

# How Poverty Separates Parents and Children:

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## A CHALLENGE TO HUMAN RIGHTS



A study by ATD Fourth World

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With forewords  
by the United Nations and UNICEF

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The Burkina Faso photo shows a reading workshop that takes place each time ATD Fourth World accompanies children living in the streets on visits to their families.

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Cover photo: © ATD Fourth World - Guatemala City – Guatemala - 2003

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## **A Preface by the United Nations**

This document is a journey.

A journey to six countries around the world: Guatemala, Haiti, Burkina Faso, the Philippines, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

A journey into the lives of some of the very poorest families in these countries.

A journey that, despite the diversity among these countries, brings us back each time to the same hope of very poor parents and children to be able to live together, despite all the forces that combine to separate them.

A journey that brings us back each time to the strength and protection family members can offer one another in the face of destitution.

Many things can be learned from this document, but foremost among them is perhaps the realization of how many hidden efforts parents and children in extreme poverty make in order to stay together.

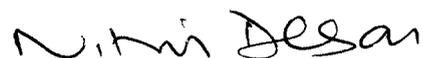
In efforts to protect their children, very poor parents continually find themselves faced with unfair and inhuman choices in their daily life. These same choices can be so misunderstood that they lead society to condemn the parents. In one country, for example, a mother must leave her children alone and unsupervised while she works very long days to ensure that the family will not go hungry. And yet, she knows the dangers her children face because two of her children have already been killed in violent incidents in the street.

What do human rights mean when very poor parents around the world face similar choices between things that are not optional but vital to their children's well-being?

This journey to different parts of the world and to the misery people face leads us to a question. If this determination of parents and children in extreme poverty to live together is so strong, what would happen if we dared put this aspiration at the heart of our anti-poverty policies?

What if this aspiration enabled us to create links among the many policies that can be so hard to harmonize at international, local and national levels? What if this aspiration brought together economic policies and human rights policies, employment policies and access to culture?

What if building on the aspiration of parents and children to live together enabled us once and for all to put an end to extreme poverty?



Nitin Desai  
Under-Secretary-General  
United Nations

March 2004

## A Foreword by UNICEF

This study documents heart-breaking choices that very poor families, in a variety of countries and societies, are forced to make, because they are not supported with resources they need to stay together, whether these be material resources or psychological support. Current pressures of urbanization and globalization are weakening extended family ties. At the same time, an age-old distrust of very poor parents leads to policies and practices separating family members from one another.

All too often, traditional approaches remove children from destitute situations "for their own good." This study demonstrates that this is not what the children want, nor is it in their best interest, if enforced on a long-term basis. The Convention on the Rights of the Child and other national and international policies for children highlight and uphold the primary importance of families—and parents in particular—in protecting and fulfilling the rights of their children, including the right to have a voice in decisions affecting their lives. Yet, too often, the stresses of extreme poverty act to break up families, robbing both parents and children of their dignity, their basic rights and hopes for a decent future.

Poverty can be reduced, and even eradicated, when policies, practices and resources focus on children and their best interests. In most cases, children, including those living on their own in the streets, can be supported most effectively by empowering their parents and families. As this study shows, with knowledge and resources, children and their families can become partners in combating the poverty which so limits their choices.

The research in this study is grounded in ATD-Fourth World's practical, on-the-ground experiences, accumulated over decades of working hand-in-hand with the poorest of the poor. In some countries, the research also points toward appropriate steps that can begin to remedy this crisis of family breakdown, by providing parents and children the tools they need to stay together. To be effective, it is essential that policy makers and program implementers develop such strategies in close collaboration with those who know best their situation—the poor themselves.

The very poor are not voiceless; yet their voice too often falls on deaf ears, or is drowned out by prejudice. Too rarely do their would-be partners seek them out. True collaboration with the poorest embodies the very concept of dignity that is at the core of human rights, and which under girds the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Experiences around the world—those of UNICEF in more than 150 countries, and those of ATD Fourth World—have shown the capacity of communities to help themselves, when given the tools they need. It is important to show the very poor that others have confidence in them, and understand that they, like other parents around the world, want the best for their children. In doing so, policy makers help families and communities to become better equipped to face the challenge of leaving poverty behind, and thus contribute to raising the quality of life for the country as a whole. But the greatest benefit of taking measures to strengthen families' capacities to care for and respect their children, is that children themselves become happier and better prepared to engage in and contribute to society, as the first step in breaking the cycle of poverty.

For UNICEF, "How Poverty Separates Parents and Children" is an important study, raising our awareness of the many crushing obstacles poor families must overcome to stay together and create a decent future for their children. It reminds us all of our obligation to listen to and respect the opinions of the very poor, both children and their families. Finally, the study offers us a few glimmers of hope by presenting policies and practices which

have helped very poor families; for those readers privileged enough to be in position to influence such policies, this book is an invaluable resource.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kul C. Gautam', followed by a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Kul C. Gautam  
Deputy Executive Director  
United Nations Children's Fund  
(UNICEF)  
New York City

March 2004

## **A Foreword by the United Nations**

In most countries, family—whatever forms it may assume—stays at the crossroads of social and economic development, and poverty is one major factor which affects families and households in risk situations. Single-family households headed by women or families where the parents have low levels of schooling are often the most vulnerable. One can say that women bear a disproportionate burden, and children growing up in poverty are often permanently disadvantaged. Older people, people with disabilities, indigenous people, refugees and internally displaced persons are also particularly vulnerable to poverty.

The global struggle to eradicate poverty was joined at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995 and reinforced at the Millennium Summit in 2000. Heads of State and Government committed themselves to achieving ambitious targets to reduce poverty and misery in their many manifestations. At Copenhagen, poverty was understood in a broad context, including: lack of income and productive resources sufficient to ensure sustainable livelihoods; hunger and malnutrition; ill health; limited or lack of access to education and other basic services; increased morbidity and mortality from illness; homelessness and inadequate housing; unsafe environments; and social discrimination and exclusion. These physical manifestations are readily visible, but poverty is also characterized by a lack of participation in decision-making and in civil, social and cultural life. Poverty affects people unequally, but its consequences are always detrimental for human development and well-being.

Viewed theoretically, poverty is a complex multidimensional problem with origins in both national and international domains. It results from a lack of control over resources, including land, skills, knowledge, capital and social connections. Without those resources, people are easily neglected by policy makers and have limited access to institutions, markets, employment and public services. Thus, participants at the Social Summit realized that the eradication of poverty cannot be accomplished through anti-poverty programs alone but will require democratic participation and changes in economic structures in order to ensure access for all to resources, opportunities and public services, to undertake policies geared to more equitable distribution of wealth and income, to provide social protection for those who cannot support themselves, and to assist people confronted by unforeseen catastrophe, whether individual or collective, natural, social or technological.

Beyond the broad definitions and grand schemes for poverty eradication, there is the human face of poverty, the often overlooked and easily forgotten experiences of hundreds of millions of women, men and children all over the world. Poverty may destroy the integrity and functioning of the family, in terms of its ability to care for all its members, to contribute to social integration and to ensure healthy intergenerational relations. The poverty of one generation may be transmitted through families to the next generation, as parents are forced to send their children to work rather than school, denying them any opportunity to lead better lives. New threats, such as HIV/AIDS, create overwhelming burdens on family units and family networks, upsetting traditional family roles and relationships, including intergenerational relationships, and increasing poverty.

Despite these challenges, families all over the world remain the most vital force in the battle to eradicate poverty. Families are the providers of first resort and the providers of last resort. The mutual caring, sharing and nurturing that family members provide for one another are often the essential elements that allow people living in poverty to survive each and every day. The family, even while its individual members may not be living together, enjoys a sense of identity, responsibility and affiliation. The irony is that, often, the centrality of family has escaped the attention of policymakers. There has therefore been insufficient attention paid to the impact of policies on families, and insufficient regard for the contributions families make to the well being of their members. Policy makers are only beginning to realize that programs to eradicate poverty and to provide basic services must recognize and support the ongoing efforts that families already make. Policies must contribute to strengthening the support functions that families are already providing and

they must help families to cope with the challenges they individually and collectively face. The Division for Social Policy and Development promotes an approach which seeks to integrate a family perspective into policy making.

I wish to commend ATD Fourth World for its longstanding contributions to efforts to eradicate poverty by exposing its human face. Through its programs and activities, the organization reminds us that poverty is not simply a series of statistics or a vague concept for policy makers to discuss; poverty is the real-life, daily experience of hundreds of millions of fellow human beings. I would like to congratulate ATD Fourth World for undertaking this study on *How Poverty Separates Parents and Children*, and for bringing these personal experiences and stories to the attention of concerned citizens the world over.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Johan Schölvinnck', written over a horizontal line. The signature is cursive and somewhat stylized.

Johan Schölvinnck  
Director  
Division for Social Policy and Development  
United Nations

March 2004

## Executive Summary

No one wants children to suffer the harshness of life in poverty. This can drive some parents to entrust their children to an orphanage or to work in domestic service. It can lead some social workers to remove children from a home because their family is poor. There are times when these are the best options available: the children will be better fed and the parents may have the time to overcome a crisis and build a more stable home. Outcomes are far worse when children leave of their own accord and end up on their own in the streets. But even in the best of circumstances, what children themselves say time and again is that they know something irreplaceable has been lost when they leave their families and communities. Children in the custody of private institutions or the government are likely to find themselves in a system with scant resources that is seldom held accountable to the families they serve. We owe it to these children to innovate better solutions together.

Poverty is not the only factor separating parents and children. The phenomena explored in this study—that affect children living in the streets, in foster care, and in other difficult situations—are complex and will not be resolved by any single measure. Parents themselves often show unstinting resilience and courage on behalf of their children. But the enormous efforts necessary to keep a family together in the face of poverty also sap people's energies and hopes in ways that can delay and even sabotage their attempts to escape poverty.

