw this collaboration in the ICT.

M: Yes… with the merging of knowledge approach we find ourselves in an area of radical epistemologies. These have as their goal the construction of new knowledge, but also the fight against inequalities, the fight against epistemic injustice – the fact that some people are excluded from the production of knowledge. This has been the case for a long time for women, or minorities – or excluded people, such as those living in poverty. And to allow these people to participate in producing knowledge, I think we need to work together – academics and NGOs that bring them together and enable them to deliver their knowledge, and their own framework of interpretation. So the academics have to ensure the research is done in a scientific way – for example, they have to ensure the NGOs do not confuse research with advocacy. But I think ATD

Fourth World's strength was that we could gather people living in poverty together. And we went a long way with them before they participated, because it's not possible to just take people on the street and say, 'come and participate with us in this research'.

F: So one issue that raises is whether the primary aim was to contribute to policymaking, or was it a way of gathering knowledge about poverty and enhancing understanding of it?

X: Well, I think a second step was to use the research as a tool for advocacy. But the main goal was to build knowledge on poverty with people living in poverty, academics and practitioners. And we didn't come up with policy recommendations at all; we didn't have time.

F: And what added value did you think it would bring to have ATD Fourth World and Oxford University working together? And also, did you anticipate any difficulties?

X: Well, one added value for us was that, when you work with big institutions like the OECD or the World Bank, if you are not associated with a big university such as Oxford you don't have much power or weight. I discovered the World Bank doesn't give much credence to NGOs; it gives much more to academics. So if you are not working with academics, you won't be listened to, it's very simple.

F: And did you anticipate any difficulties in doing that?

X: It's never easy when we come from different backgrounds and have different training. It was a very challenging project for each of us. And this is a lesson we can draw: when you go on such a journey, you are compelled to change. You need constantly to make compromises – but without losing what's important for you. And it was important to have the contribution of people living in poverty *and* something that could be considered as scientific. And that, in my view, was what could give weight to our project.

F: Robert, did you know what it would be like to work with ATD?

R: No, I had no idea. And the reason we got involved was… I think three reasons really, four maybe. One was the consistency of perspective of ATD Fourth World in the context of our own work on poverty and shame. So we were talking about the same thing in the same sort of way, and that was fundamentally important. Second, one couldn't help but be impressed by the integrity of the organisation. Third was about people themselves – they may have strong views, and we may all be fairly inflexible; but ultimately we swap our roles and come together, and that was evident right at the beginning. And then there was a pragmatic consideration. ATD Fourth World has fingerprints on the ground; it understands the nature of poverty in a range of different cultures. We were wanting to have a big impact on the way the globe thinks about poverty, and therefore we needed it to be international. ATD also had credibility within the United Nations, and Xavier was making connections too with the World Bank.

Did I understand the nature of the relationships and encounters we were going to have? No way! Do I regret it? No way. I have really close friends as a result. And I agree partly about the whole process being transformative… I think I do think in a different way than I did when I began the process.

But I think the compromise is costly. I think coming together makes it very, very difficult to hold on to the foundations of our different perspectives.

And so I think the merging of knowledge is a tool which has great strengths in bringing people together in terms of making people think, in terms of transformation. In the way it evolved in ATD Fourth World, I think it was in a sense about reaching understandings and decisions; but that's not necessarily research. And the experiment from our (academics') point of view was to see to what extent the merging of knowledge could be a strong research method. And thereby is a tension; and it's a tension we resolved through compromise, and we came to the end, and we have knowledge which we all have faith in. But whether it's good research is an open question! Whether it's influential research… I'm convinced it is.

F: I wonder if the merging of knowledge is deliberation, rather than research?

M: Good question! I'm not sure if you take ten researchers and ask them 'what is good research?' they will respond with the same thing. I think with the merging of knowledge we are very close to very participative research. So it was important for me that there were two academics in our team – because no one academic alone can have the truth. And it was the same for Xavier and me; it's very important to have at least two people coming from NGOs, and two from an academic world, because then you see that there are different schools of thought. I still think the merging of knowledge can be a tool for good research.

X: And I think we didn't just put together different opinions, as deliberative methods do. If you come back to what Amartya Sen said about objectivity and transpositional objectivity… When you are working with people in poverty, you are building towards positional objectivity on their circumstances. And then when you put together the collective positions of people in poverty, academics and practitioners, you come up with transpositional objectivity. But it's not just deliberation about opinions; it's much more solid, because there has been the collective work.