Safeguarding parent-child relationships is a question of human rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms that it is in the overriding interest of children that they be brought up in their own families. It envisages separation as the last possible step after doing everything that can be done to support parents in their responsibilities.

Committing to defend the rights of children and families is only the first step. Implementing change requires training, planning, methodology and evaluation that is developed in partnership with children and families themselves. This begins with a focus on people as active participants in development. Priority must be given to support the efforts made by the very poorest people.

### The six countries profiled in this study

- In the situations examined in Guatemala, some very poor families lack community support. Too many children end up in the streets, with some of them in prostitution. Other children in formal structures find themselves marginalized by their extreme poverty, as when school administrators humiliate them for having lice and worn out clothing. Still other children find themselves in situations where they have access to drugs and become addicted. Meanwhile, parents live with the fear of their children being kidnapped for adoption. Faced with such overwhelming challenges, these parents make enormous efforts to protect their children as best they can.
- In Haiti, the situation of children in domestic service has recently been in the spotlight. It is important to look at all aspects of this issue. While the ideal situation would be for children's families to have sufficient means to raise them at home, until that goal can be achieved, it is important to distinguish between varying situations of domestic service. While some are highly exploitative of the child, in other situations, a child may simply be helping out neighbors who have the means to welcome her or him until the child's family has more food or the means to send the child to school. A network of three schools in the rural community of Fond-des-Nègres offers a practical model for ensuring the education of some of the poorest children—both those in domestic service and those at risk of going into domestic service.
- The chapters on the Philippines, the United States, and the United Kingdom, give complementary views of families whose children are in the custody of social services. Life and economic realities are very different on these three continents. The parents profiled in the Philippines chapter were more likely to voluntarily entrust their children to orphanages in hopes that they would thrive better in that environment than at

home. Although the institutional and legal frameworks vary in these countries, it is striking to notice the similarities among parents who are faced with a series of obstacles to overcome. Too often, the outcome is despair. A child in the United States blames her parents for not having been able to protect her from the child welfare system; a child in the Philippines runs away from an orphanage to find her parents. These are symptoms of institutions gone awry. And yet, there are also important ways in which institutions can strengthen children and families. The Child Welfare Organizing Project (in the U.S.) proposes an approach that enables parents to examine issues together and contribute to the analysis and planning of the child welfare system.

- The children living on city streets in Burkina Faso have often been going in circles. They suffer from the rootlessness inherent in their lives and the risks to their health and well-being that result from fending for themselves. Institutions designed for their benefit have helped to protect some, but they have also left many of these children disoriented, not knowing how they can grow up to participate in their community. Here, the work of the Courtyard of 100 Trades is an innovative model demonstrating how it is possible to reintegrate these children into the lives of their families and mostly rural communities.

## **Lessons learned**

Some approaches are ineffective. In Burkina Faso, for instance, opening institutional homes for children living in the streets can have unintended consequences, inciting some children to leave home, believing that their lives will be better in these institutions. Despite the sincere efforts of staff in these centers, many children's lives do not actually stabilize there. The existence of the centers keeps children hoping that a "perfect center" will exist one day. So each time a new center opens, they rush to move into it, quitting projects they have begun in other centers. This new infatuation usually wears off soon, but it can be too late for them to return to the previous project they had not completed. New private initiatives (usually funded by partners in industrialized countries) crop up continually, with no common public standards to measure their competence and effectiveness. Children find themselves buffeted from one experience to another, failing and growing disillusioned.

It is also ineffective to bring children too suddenly from city streets back to their home village without preparation. Some children left home in hopes of earning more money to help their families and are embarrassed to return empty-handed. Other children may have left following a conflict. A generation ago, extended families were better prepared to support their members through conflicts. Today, rapid changes in society have frayed extended families and led children to leave home at a younger age. When these children come home, parents do not know what their children have been through or what they have done to survive. They may suspect the worst and need time to trust their children again.

As this project in Burkina Faso continued, more positive lessons about effective approaches emerged.

- Children may return home successfully with the proper preparation. To make the decision to return home, children need time and the opportunity to accomplish something, such as beginning to learn a trade. Families also need time to prepare for their children's return. It is most effective to build a relationship with a family over time, even if the child does not initially plan to go home.
- Ambiguity surfaces when a child's future is discussed with parents. Parents who had been joyful to see their child would then say, "My child may stay with you if he wants." It is very difficult for a very poor family to imagine that they could offer more to their child than any social service organization, whether public or private, local or international. Focusing on the hidden strengths in the family and the community can make it possible for children to thrive at home after all.

### **A. Transparency and accountability**

Accountability to the families living in the worst forms of poverty means building a constructive dialogue with them to evaluate services regularly. This ensures that fewer children will slip through the cracks of a program and that the program will benefit an entire community, rather than just its most dynamic members. However, the poorest families are fragile. Their time is consumed by their survival efforts. They lack education and face stigma. For these reasons, it is not effective to report back to them simply by mailing out a newsletter or inviting them to a meeting. More individual relationships should be built by regularly visiting families for informal conversations. As trust is built over time, it will become possible to include them in meetings where others can hear their voices as well.

### **B. Local policy development benefits from looking beyond national boundaries**

There are specificities to every region, country and neighborhood. And yet children in institutions in Burkina Faso and the United States face a similar disorientation at being part of an artificial community. Policies should never be designed far from the communities they serve, nor imposed without regular evaluation with community members. However, we hope that sharing grassroots experiences across borders can help others learn from mistakes that have already been made, and can spark ideas that can be adapted to similar situations.

We live in a world where ideas and expertise emanating from industrialized countries are too often imposed on developing countries. Most industrialized countries remain pockmarked with social inequality and poverty, and have no monopoly on finding solutions to overcome poverty. It is important to recognize the wealth of innovation that exists in developing countries as well.

### **C. Empowering people through a long-term investment in capacity building**

We must:

- Build the capacities of those who work with the poor. These people, including professionals and volunteers, may have little or insufficient knowledge about families from backgrounds different from their own. This can put them at risk for making preconceived judgments about these families, or of seeing them as individuals in isolation from one another (rather than recognizing their family ties).
- Find creative ways to invest in capacity building with people living in poverty. Requiring the poor to be instructed in classes is not always effective, given both the lack of time available for people struggling to survive and the humiliations they face daily, which undermine their ability to benefit from a class. Successful capacity building should recognize the importance of an individual's family ties and use positive, creative methods. For instance, it works well to initiate discussions about a homeless child's return to his family by including the joyous component of storytelling that involves family and community members of all ages. Group discussions that give value to the contribution of each participant are invaluable for enabling people to place their personal experiences into a wider context and to shape a collective vision of how to improve the situation for the future.

### **D. Parents, children and communities as active participants**

All members of a family should have the opportunity to express themselves and play an active role in shaping their destiny. They depend for their well-being on one another and on their communities. The rights of one member of the family cannot be protected effectively without protecting the rights of the others.

- Children's voices matter. As soon as they are old enough, children should be encouraged to voice their feelings and opinions. Many children who live in poverty play an active role in helping their families survive and in fighting exclusion in their communities. They deserve as much support as possible to ensure that this role does

not hinder their health or access to quality education. Children living in institutions deserve protection from the risk of losing the support of their family and original neighborhood community. An artificial community is a challenging setting in which to shape one's own identity. Children who are not living in a community, such as children living in the streets, should nevertheless be considered as both individuals and members of the family and community they came from.

- Both mothers and fathers should be enabled to assume their family and community responsibilities. It is important to understand why some parents voluntarily entrust their children to others. This act, which is often viewed as abandonment, can be intended to protect one's child from hunger. Something that looks like a bad choice to an outsider may actually have been one of the better choices among the parents' limited options. For programs addressing child welfare, it is important to include in the budget an investment in getting to know the child's family, even if they have already been separated for several years, as in the case of children living in the streets. These parents should be considered partners in elaborating solutions to a crisis and developing the educational plan made for the child (preferably in a way that allows the parents to contribute directly to their child's education).
- The unintended consequences of giving priority to women. Programs designed to help women and ensure that families benefit from their proven trustworthiness, could be improved by designing and evaluating in collaboration with women who may have had negative experiences with social services. Understanding how a husband's exclusion from a program can have negative consequences for the whole family could lead to new improvements in the lives of women, men and their families.
- Extended family members can be invaluable resources that help hold a family together in times of crisis. Contributions made by extended family members to raising children in the face of poverty must be valued and reinforced. For example, they should have a clear legal status to the child and a role in planning the child's education.
- Respecting and involving communities. It is also vital for project coordinators to show respect for children's communities and culture, particularly in rural communities that do not feel valued. Geographic regions that have seen particularly large numbers of children leaving home should be targeted for economic, environmental and cultural investments that strengthen the traditional, local economy.
- Not overshadowing the role of neighbors. For family and community members to be active participants, rather than passive beneficiaries, some restraint is needed on the part of project directors. If all goods and services are provided by an outside organization, existing efforts of solidarity among neighbors living in poverty can pale in comparison, robbing the community of a source of pride.