R: Well, this is almost an ontological question – what knowledge is, and whether we can meaningfully distinguish between opinion and knowledge and fact. I agree with Xavier's notion of people coming together and getting a position. He presented it in terms of people in poverty, and that's a priority, I think, for ATD – to give voice to that perspective, which is very largely ignored. But as I wanted to see the process, it was to bring together all perspectives, to get a rounded understanding of the experience of poverty. And I think we were trying to get people to talk about their experience – which is as close to fact as they get; but it's clearly moderated through opinion, or words and reflection, which takes you away from direct experience. So in that sense, it's not just 'I think this', it's 'I understand this because…'. And we were trying to track why they understand the world in the way it is, and to refine that by challenge: 'is that really what you think?' So it's not deliberative in that sense. There is a connection; but what is brought in are 'facts' from the groups with their different perspectives. So each group is experiencing their own facts, plus the facts of those people they have been talking to.

M: Yes, I think it's refining knowledge together, but coming from different perspectives, and challenging one another; explaining why you think what you think, then making others think about what you said. So it's not merging of learning, knowledge, with each one defending what he's thinking and saying; but it's inviting everyone to question their own vision in the light of what the other is bringing to the discussion – and so construct together a common understanding, co-construction of knowledge.

Working together: in practice

F: I was going on to the process of working together – partly in the international coordination team, but also between that team and the national teams in the six countries.

M: Maybe first about the national level. The research teams in the different countries were composed of people who had experienced poverty, practitioners and academic researchers. So, for each sub-group to build their knowledge, they organised peer groups for each of these. And then they merged their knowledge… but that was not always easy in the national teams. In some countries, it was difficult to find academic researchers in post who were willing to participate; or in other countries, cultural habits make it difficult to exchange on an equal basis between different groups. Or sometimes practitioners took too much… space. So there were in the different countries a lot of challenges – and so, as an international coordination team, we tried to look with every country at how to do things in the best way.

And similar challenges arose during the international meetings, with some added complexity, because we spoke five different languages: English, Spanish, French, Swahili and Bengali. And we also came from very different cultures, between countries of the south and countries of the north, but also between, for example, the individualistic approach of the United States (yes, you can!) and the more human rights approach of France, for example.

So all those things were in play when we came together. And it was a real challenge to realise an exchange in which everyone could contribute, and bring their knowledge, in such a way that everyone at the end could also recognise themselves in the results. So we had to invent a way of doing things…

Working together: outcomes and impacts

F: So first, in terms of outcomes, what was learned from the process of the research?

X: I remember Rachel introduced the idea of a 'multiplier effect'. She thought those involved in the research felt the benefits they received from it, and wanted to replicate it with others.

R: That's my understanding, too. One is emotionally as well as intellectually engaged; and that has consequences for people in that process and them wanting to take it forward.

M: I just want to add that also all the partners – participants – have ownership of the results. I think people living in poverty and the practitioners in the research teams know the findings, can talk about them, and can defend them; I think this is really a result of the process.

R: The freedom the national research teams had to do things their own way is a challenge. If we have a model that the real world is so strong that it reaches you, however you seek to find it, we can be confident our results are solid and comparable. If, however, you believe what we found out is a function of how we go about it, I think we have a problem – that our work isn't comparable, in that traditional, scientific way. And I think we just have to, broadly speaking, live with that. But it also raises a question of what role do you play as an international coordination team. We played it as if it was bottom up, because of who's on the ground understanding the problem, it's not us, it's the national teams and the participants. And so we decided there was no way we were going to be prescriptive. We were asking our national teams: what are you going to do? if you do that, what are the consequences? and getting people to try to think it through. But there was a coordination function, both at the beginning, about: what is it we want to achieve? And at the end, where we thought collectively, internationally, together, in terms of holding together the ideas, and thinking how they relate, and feeding them back.

X: Yes, there was a constant tension. Because if we gave complete autonomy to each team, there would be nothing in common. And if we imposed guidelines, there would be no autonomy. So we had to juggle with autonomy and guidelines, and this was a constant challenge for all teams, and we had to adapt to every team.

F: I want to finish by talking about the possible impact of the findings and what is done with them. This research wasn't commissioned by an international institution – in fact, it may be a challenge to the way international institutions have measured poverty, and (possibly) thought about poverty. So is this being marketed to the policy community, which did not initiate it?

X: First of all, we set up at the very beginning an international advisory board, with people from the World Bank, the OECD, big universities, the French Development Agency… And this was really important because, at the end of the process, the OECD representative agreed to welcome the report at the final meeting at the OECD in Paris; and the secretary general, Angel Gurria, said it was wonderful. So we got the results recognised by the OECD – and we are trying to do the same with the World Bank and other bodies.

R: I think it's probably wrong to think about the policymaking process as us and them, us and the big agencies, as if we're in opposition. Clearly, each international body has its own concerns and pressures and politics. But I think, broadly speaking, anybody working in those organisations is committed to doing something about poverty. And so the door isn't locked; but we have to push it open. I think involving the advisory group – though it was difficult to keep them involved – meant we had doors that were ajar. Now, we know the policymaking process is incredibly complex, long-term, personality driven and politics constrained. But we had a reception from the OECD which was incredibly positive.

The challenge is to keep up the momentum – and COVID doesn't help. The World Bank and the IMF held a door open for us, until COVID burst upon us. Whether we can maintain that interest is a challenge, and where we need the power of ATD Fourth World in cooperation with, say, the OECD, and indeed other NGOs around the world, to push this forward.

We have to think about whether the greater complexity of our research opens up a new paradigm. I think we have embedded within our concept of poverty individual agency; and we've added a real understanding of the relational nature of poverty, the extent to which individuals and society are connected, and that we as a society contribute directly to the experience of poverty – that in broad terms we make it a lot worse on a day to day basis. But we have the notion of positive elements of poverty as well, which is nowhere really on the agenda, or in discourse. And so I think it is possible to think about it as a new paradigm.

F: Do you think the research is more useful to thinking about policy, or measuring poverty?

X: Well, poverty is often approached in simplistic ways, like the $1 a day World Bank measure. We introduce more complexity. And I would like big organisations and national statistics offices to have more complexity in their measurement. And now the French statistics office, INSEE, has agreed to try and measure institutional maltreatment. So they created a questionnaire which was submitted to us, and we came up with comments, and most were taken on board. So this is one way to introduce more complexity in the measurement of poverty. It will not change the fate of the world; but it's still better than before.

M: They not only took on board one of our dimensions; second, they recognised us as a partner of interest. And we succeed in mobilising people. I think that's also important to say: with research, you can mobilise the people who worked with that to think about next steps.

R: We're talking about adding complexity, which is the last thing policymakers want to hear. They want simplicity and simple solutions; but the world is complex… It doesn't worry me that policymakers pick up one or two of our dimensions, they add them in. And I do think measurement's important. You know, it's one of the tools; it's part of the language of the policymaking process, and adds a certain credibility.

But I agree with you too about the notion of the policy template. These are dimensions we could think about in a mainstreaming poverty sort of way – whenever we're implementing policy, let's think about these dimensions, let's think perhaps about how our policy ideas are going to affect each of them. And I think that can work at many levels – it's as relevant for practitioners such as social workers as it is for somebody in the Department of Finance.

We have a proposal connected with the planned meeting at the IMF and the World Bank, which I would like to see resurrected, which is about thinking about some basis for developing that template, to think about the questions we could add on each dimension. And maybe even think about different tools for different parts of the policymaking process.

But I think all of us would also say the process is important in terms of transforming people and institutions. And some things Rachel has said – in terms of adding credibility, or bringing people who really know what it's like into the decision making arena – are powerful in themselves. Marianne has talked about the notion of this broad ownership of the findings… irrespective of their scientific validity, they take on a life of their own – which I don't think is problematic, I think it's an important part of the policymaking process. After all, research is one small part of, if you like, information or knowledge that's used in the policymaking process; the more credible we can present it as, then perhaps the more influential it will be.

I would add Rachel's other point – that this is part of a set of participative research approaches, with its own unique characteristics – and to think about it that way. We set out to test it as a research method, even piloting it with young people, as well as to devise meaningful scientific conclusions. I wouldn't want to forget that part of our process.

Notes

[1] Fran Bennett is an Associate Fellow of the Department of Social Policy and Intervention, University of Oxford: fran.bennett@spi.ox.ac.uk. Discussion transcribed by Jo Porter (joporter@west-kirby.co.uk); transcript edited by Fran Bennett. This shortened version initially appeared in French in the journal of ATD Fourth World, *Revue Quart Monde 258* (June 2021), Editions Quart Monde, Montreuil: https://www.revue-quartmonde.org/10299. The full discussion is available at https://www.atd-fourthworld.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2021/03/Hidden-Dimensions-of-Poverty-Discussion-Feb-2021.pdf, and the research report at https://www.atd-quartmonde.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Hidden-Dimensions-of-Poverty-20-11-2019.pdf.

[2] For example, see Bray, R., De Laat, M., Godinot, X., Ugarte, A. and Walker, R. (2020) 'Realising poverty in all its dimensions: a six-country participatory study', *World Development Review* 134: 1–10.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.