#### **E. Making a personal commitment to building partnership**

*"As I see it, the lawyer's job is to create a sense of community with their client. Through my years of doing this work, I have had the opportunity to meet, and work with, many parents whose children are placed in foster care. I have come to know people with enormous strength, fortitude and determination. They face enormous obstacles; they fight through their pain; they struggle with their self-esteem; they sometimes give up; they sometimes go on to achieve their goals. [...] To create a society where people do not live in conditions that foster [child abuse and neglect], how can we help to marshal the political will [needed...] to invest social capital in improving conditions in the communities where most children in foster care come from, and [empowering] institutions in those communities? [...] Child welfare advocates need to think of themselves as anti-poverty advocates, and to think of radical reforms to the system."*

- Ms. Nanette Schorr, Bronx Legal Services, United States

Believing in each person and following through on that belief with a long-term commitment to support people's efforts is vital to overcoming poverty. Because this is unquantifiable, it is rarely mentioned in the context of development or child welfare. And

yet this is one of the most common issues addressed by both parents and children living in poverty: the weight of humiliation, the feeling of being mistrusted by the community, and the constant lack of self-esteem. All of these factors can drive people deeper into unemployment, addiction and homelessness, which contribute to the break-up of a family. Seeking out and highlighting the unseen efforts made by people who are among the least respected is a way to reinforce their endeavors and improve their chance of success.

This commitment requires courage and preparation as well. Even people from a very simple background who visit a shantytown are sometimes so shocked by the conditions that they make a donation and flee, instead of following through on their original hope of offering long-term support. Training and support can help people get past the shock of extreme destitution and join in a long-term partnership.

## **F. Creativity**

Families living in extreme poverty around the world are diverse and no single solution will work for all families, or even for all families in a given community. It is important to envision many different paths to a successful outcome. Enabling these families to be involved directly in the planning and evaluation of programs will lead to more creative solutions.

Families in crisis may need to ask for support from non-profit organizations or from government child welfare services. The fear people living in poverty face of losing custody of their children deters them from seeking preventative support that could avert a crisis altogether. Creative alternatives to orphanages and foster care should be explored, and funding should be invested in preventative services. New forms of educational intervention and child protection should be developed which will benefit the children and the whole family.

Fighting poverty is urgent and we should strive to make continual headway. But any program intending to reach people in extreme poverty must plan to invest over many years. Initial plans should leave ample room for these people to become partners who contribute their experiences and ideas. It is in the context of this long-term framework that originality can evolve and succeed.

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This study is a step toward showing what ATD Fourth World has learned from its own grassroots actions and from those of other NGOs. We learned about families' lives while working in partnership with them on cultural and educational projects that benefit their children. From our mistakes, from our accomplishments, and from reflecting together with these families, we learned what works best to support families' efforts to remain together.

The next step is to further our dialogue with the relevant policy makers to see how these lessons from grassroots actions can help improve policies affecting children and families in poverty.

As long as extreme poverty persists, there will be parents who feel they must entrust their children to others, children who end up in the streets, and child welfare systems that distrust parents' ability to raise their children. We must continue to invest in fighting poverty, in ensuring access to quality education for every child, and in creating social justice for all.



# Introduction



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*"My family has been on the street for three years now. The last place we had was not really a house and it flooded when it rained. The owners wanted it back and we were thrown into the streets again. I have three children who live with me. Two of my children died when they were little, one of pneumonia and one of malaria. I have given away two other daughters: Rita, who is nine, is working as a domestic servant, and my youngest I gave away to be adopted. I was afraid of what might happen if they grew up in the streets. Young girls are dragged away, just because they are poor. Police harass us for sleeping on the street. But what can we do? They come in the early hours, pile us into a truck, and send us to prison camps. They are worse than regular prisons. Our relatives can visit us less often than if we are in regular jail. And in those camps, they split up the families. A father and mother are not put together with their children. How can they do that? They split us up—it's like breaking a bird's nest. Don't they see that? All we have is our family. I can't read or write a word. But I understand that much—what they do to us is an injustice."*

— Anna, a mother in Southeast Asia

*"The child shall be registered immediately after birth and shall have the right from birth to a name, the right to acquire a nationality and, as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents. States Parties shall ensure the implementation of these rights in accordance with their national law and their obligations under the relevant international instruments in this field, in particular where the child would otherwise be stateless."*

— Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

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In countries and communities around the world, every year children are separated from their parents due to the extreme economic insecurity facing their family. These separations take many forms. They may be caused by the homelessness just described by Anna. They may involve parents who have no safe place to leave their children while they work, or children who leave home in hopes of earning money for their families. They may involve child welfare institutions.

### **Why is family separation an issue in the fight to overcome poverty?**

The separation of children from their parents is not limited to very poor families. But factors associated with extreme poverty regularly play a role in separating parents and children from one another. The definition of poverty includes more than measures of inadequate income. Poverty is a violation of human rights and touches all areas of human development, such as health, education, and the right to self-determination.

*"The lack of basic security means the absence of one or more of the factors that enable individuals and families to assume basic responsibilities and to enjoy fundamental rights. Such a situation may vary in extent, its consequences can vary in gravity, and may to a greater or lesser extent be irreversible. The lack of basic security leads to chronic poverty when it simultaneously affects several aspects of life, when it is prolonged and when it severely compromises people's chances of regaining their rights and of reassuming their responsibilities in the foreseeable future."<sup>1</sup>*

This degree of insecurity too often leads to family crises that separate family members from one another. The separation tends to rob the now isolated members of the family of their support network, their self-esteem, and their courage to struggle against poverty.

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<sup>1</sup> *Final Report on human rights and extreme poverty*, submitted by the Special Rapporteur, Leandro Despouy (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1996/13). This definition was formulated by Fr. Joseph Wresinski, and adopted by the Economic and Social Council of France, in the Report *"Grande pauvreté et précarité économique et sociale,"* February 1987. (Translation in English, *The Wresinski Report: Chronic Poverty and Lack of Basic Security*, published in 1994.) The late Fr. Wresinski founded the International Movement ATD Fourth World.

Safeguarding parent-child relationships can strengthen efforts to overcome poverty and empower the poor. While the world's governments have pledged to eradicate extreme poverty as the very first Millennium Development Goal, the means and methods to do so remain in short supply. When people living in extreme poverty are consulted, they consistently emphasize the overriding fragility and importance of their family ties. Protecting these relationships also protects the most basic framework on which families, communities and countries depend for survival, health care, education, work, and love.

### **The absolutes and the nuances of injustice**

The injustice of human rights violations lends itself to absolutes. Never again should any person be abused. Sexual violence must not be tolerated. Trafficking of human beings is unconscionable. These issues, which are linked to the vulnerability suffered by people in poverty and tend to separate families, deserve stronger international initiatives and commitments.

This study, however, will focus on issues that are less black and white and that are rarely examined in partnership with people living in extreme poverty. Some children living in the streets or working in domestic service may be there because of ill treatment by their own parents. Some children placed in care or offered for adoption by social service agencies need protection from abuse by their own parents. Protections from abuse, enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, are vital and must be vigorously defended. But the experience of ATD Fourth World and other NGOs show that in too many cases, there is scant evidence that children benefit by being removed from their parents' homes.

Part and parcel of being born into chronic poverty is being subject to disdain and mistrust. In very different parts of the world, society has a strong tendency to assume that very poor adults are unable to be loving and responsible parents, and that their children can only benefit by being removed from the family. Our experience shows, on the contrary, that children who have lost contact with their birth parents for reasons stemming from extreme poverty face a greatly heightened risk of emotional insecurity, educational failure, abuse and violence.

### **What children living in deep poverty say about family**

In 1999, on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ATD Fourth World brought children together for a Tabori International Children's Forum<sup>2</sup> at the United Nations in Geneva. Coming from 27 different countries, many of these children live in persistent poverty. They were free to speak about the issues they considered most important. Time and again, they spoke of how important their families are to them.<sup>3</sup>

*"I believe that I'm able to move forward – but my family has nothing. I often don't go to school because I have no bread to bring and no money to buy it. I have to work to help my family. A teacher sent me home from school one day because I wasn't going regularly. I was so sad, I thought that I'd never be able to go to school again. I want to go to school because, if I pass my exams, I will be able to work and help my family. My family's life will change then... I'm only 11 years old, but I have hope."*

— Raphael, from the Indian Ocean region

Investing in Raphael's well-being means investing in the well-being of his entire family.

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*"For me, family is the most important thing. Without our family, we cannot live; we cannot grow up. But a family cannot live without friendship [...] in the community. If there is no friendship, there is no life. Friendship makes you happy,*

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<sup>2</sup> The Tabori Children's Network links children living in poverty and children of other backgrounds. Together they build friendship and solidarity, and create awareness of poverty and human rights issues.

<sup>3</sup> A full report of this forum can be found in "Tabori Children Defend the Convention on the Rights of the Child," a report prepared by ATD Fourth World for the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children in May 2002.

*even if you are poor, even if you don't have enough to eat. [...] Friendship makes it possible for us to hold hands and to look in the same direction. It destroys poverty."*

— Fatimata, Western Africa

Fatimata links the survival of a family to friendship in the community. Just as children cannot be seen in isolation from their families, families cannot be seen in isolation from their communities. This study will look at the challenges faced by families who live on society's margins without friendship or support, as well as some examples of solidarity built by neighbors and community workers.

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*"The most important thing for me is to have a mother and father. Mothers hug you and comfort you when you're sad. Fathers try to talk to you. A foster family, even if they are nice, cannot replace your mother and father. I was separated from my mom and it was hard. When she would come to see me in the children's home, we would have a lot of fun together, but in the evening it was hard to leave my mother. I would see her cry. When you go through that, it hurts, you feel ashamed. Some people said that we were separated because I was getting in trouble all the time. This was said also to other children who are in foster care. We have to do everything possible so children can live with their parents. We love our parents."*

— Eric, Western Europe

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*"I really want to be free. A children's institution is not a place of freedom. Freedom is being with my parents and my sisters... In the institution, we have no father or mother, so we have no point of reference. But at home, we see how dad builds; we can even help him. [...] We really like being with our parents. Sometimes we go with our father to cut sugar cane; we help him because he has to cut a truck full each day. There are mosquitoes, ants, and sometimes wasps, and every day he does this work... When I'm older, I want to become a mason like my father because it is beautiful to build."*

— Adrien, Indian Ocean region

While society makes an effort to support these two children by sheltering them in institutions, Eric speaks of his own shame at being apart from his parents and Adrien describes having no point of reference without them. They are among the many children whose experience calls into question the support they have received. These children remind us that the family life they now lack is irreplaceable and could be rekindled.

Some of the things children feel and think are hard for them to express. When Katia, a child in North America, was about 11 years old, she was constantly getting into fights with other children. It took time for the Fourth World Volunteer Corps members who knew her to understand the source of her anger. Katia constantly heard her mother disrespected by others. Not only did other children make fun of Katia's mother, but Katia's teacher also criticized her whenever Katia arrived late to school. The teacher did not know that Katia had started arriving late when her mother took an extra job in the early mornings to help make ends meet. Katia then needed to replace her mother by walking her younger sister to school and she could no longer arrive on time herself. Just when Katia saw her mother doing more to help their family, she heard her teacher saying how irresponsible her mother was. It was important to Katia that other adults respect and listen to her mother.<sup>4</sup>

### **The voice of parents living in deep poverty**

Defending the Convention on the Rights of the Child must begin with listening to the most vulnerable children themselves. Their voices are so rarely heard or understood. Many of these children, like Katia, tell us that their parents have even less credibility than they

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<sup>4</sup>Katia's story has been published in a Tapori mini-book entitled *Katia*, as well as in *Teaching Tolerance* magazine.

do. For some of these children, it is common to meet strangers ready to offer them help, while simultaneously blaming their parents. Children can also be convinced to insult their own families. In Burkina Faso, children living in the streets have been interviewed about their situation by journalists, in exchange for a good meal. Some of these children felt they owed it to the journalists to tell the story they were expected to tell, a story that would blame their parents for their fate. Without giving a voice to all the members of a family, we miss out on learning the whole story.

Over the past years, forums and seminars have taken place that look at family issues. One important objective of these efforts has been to gain a wider acknowledgement that advocacy for strengthening support of families' efforts can be compatible with the defense and promotion of the individual rights of each member of the family. In 1976, a "Fourth World Family Congress"<sup>5</sup> was part of this trend. Participants insisted that one of the most pressing needs of people living in poverty and destitution was respect and support for their right to a decent family life, whatever its form. To mark the International Year of the Family in 1994, this dynamic continued, pursuing reflection on the meaning of family for those living in extreme poverty. A second "Fourth World Family Congress" was held, gathering some 300 adult delegates from around the world. Part of this meeting took place at the United Nations in New York. Thanks to support from the United Nations Secretariat, a book was written to accompany the preparations for this congress, which retraced the history of extremely poor families on five continents over several generations and made proposals for policies to support families like these.<sup>6</sup>

The present study is founded on these earlier initiatives. Our starting point for the research are the voices of the families living in extreme poverty who have endured these situations for generations—voices that are almost never heard from in their own communities, let alone on an international stage. These families have shared some of their most personal anguish, in the hopes that the world will become more just. They have shared their experiences, their ideas, and their efforts to improve their situation and those of other very poor families.

## **2004: the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the International Year of the Family**

The United Nations General Assembly reaffirms the importance of observing this anniversary with the objectives of "increasing the awareness of family issues, [...] and undertaking reviews and assessments of the situation and needs of families, identifying specific issues and problems," among others. This marks an important opportunity to listen to the voices of millions, whose family life has been strained and broken by destitution, concerning how poverty separates parents and children. It is in this context that the United Nations Trust Fund on Family Activities contributed funding toward this study.

Existing policies and programs addressed to all families tend to let the poorest families slip through the cracks. This can lead setting up separate programs for the very poor in ways that can become stigmatizing. Choosing from the start to make a priority of reaching the most vulnerable people can help design policies that will support all.

## **Indicators**

*"Clearly, in this field [of measuring poverty], we still do not have accurate, much less reliable, statistics [...]. The poorest people are not contacted when statistics are gathered. [...] The parameters used [...] generally underestimate poverty. [...] There is a lack of interest in and regard for the poorest section of the population. [...And] poverty lines are inevitably somewhat arbitrary."<sup>7</sup>*

The indicators chosen for this study are qualitative rather than quantitative. As valuable as figures are, they can be manipulated, fail to capture the complexities of a

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<sup>5</sup>The term "Fourth World" was used to refer to families living in extreme poverty in both rich and poor countries, and to the efforts made by these families to support one another in the fight against poverty.

<sup>6</sup> *This Is How We Live*, Fourth World Publications, Landover, Maryland, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> *Final Report on human rights and extreme poverty*. (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1996/13).

situation, or too often leave out the experiences of those who dwell in the most abject situations of poverty. In order to measure the extent of a family's poverty or the success of an anti-poverty program, we relied on in-depth interviews carried out in the context of long-term relationships. The lives of extremely poor families are weighted with chaos, crisis and incoherence but they also reveal people's resilience and determination. The research completed by Fourth World Volunteer Corps members for this study included creating opportunities for people living in extreme poverty to articulate their experiences and to evaluate the situations they cope with.

Measuring the effectiveness and sustainability of any program geared to fight extreme poverty (whether through strengthening families or through other approaches) begins with examining the "input": just what efforts are made to reach those people whose destitution makes them the most excluded in their communities? As the program continues, the process must be participatory and held accountable to all those who have a stake in its success. Ideally, the program should build partnership with the very poorest participants.

### **A human rights-based programming approach to family separation**

Safeguarding parent-child relationships is a question of human rights. As stated in Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State." The Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms that it is in the overriding interest of children that they be brought up in their own families. It envisages separation as the last possible step after doing everything that can be done to support parents in their responsibilities.

Committing to defend the rights of children and families is only the first step. Implementing change requires training, planning, methodology and evaluation in partnership with children and families themselves. A United Nations Inter-Agency Workshop has noted that "there is, as yet, lack of agreement as to a single common approach (e.g., how to incorporate the goals and targets of the Millennium Development Goals in a human rights approach)."<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, at this same workshop a number of necessary elements were identified. Those most relevant to this study include: "Focus[ing] on people as holders of rights and as active participants rather than passive beneficiaries in development; [...] prioritiz[ing] the most vulnerable, disadvantaged, excluded or neglected groups in society; [addressing] the goal of poverty eradication [...] and structural inequalities that cause poverty; [and] most importantly putting into practice the human rights norms and principles of freedom (in terms of enlarging people's choices and capabilities), dignity, security of persons and resources, transparency and accountability."

A focus on human rights is an integral part of all the projects profiled in this study. This focus is more or less explicit, depending on the cultural context of the families and communities involved.

### **Outline of this study**

In this study, we will hear from families in:

- Guatemala, who have no safe place to protect their children while they try to eke out a living;
- Haiti, whose children live and work as domestic servants in other people's homes;
- Burkina Faso, whose children have been living on their own in the streets in search of economic opportunities;
- the Philippines, who are told by others that their children would be better off without them;
- and the United Kingdom and the United States, whose children have been placed in the care of others due to allegations of economic neglect.

Each chapter begins with a brief presentation of the wider context of daily life in

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<sup>8</sup> Report of the UN Inter-Agency Workshop held in Princeton, New Jersey, in January 2001, p. 2.

extreme poverty and the many ways that poverty can unravel family ties.

In developing countries, there is little or no government support for poor families. Poverty forces separation on large numbers of children just for the sake of survival. The chapter on Guatemala gives a stark picture of these realities. There are also many private non-governmental organizations in these countries, taking the initiative on behalf of these children. The chapters on Haiti, Burkina Faso and the Philippines discuss some of the approaches developed in the field. Industrialized countries have public systems designed to protect children and families in crisis. Unfortunately, these systems can go awry and actually worsen the situations. The chapters on the United Kingdom and the United States give an account of efforts being made by private organizations to support families.

The research for this study comes not only from interviews, but from collaborative anti-poverty projects carried out over many years. In some of the chapters, these projects are described because of their success in strengthening family support networks. In other chapters, similar projects are referred to only in passing, because supporting families was not their main emphasis. For instance, in Guatemala, the Philippines and the United States, one of the projects ATD Fourth World runs is the Street Library, an outdoor reading and craft workshop for children in very poor areas. Through continual efforts to include the children living in the most difficult situations, and to build partnership with the children's parents to plan and evaluate the Street Library, Fourth World Volunteer Corps members learned about the issues that separate families and of the efforts families make to remain together. This "learning through doing" led to conscious efforts to reflect together on common situations facing families and to learn from them.

This study bears witness to the unseen efforts made by parents in extreme poverty to care for their children. It also reflects how the long-term human commitment carried out by people of all backgrounds is the indispensable tool needed to build trust and partnership with families whose trust has been long abused. We will not succeed in overcoming poverty without contributions from these families.

The final part of this study addresses questions of how best to put this human rights-based approach into practice and policy. This study will examine lessons learned from the situations of the poorest and some of the pilot projects that support their efforts to keep their families together.

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# CHAPTER ONE:

# Guatemala



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## **Introduction: A parent forever**

*Doña Angela Cifuentes came to the Fourth World team asking for help: "You have to come with me. I used to have another daughter. I lent her to another woman when she was 5 years old and now she is 12. Now the woman says I gave my daughter to her. I want to make it clear that I did not give her my daughter."*

What is this mother asking of us? She wants our support in order to make it perfectly clear that, no matter how difficult her situation was, she did not abandon her daughter. Many parents like her entrust their sons and daughters to close or distant relatives. The vast majority do so with the sole objective of saving their children from the harsh environment where they live. The parents dream that others may provide the safety and opportunities for their children that they cannot ensure. But eventually they come to realize that despite their intentions, they have lost their children.

This realization is unbearable and unacceptable to them. A mother or a father is a parent forever. Entrusting their children to others is done as a last resort. These parents pay a high price: losing the children they love. In addition, the parents are disgraced. Their neighbors say, "Only animals give away their children, not people." Even parents who believe they are doing the best possible thing to help their children feel ashamed in front of their neighbors once they have entrusted their children to someone else.

ATD Fourth World-Guatemala began in 1979 when families living in extreme poverty were brought together by members of the Fourth World Volunteer Corps. This chapter reflects what has been learned since then through daily relationships about the challenges that can tear these families apart, and about the little known efforts these families make to survive. People's struggle against extreme poverty must be measured in qualitative terms to show fully the dignity of each human being and the determination and resistance required to hold a family together in the face of destitution. Affirming that these families do make efforts is not an ideology, but a recognition rooted in decades of presence and partnership. ATD Fourth World-Guatemala has launched a variety of grassroots projects whose achievements have included:

- Sharing the fruits of development more widely;
- Linking knowledge and health so that people living in extreme poverty can play an active role in protecting their health and the health of others; and,
- Increasing access to education for children from the poorest backgrounds.

All these projects have been part of a comprehensive approach to recognizing people's roles within their own families.<sup>9</sup>

The following pages will retrace the lives of four families. All have more than ten years of history with ATD Fourth World. Their experiences reflect the suffering of many Guatemalan families that, due to their deep poverty, live partially or definitively separated from their children. This chapter will show how parents try to protect their children, and how difficult this is to achieve.

## **I. Four families**

### **A. Poor among the poor**

ATD Fourth World teams in all countries spend the time it takes to seek out those people who find themselves in a particularly grave or vulnerable situation. These are people who are isolated even within their own communities. In some countries, these are people living "on the wrong side of the railroad tracks." In Guatemala, these people live in shanties just centimeters from the tracks themselves.

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<sup>9</sup> For more information about the approach used in ATD Fourth World's grassroots projects, see Appendix.

Even in extremely poor communities, there are usually some dynamic families, capable of taking advantage of any development project presented to the community. On the other hand, the very poorest families have lived through too many crises, both within their community and outside of it. These crises make them distrustful of others and of themselves. They are worn out with anguish, loneliness, sadness and fear.

- **Where do they come from?**

Many have emigrated from the countryside to the capital city for various reasons: the civil war, poverty, unemployment. Upon arriving in the city, the majority of them face many challenges. They lack shelter and income. They also lack knowledge and experience of the city. Where can they settle? How will they live?

Some can stay with a relative, but when space and food are in short supply, their welcome may wear thin rapidly. Beginning in 1930, some twenty poor families settled along the railroad line (property of the state-owned Railroads of Guatemala). More continued to arrive, particularly after an earthquake on 4 February 1976 that left thousands of families without roofs. Little by little, local and immigrant families have come to see this unstable living situation as a genuine alternative. They scavenge housing for themselves near sources of small jobs. They settle with no guarantee of the basic infrastructure anyone needs for real development: drinkable water, drainage, electrical lighting systems, paved streets, decent housing, food security and decent work.

At the very end of the railroad line is the repository of all of the city's refuse. Called the "clogged toilet," this place too has its human settlers. Also at the end of the line is the Terminal marketplace, where fruit, vegetables, and other articles from all over the country are bought and sold. Women and men looking for work can offer manual labor here. It is forbidden to live in these places because they are privately owned, and because they are not safe for human habitation. But those people who have no choice other than to camp here are rarely sent away. Parents living there say:

*"At first it was a trash dump, the police often came to remove us. [...] We would rebuild and made sure they didn't remove us." "When we arrived at Sector 2 of the tracks, our first shacks weren't even shacks—they were simply made from plastic scraps, they were like toy houses."*

The greatest pressure on these families is the disdain they feel from others for living here. As one of the mothers said:

*"There we faced dangers of all types, so many risks, the train could derail. We lived in filth, but we did it because we had to earn the bread for our children. Because of that, they discriminated against us. When we went to the stores or any other area away from the tracks, they looked at us as if we were people from another planet." <sup>10</sup>*

- **Rosario Cardona's and Pedro Ixel's family**

Doña Rosario Cardona cannot read or write. She was born in the village of Palencia, in the municipality of Guatemala. Her aunt raised her in Guatemala City. She is the mother of seven children. She has been separated from the first three for many years. Her first son was raised by her aunt because of Doña Rosario's young age, 14. The next two sons are being raised by their father's family. (The father himself is in prison.) The four younger children, Misael, Willian, Julio and Michelle, live with Doña Rosario. Her relationships with her mother, father and brothers in the village are quite distant since she grew up in the capital city.

Don Pedro Ixel (originally from the Salama department in the north of the country) the father of Julio and Michelle, died in 2001. He was not Misael and Willian's father, but he gave them his last name. During his life, he was a source of stable support for Doña Rosario, and became a pillar keeping the family together. Since his death, the children

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<sup>10</sup> Expressed to a UNICEF consultant researching the theme "Extreme Poverty and Child Labor."

return more frequently to the streets. Many members of the Fourth World Volunteer Corps witnessed Don Pedro's concern for the children and the children's love and respect for him.

Not long ago, the family relocated to the community of Balcones of Palin, located 45 kilometers from the capital. Still more recently, they returned to live near the Terminal marketplace in an empty place that once served as a dump.

- **Elena Cifuentes' and Alex Morales' family**

Doña Elena Cifuentes was born in the countryside and can neither read nor write. Her parents were very poor workers on sugarcane and coffee farms. Their poverty led their family to the capital, where they had no relatives or community to sustain them, no points of reference. They have lived in different parts of the city: Asentamiento Peronia and, at two different times, along the railroad tracks in Lomas de Santa Faz and Arenera Zona 21. Their lives have been nomadic.

Don Alex Morales arrived from a town in the east of the country; his parents did not move with him. He lives together with Doña Elena alongside the railroad tracks. Both had children from a previous relationship. The children from Doña Elena's first relationship are Maria, Gerson and Julia Cifuentes. Maria met a violent death when she was about 15.

Doña Elena and Don Alex had five children together: Mirian, Odeth, Pablo, Maritza and Fernando Morales. With support from her mother, and from ATD Fourth World, Mirian was able to go to school for several years. Sadly, like her sister, she too was killed around age 15. Although both these sisters lived with their family, they also spent a great deal of time in the streets, where they were killed.

The youngest of Doña Elena and Don Alex's surviving children is now 6; the oldest is 24. Like the two sisters who were killed, Gerson also knows life on the street. Last year, Don Alex died a premature and violent death.

- **Angela Martínez' and Saturnino Mendez' family**

Doña Angela Martínez, 37 years old, is originally from the village Nueva Concepcion Escuintla (in the southern region of the country). She moved to the capital 11 years ago. Doña Angela's mother has died. For part of her childhood, she was raised by godparents. Her first partner was killed.

With her second partner, Don Saturnino Mendez, she had five children: Ruperto, José, Gabriela, Reyna and Ignacio Mendez. Don Saturnino is currently in jail.

Doña Angela has long hoped for a rich family life. She now lives with Don Rogelio Salguero. With him, she had four more children: Monica, Mario, Nora and Elvis Martínez. Don Rogelio often leaves the house.

Very few of Doña Angela's children still live with her. Her son José was killed on the streets. Three other children are at the home of relatives. Three more live on the streets. Only the two youngest are with her. For a time Monica and Mario were in a boarding school where they received education. This permitted Doña Angela to work with fewer children at her side. She struggles for the most basic securities for the children: food, housing, health care and education. Facing this responsibility alone often leaves her in anguish. Although her children don't live with her, she is always aware of where they are sleeping, and whether they are sick or in jail.

- **Paulina Roque's and Zacarias Cotzal's family**

Both originally from Totonicapan, Doña Paulina Roque and Don Zacarias Cotzal are of the Kiche ethnicity. Doña Paulina can neither read nor write. She is 46 years old, and is very shy. Her mother and one sister remain in Totonicapan. She moved to the capital 20 years ago, looking for work and a better life for herself and her family

Doña Paulina and Don Zacarias had five children: Diego, Sonia, Rita, Damian and Justino Cotzal. Their son Diego is a drug addict. Their daughter Sonia is now a mother at the young age of 14. Don Zacarias was killed.

With her next partner, Doña Paulina had two children, Bayron and Roberto Roque. Their father too died a violent death. Too little is known about these two fathers. Both were day laborers, looking each day for new employment. The instability of their employment has been one of the reasons for the loneliness in which this family lives.

Diego's drug addiction and the death of her partners made Doña Paulina particularly anxious to protect her other children from the street and from drugs. Doña Paulina agreed for some of her children to live with relatives: Rita and Justino live with relatives in the east; Damian lives with an uncle. Bayron and Roberto live and study in a boarding school.

Drugs are present in the neighborhoods where Doña Paulina and her relatives live. These drugs can further distance children from their parents.

Neighbors accuse Doña Paulina of being a bad mother, irresponsible and incapable. Little by little the separation between her and her children has become a long-term reality. She has not lived with her children for four or five years. She doesn't see them, but she continues to speak of them.

She has one more child who does in fact live with her: her youngest son, Estuardo, who suffers from a disability and, because of this, depends a great deal on his mother.

## **B. These families' homes**

*"You need at least a bit of land to be able to stay as a family,"* parents say.

A home is a place of liberty, one where you are head of the family and can welcome other people—this is the definition given by two of these parents. All families dream of having a house but many will not manage this. Achieving it means making long-term plans, where parents acquire new community responsibilities.

Doña Paulina Roque had a small parcel of land, but the shack she built there was so inferior to her neighbors' that she felt out of place. She had been paying for her lot for several months, but she felt the others were judging her, so one day she sold her lot. Today she has no secure home. To acquire an owner's mindset you need to be able to build on positive past experiences. When those experiences were bad, you need a second chance. Doña Paulina chose to protect herself by saying, "A home does not matter to me." This meant she would not have to explain why she could not manage to build on the land. Next she rented a room near the train terminal, but she could not afford the rent. Today she has returned to the Arenera neighborhood where she asks neighbors for lodging in their shacks.

For a fee, a lawyer could formalize the legality of the land on which Doña Angela Martínez lives. But she does not have this sum. All she has are some sheets of zinc and used wood that she salvaged from the previous shack. No one along the railroad tracks has a formal house. There are only shacks. With the materials from the shack, she built her new makeshift home. Like most, hers has just one all-purpose room used as a kitchen, dining room, living room and bedroom. In this community her poverty is more evident, more public.

Without this one room, what would be left? Desperate not to lose it, Doña Angela needed money for the lawyer and for the small lot in Arenera. Feeling she had no choice, she allowed her daughter Reyna to drift into prostitution. The income allowed Doña Angela finally to ensure shelter for the youngest children. How could she have tolerated this? We must also ask how society can allow situations to become so dramatic that families feel condemned to pay such an inhumane price for defending their fundamental right to a home.

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A decent home is a space for family harmony. It is a place where you can cultivate tenderness. The lack of a home prevents any intimacy. Without a place to live together, children are driven to leave their parents.

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- In some homes, there may be no doors to shut. Or there may be no windows to open. Often, rats make up part of the household. They bite the children. Where there is one

bed for six people, where the floor is covered in mud, how do you get to school clean? How do you feel proud of your home? How can you ever wake up without sadness?

- In some homes there is no privacy. When there are no latrines, your biological necessities are exposed to your neighbors. The odor brings their reproaches.
- The condition of a home signifies many things about the rest of a family's life, its challenges and its strengths. Doña Elena's home, for example, is sometimes messy; at other times it is not. There is not enough space to move around. The rain comes in through the roof, and the water runs under the beds. There is no drainage.

In such insecure housing, the extreme lack of privacy and the vulnerability to the elements increase the challenges for families to remain together. A place where any child or parent would feel sorrow and shame is definitely not a home.

### C. Hunger

The families profiled in this chapter struggle continuously to provide food security for their children, but they do not succeed. Seven of the children in these families<sup>11</sup> ran away from home because of hunger. Their families are destitute. The children and parents rarely say directly that they are suffering from hunger, but they say it in subtle ways. "Today I ate one tortilla for breakfast." "My neighbor gave me a plate of herbs." They may serve only radishes for breakfast, tomato sauce for lunch. All these remarks are discreet ways to say: you do not know what we are going through.

When parents do manage to feed their children properly, they sometimes voice the regret that the teacher is not around to see them being well fed: "If only the lady<sup>12</sup> were to see what I am giving my children to eat!"

There are anti-hunger policies, but the way they are implemented is often unhelpful to parents. Many food programs do not take into account the culture and customs of a community. Some programs accentuate the shame parents experience in depending on charity from others.<sup>13</sup> The children notice, and they do not feel proud of their parents. Provisions provided through public assistance or from individuals include: oil, sugar, rice, beans, corn and flour. Parents confide: "The donors say that we the poor are ungrateful because we sell the food." With the money they get from selling the flour or oil, the families in fact buy needed maseca<sup>14</sup> and more beans.

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- **The families' struggle to obtain food** means the children generally have to stay alone in the house when their parents leave to get food. At these times, not only do the children find themselves without an adult to keep them company, but they also feel hunger pangs. They feel alone and abandoned and begin to despair. Doña Elena says:

*"I am neglecting my children, but I have to feed them all. I have to choose between: working, leaving them behind during the day, and finally taking them something to eat; or staying at home and living off the help of my neighbors who in fact probably cannot help even in the short term, because our situations in life are more or less the same."*

Doña Elena is aware of her predicament. What she tells us clearly is that, for her, providing food security is out of reach. She has to leave her children alone, either at home or in the street. If she stays at home, then there is no food. "I am neglecting

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<sup>11</sup> Misael and Willian Cardona-Ixel, Pablo Cifuentes-Morales, and Ruperto, José, Reyna and Ignacio Martínez-Mendez.

<sup>12</sup> The term used in Spanish, "seño," or señora, could refer to a teacher, a health worker, a social worker, or a Fourth World Volunteer Corps member.

<sup>13</sup> Marie de La Soudière, of the International Rescue Committee, notes that this is often the case in refugee camps, when meals are distributed without regard for family relationships. In Guatemala, this is the situation even for people who are not in refugee camps.

<sup>14</sup> Corn meal.

them, I am leaving them behind.” There is a chronic crisis between her and her children.

- **Many of these families have been relocated** because they were living in a place where the land was scheduled to be developed (although the project in fact never took place). Relocating extremely poor families to distant places, without guaranteeing decent housing, sources of work for the parents, and other basic rights is condemning them to live in even greater isolation and hunger. This injustice is compounded by the fact that the children, little by little, lose respect for their parents, because they are not able to provide adequate food.

One day when Doña Elena and two neighbors were walking through the Terminal marketplace, they picked tomatoes out of the trash. They say that when they were living in this marketplace they ate better, because it was possible to scavenge food. In the new settlement where they were re-housed, that possibility does not exist. When poor families live near markets or dumps, and there is no money to buy food, they can salvage, and lessen their hunger. But in the remote settlements of the city, there is not even this possibility of survival.

- **The parents’ presence during a meal**, as in other moments, is fundamental to creating family unity. These are moments of joy and of a shared life. For the poorest families, eating together is almost impossible to do on a regular basis. And yet these parents recognize that family meals strengthen the bond between parents and children. They say, “On the days when we do manage to bring enough food home, we all eat together at the same time, parents and children.” The effort they make shows how important they consider this.

Hunger itself, as well as its consequences—parents leaving their children untended while looking for food, and rarely able to provide the joyous family meals that strengthen relationships—become grave obstacles to keeping family members together.

#### **D. The families’ work**

- The fundamental value of work

Parents’ work allows them to pass their dignity and humanity on to their children, despite their yoke of poverty. At these moments, children and parents can benefit from experiencing the same process and identifying themselves as being in the same struggle. It might seem strange to talk in terms of work, because the odd jobs done by these parents are actually informal. These men and women are not recognized as workers, because they do not have training. They are jacks of all trades. With no real profession, they continue to hope that through their work they can pass on to their children a legacy and an ability to fight.

Today the lack of work and the distance from sources of employment endangers this legacy. While the parents dream of teaching their children the determination, boldness and pride of their work, their occupations in fact keep them away from their children. The parents know that teaching their children to work and the value of work would become a source of cultural pride, as well as a protection against laziness. But the parents face obstacles: first, the jobs they manage to get are not those they dream of for their children; and second, these jobs do not leave them with the necessary time and energy to raise their children.

- “Our long work days rob us of our children’s childhood.”

During long workdays, the children are generally left home alone, without either parent. These children lead a life of uncertainty. For parents, the lack of work anywhere near their neighborhoods means they walk many kilometers to the jobs where they expend their physical energy. When the parents come home tired, they no longer have enough energy left to make their time with their children enjoyable.

To survive, the two parents from the Cifuentes-Morales family worked many long hours. Doña Elena washes other people's clothes. Before her husband's death, the two of them collected aluminum, copper, glass and cardboard from the garbage dump, in order to sell these materials and buy food. Don Alex also worked as a fruit vendor for the fruit merchants in the Terminal marketplace. Since his death, it has fallen to Doña Elena alone to secure food for the family. For the past three years, she has managed to stay employed, with occasional help from her daughter Julia. Doña Elena leaves home at 6 a.m. and returns at 10 p.m. She works in the dining rooms of the Terminal market near her former home. Her work schedule does not allow her to participate in community meetings or development projects. When she hears of a group meeting, she always asks to receive the invitations despite being unable to attend.<sup>15</sup> After a few weeks at work, she realized that her children had stopped going to school in her absence. They were gradually drifting further away from their home and the community.

Doña Angela Martínez salvages scrap metal seven days a week: aluminum cans, and iron from different automobile repair shops. These repair shops are close to the edge of the railroad tracks. Every morning they throw away everything they no longer use, whatever scraps remain after repairing or removing the insides of cars. Salvaging metal is informal work, and her earnings are undependable from day to day. When she does not work because of health or other reasons, there is no one else earning any income. The work is hard and dirty. Often the two children still living at home, Nora and Elvis, appear as blackened by grease and iron dust as she is, perhaps because they have helped. Every day she travels from Zone 21 to Zone 8 to work. During rush hour, the bus ride takes an hour and a half. Often she must wait until the car traffic is less heavy to take the bus, which gets her home even later.

Although parents dream of teaching their children a trade they can be proud of, in fact the scarce economic opportunities available more often lead parents to leave their children untended for long days.

### **E. Children's work**

Their parents see involving children in their work as a way of collaborating and of protecting their children from drugs or gangs on the streets. Girls learn from their mothers to earn a living washing other people's clothes, as soon as they are tall enough to reach a washtub. The boys work as porters or loaders in the market when they are a little bigger and stronger (usually from 9 years of age onward). They get up at 4 a.m. to begin to unload the trucks. Some children care for younger siblings while their parents work.

Others peddle fruit, vegetables, candy or gum. Some have their own stalls, and others sell their products on buses. Many children go by the market stalls and offer to empty the vendors' trash bins. Other children help their parents salvage scrap metal, paper, plastic or anything else that can be sold.

The children from families with few resources work because of the difficult situations in which they are living. The majority of children accept their roles as workers and are willing to meet this family commitment. The majority of parents try hard to ensure that the work their children do is not in the most dangerous places or situations.

As hard as it can be for parents to see their children working so hard, in many cases the children's work becomes a way for them to spend more time with their parents.

## **II. Particular challenges these families face**

### **A. Young people's place in their families**

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<sup>15</sup> These may be parent-teacher meetings, micro-credit programs, or "Family Meetings" organized by ATD Fourth World to give parents living in extreme poverty a chance to reflect together on their experiences.

Mirian Cifuentes-Morales, like older daughters in similar families, played a significant role in her household. For years, she stayed home with all her siblings as the one in charge. Eventually, however, many of these girls cannot continue this support for their family. Adolescence is a confusing time for all young people, and it can be even more so for teens from very poor families. They dream of being like other teenagers, of dressing decently and meeting young people of their own age without feeling stigmatized. Often the young people they meet also have hard lives, so they may form gangs and start to sniff glue or to use other drugs and alcohol. They may stop coming home to sleep, and they may get in trouble with the law.

When the older daughters leave home, the difficulties of the whole family worsen, and the younger children may again be left unsupervised when their parents work. Their mothers are sick with worry. As noted above, their worst fears were justified for three of the children in these families: Maria and Mirian Cifuentes-Morales and José Roque-Cotzal were among so many other very poor young people who died early deaths because of street violence. The sudden nature of these deaths only accentuates the already unbearable pain of losing a child forever. Their neighbors criticize them even more, saying they cannot even protect their children from the street.

Members of these communities show in daily remarks or attitudes that they have lost faith in the families who are the most beaten down by poverty. The communities also lose faith in the young people, who are accused of being thieves, of being antisocial, and of setting a bad example for the younger children. These young people are not welcome in social or cultural gatherings where the hopes for their country are articulated and its future shaped. They too often end up running away from their neighborhoods to seek refuge in the streets.

## **B. Protecting children while their parents are away at work**

Most parents love their children very much and try to protect them. Even though it can be difficult to understand, the act of leaving them shut indoors is usually intended to protect them from the high-risk environment of the encampment and the surrounding area. Dangers can include drugs, other people or simply attempts to play. Carlos, another child known by ATD Fourth World, was playing with firecrackers when they exploded in his hand, requiring 19 stitches.

A child shut indoors will spend day after day in a very cramped environment with limited freedom. This reality could be viewed as a self-imposed exclusion. But parents, like Carlos' grandmother, see no other option to protect their children. Gersón, age 17, the second son of Doña Elena Cifuentes, wrote on 17 October 1999, the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty:

*"I was born in La Línea [by the railroad tracks]. I spent my whole childhood and part of my adolescence there. Our parents were always nearby. [...] Sometimes they left us shut inside the house because they were afraid of the train derailing and of thieves. If we were out on the street, our mothers would repeatedly come to check on us to see if we were okay and to know who we were with. [...] As children in La Línea we were happy."*

With no other options, shutting children indoors without supervision can be the only way for parents to ensure their safety.

## **C. Overcoming shame and the feeling of powerlessness**

Doña Angela Martínez was invited to join a small women's micro-credit group. When we visited her, she spoke powerfully about this:

*"I cannot participate, because I cannot stand the looks my neighbors give me. They know a lot about me and so they laugh at my situation. They know private things: that my partner abandoned me and my children, that some of my children*

*live in the streets and use drugs, and that I am living in the most absolute loneliness, with my morale at rock bottom."*

Even at the funeral of her son José, Doña Angela heard comments about the fact that her children were living in the streets.

*"The funeral is a moment in which everything a family is living is talked about, and anything they say is a humiliation."*

Many parents feel just as powerless. Their children do not listen to them. The loss of authority is a gradual reality between parents and children. Parents have trouble making ends meet. The children often go out to beg, even when their parents do not agree. When the parents go looking for their children in the streets, the children may run away when they see their parents. Doña Elena says, "I do not want Pablo to beg. Right now people give him money because he is a child. But when he is an adult, what will become of him?"

### **III. Efforts to refuse the fate of "ending up in the street"**

#### **A. Education**

*"If my brother had stayed in school, he would not have hung out in the streets."*

- A 10-year-old girl

Of course school is not a daycare center for children. The appeal this girl makes to us is more profound: she reminds us that if there were people and institutions available for support, "then we could live as a family."

Families of all backgrounds are aware that education is the best way to prepare their children to be citizens and to build the future. Parents pin so much hope on education as a tool of liberation. Very poor families, however, face numerous challenges before they can send their children to school.

- **The legal papers needed to register:** The journey begins with the birth certificates. Frequently, with all the upheavals of extreme poverty and insecurity, families do not manage to go through the formality of entering their children in the registry of citizens at birth. In these cases, to register for school means that the family must appeal for extemporaneous birth certificates, a service the state does not provide automatically. The procedure can take six months or more.
- **New expenses:** The Constitution of Guatemala states that education is compulsory and free. The reality is different. Expenses include school registration fees, the purchase of supplies, a uniform and shoes. For a child in the first cycle of primary education, these supplies cost Q350 (approximately 44 US dollars) per child. For these families, the cost is high. Some have decided to enroll their children one at a time, while for others the possibility of paying these fees for even one child is out of reach.
- **Parents are unprepared to play a role in their child's education:** For all parents, keeping their children in school requires a commitment to accompany them in the learning process, by supporting them at home, and by attending parent meetings. For a parent who did not attend school or who did not learn to read despite a little schooling, it is that much harder for them to feel they can play this role without embarrassing their children.

Even when these obstacles have been overcome, more await. For three girls from the Cifuentes-Morales family, school was fraught with difficulties. Mirian and Odeth went to the Pennat school for working boys and girls over the course of a year. Even though they could not continue their studies for very long due to their itinerant lives, it was an important first step that led them to pass through more than seven schools. Their sister Maritza still attends school. Maritza's preparatory teacher has spoken of her intelligence and her eagerness to learn. The teacher insisted that she continue in a day school. Even though it is difficult for Doña Elena to meet that responsibility, she has changed jobs in

hopes of supporting her. One day Doña Elena received news that the principal had suspended Maritza because of her lack of attendance. After a discussion with the principal, it was agreed that Maritza could continue, but under practically impossible conditions: from that day forward, she could not miss a single day of class, and her mother had to help her with her homework always. For Doña Elena, it is hard to imagine being able to meet these conditions all while working to support the whole family. She wonders:

*"If I don't work, who will bring home food? Look, when I do not work, I have to sell my things—dresses, umbrellas, apron—because what the children lack is food. I tell the children that the best reward they can give us is passing in school. I want them to learn, but I don't know how to make it happen."*

As parents do what they can to surmount these obstacles, and still others (e.g. behavior problems, hygiene problems), they may nevertheless be taken to task because, they are told, their children have problems learning. In this situation, the right to education seems to become more of an insurmountable obstacle than a tool for liberation.

## **B. Finding ways to trust institutional support for children**

Although some daycare centers exist, parents' experience has taught them to be wary of institutions.<sup>16</sup> Although some measures have been taken to address this crisis, these efforts are carried out without dialogue with the parents of the most vulnerable children. It remains very hard for these parents to know which institutions they can trust. One parent known by ATD Fourth World spoke of her fears in a testimony on 17 October 2003, the occasion of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty:

*"My two older daughters are Vivi and Yoli. With me, they had to work, digging drainage ditches, and at the same time looking after their younger brothers and sisters, who napped next to us while we were working.*

*"To get to where I am today, I had to overcome my fear of the community daycare center. Their staff had always suggested I take my smallest children there so that I would be freer to work. I could never manage to do it, because I was always afraid the children would be taken from me, and I would never see them again.*

*"But now I understand that it is the best thing. Every morning for many months, when I took the children, I did it with fear, and I was sad the whole day. When I went to pick them up, I always thought I was not going to find them, that they would have taken the children from me that day. But now I trust them, and I have stopped being afraid. That lets me move forward in my dream of giving my children a better future."*

The extreme caution parents must exercise toward institutions further complicates their efforts to ensure that their children are safe while the parents work.

## **C. Boarding at school**

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<sup>16</sup> A Special Rapporteur for the United Nations has explored this issue and noted: "The sale of children is of particular concern in Guatemala. [...]. Intercountry adoption developed into a profitable business as a result of the large number of children who were orphaned or abandoned during the years of conflict. What started out as genuine efforts to place quickly children in dire need of homes turned into lucrative business deals when it became apparent that there was a great demand in other countries for adoptable babies. [...] It is reported that Guatemala is the fourth largest 'exporter' of children in the world." From the report of the Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, Ms. Ofelia Calcetas-Santos, to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, E/CN.4/2000/73/Add.2, 27 January 2000.

For a time Angela Martínez and Paulina Roque both managed to send their children to a boarding school. The children would come home regularly where they were warmly welcomed. Their mothers saw the boarding schools as an alternative to life in the streets. One of their main hopes was to avoid their children getting caught up in drugs or getting killed. These schools, which include children from different economic and social situations, try to provide kindergarten and primary education, safe and healthy food, and a healthy environment. Some children attend as day students, but allowing others to board at the school can enable those children's parents to work long hours without leaving their children alone. Doña Angela registered Mónica and Mario. Doña Paulina also sent two of her children (Bayron and Roberto) to one of these schools.

It is hard for children used to such strained circumstances to arrive at this kind of establishment. The people in charge of the boarding school always point out their lice and the condition of their clothes and footwear. Each time they visit home, something happens: they do not return to the boarding school at the stipulated time; or they do not have money for the bus or someone to drive them to the boarding school; or they do not have the clothes and supplies they need. The environment is not easy for Mónica; on some occasions she does not want to return to the boarding school. But Doña Angela pushes her: "If you don't go back, the street will be your future."

Doña Angela and Doña Paulina have made many unseen efforts so that their children could remain at the boarding schools. Many demands are made on the children who board at the school: in addition to the school uniform that all children must have, living in the school means they are also told to have fancier clothing and shoes to be worn on Sunday, as well as everyday clothes. The parents, on each visit, must bring two week's worth of clothes and other supplies. Other parental responsibilities include participating in a monthly parent meeting, and picking up and dropping off the children every other weekend. For the children of Doña Angela, this rhythm and responsibility lasted three years. The children managed to go until the end of 2001, and they registered for the next year, although they did not stay through the end of 2002. Mónica and Mario did complete their first cycle of primary education. Bayron and Roberto Roque-Cotzal are continuing for the moment.

Although it is difficult for very poor families to benefit from these schools, they can provide a way for parents to ensure both education and protection to their children.

#### **D. Homes for boys and girls who live in the street**

These homes are very different from the boarding schools. Education is not necessarily provided. The children describe these homes as "little jails" because they are treated not as normal children there, but rather as problem children who have been banished by their communities and their parents. Eight of the children from the four families profiled in this chapter have spent time in these institutions.<sup>17</sup> The destitution of their families led these children to live in the streets and then to spend time in an assortment of institutions in order to partially alleviate their hunger and improve their physical well-being.

Ties between children living on the streets and their families are not often maintained. The staff of these institutions working on behalf of the protection of children and young people on the streets tend to refer to their families with terms like "instruments of rejection," leaving these families entirely alone to shoulder the blame for their children's situation and the poverty that caused it.

Although these homes can provide physical safety for children, the experiences of the families profiled here have been negative.

#### **E. Maintaining ties**

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<sup>17</sup> Ruperto Méndez-Martínez, José Méndez, Reyna Martínez, Enrique Martínez, Pablo Morales Cifuentes, Estuardo Roque, Damián Roque and Misael Ixel.

Even faced continually with situations that defy comprehension, the parents we know continue to seek ties with their children. For instance, when Doña Elena Cifuentes went to one institution to ask for Pablo, they told her he was not there. It turned out that in fact he was:

*Originally Doña Elena had enrolled Pablo, age 9, in a boarding school. But one day after a period of free time, he did not return to the school. Doña Elena stopped work to search for him desperately. She went to many places to ask, but she could discover nothing. She was desperate and could barely sleep.*

*One day she came to the Fourth World House to ask us to go with her to a center that takes in children who are in the streets. We arrived there asking for Pablo. They told us he was not there, but they advised us to go by another center run by the same organization to see if he was there.*

*When we arrived they told us Doña Elena had already asked, and he was not there. But at that moment Pablo appeared in the doorway. Doña Elena's first words were, "My son, you are safe. I've been looking for you all over."*

*The person in charge of the center said that they took in children who were begging in the street, those who were in danger, in order to save them before they fell into drug use.*

*Doña Elena tried to explain that her son did not have bad habits, and that he went out to play with other children and one night did not come home. "I have other children and I am alone. I have to work to provide food. That's why they stay home alone, but I work so I can provide food. I have not worked for one month because I have been looking for him."*

Many parents in Doña Elena's situation are torn apart by anxiety and put all their strength into hunting for their children. It is unbearable not to know their fate. In this context, it is particularly painful to arrive at an institution after hours of walking and not even be acknowledged. Even neighbors who do not always have respect for those families in the most difficult situations, refuse to accept this complete lack of regard. When Doña Angela Martínez's son Enrique was missing, it was a neighbor who returned with her to the police to demand that they inform her of her sons' whereabouts.

Another neighbor, Doña Matilda, was once visiting one of her sons in jail when she met another teenage boy. This boy told her that he had not been able to get any news to his family. She offered to visit his family to give them news about their son. She knows what it is like to be unable to find one's children. She volunteered her support so that another family's ties may be preserved.

These efforts by parents on behalf of their children or of others too often remain unseen.

#### **IV. Family and community: the last refuge against misery**

These families go to great lengths to remain a family, beginning with the parents' work. In the worst cases, when children have taken to the streets, they have often defied both their parents' authority and their parents' disapproval of drugs. The parents then endure anxiety about their children's fate and unrelenting criticism from neighbors, who sometimes call their children an embarrassment to the neighborhood. They hear their children accused of theft, of being asocial, of being poor role models for younger children. Despite all this, when the children come home for a time, they always have a place to sleep. The act of forgiveness is always present.

When Pablo Cifuentes-Morales was still at home, he regularly went to the railroad tracks to work the same job as his father, but this environment put him at risk of drifting into street life. One day his mother said to us, "Pablo has not slept in his bed in the last two days. I would like to send him to live with his grandparent or with his uncles. The problem is that they wouldn't be able to bring him to school. [...] If anything happened to

him, just imagine....” She saw clearly the need to protect Pablo from the streets, but the only choice open to her seemed to offer no protection of his future at all.

Amid so much anguish and uncertainty for their children’s fate, these parents live in constant fear. Doña Paulina Roque was afraid because news was going around that children were being removed from their families. She fears for Roberto and Damian. Doña Angela Martínez has the same fear for her children. Doña Elena Cifuentes says, “If they try and take my children, I will fight them.” Doña Rosario Cardona, who is in her seventh month of pregnancy, has never gone to a hospital for fear of these agencies. The late Don Pedro Ixel described his experience of an agency coming for his children: “It was night, and they took the children away from me. They now take the kids at night. What I want more than anything is to fight until my death to give more to my children. I know my life will be short due to suffering and humiliation.”

Other men who live and work on the garbage dump as he did echo his strong feelings: “For men, being a father is the reason to keep living.”

- **The importance of being part of a community**

*“Without family, we cannot live we cannot grow. But the family cannot live without friendship in the home and in the community.”*

Although this chapter has emphasized the exclusion that can be part of community life, there are also important gestures of solidarity within a community that allow particularly excluded families to maintain unity. When the people living alongside the railroad tracks were relocated to other settlements, a committee mobilized against the transfer of the Cifuentes-Morales family to the new settlement. This committee went from home to home saying, “Something has to be done. This family will bring us thieves. We can’t let them live in our community.” However, there were also neighbors who knew Doña Elena’s virtues as well as her faults. They responded by telling the committee, “You are mobilizing people against this poor woman who has nowhere to live.” One woman stood forward and said, “If anyone has a right to a place here in this neighborhood, it is Elena. Since I was born on the tracks, she’s lived there.”

The community showed a core of strength by standing up in this way to defend Doña Elena’s and Don Alex’s family. Some neighbors stood ready to ensure that even those most scarred by extreme poverty could also be relocated after the mass eviction. This solidarity has grown out of a common history with the Cifuentes-Morales family, of a life shared. It grows out of knowing first-hand what it means to have to move continually from one place to another, of what it is like to live on the streets, and of the challenge of trying to hold a family together in such conditions.

Today, in the community of Arenera, where three of the families mentioned here live at the moment, two sections are developing at different rates. The area where the Martínez-Mendez family lives is more developed, with a butcher and a market that can maintain a rapid pace of development. But occasionally the community, pressured by the development agencies, demands too much from the families. There are those who would blame Doña Angela Martínez for slowing the rate of growth of her community. How can she be recognized as being as much a part of her community as the butcher or the market? How can we expect the community to have patience with the families who live in the most desperate circumstances?

Most development projects require a pace so rapid that, in the short term, they can be very divisive, rather than fostering solidarity. Scapegoating the weakest members of the community leads to generalizations. The results can be inhumane.

## **V. Conclusion**

The parents profiled here face enormous challenges that make it hard for them to raise their children. While working long hours, many of them must leave their children

unattended or entrust them to institutions. Hunger and the physical insecurity of their homes may drive their children into the streets. The lack of privacy in their homes, the lack of time they have to spend together, and the disdain weighing on the family can combine to strain parent-child relationships almost to the breaking point.

In many ways however, these parents are like all others. In each of them is an inalienable humanity. There is a human spirit of forgiveness in the unconditional love they offer their wayward teenagers. Forgiveness cannot be bought and sold. It is an act of tolerance, patience, and understanding. It is an act of hope, and an effort to make any sacrifice necessary because the splintering of their family endangers their children's lives.

It is not enough to get to know these families. We need to introduce them to our friends and to build relationships between them and the rest of society. This is the only way to ensure that the outside world does not close its eyes to the realities in which these families live. All around us are families waiting for someone who can understand them, in whom they can confide and with whom they can build friendship. By returning to these forgotten families a sense of dignity and confidence in themselves, we can increase their overall security, as well as their chances of protecting their children from danger.

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## CHAPTER TWO:



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2003

# Haiti



## Introduction

Haitian culture defines the family in very broad terms. Among all social classes, it is quite common for parents to entrust their children to be raised by a relative or an unrelated person. Raising someone else's child is an important way for families to support and show solidarity with one another. However, the extent of poverty in this country creates widespread insecurity. Most people are poor; very few people can escape economic insecurity completely. In the countryside, it tends to be the poorest parents who entrust their children to host families. These hosts tend not to be much better off than the birth families. In cities, very poor parents often try to put their children into institutions to provide for their needs.

The goal of these parents living in poverty, in both rural and urban areas, is to ensure that their children will be better nourished, will go to school, and will have more opportunities in the future. Unfortunately, these parents are no longer able to protect their children against the many risks of physical, psychological or sexual abuse. In fact the parents often end up losing all contact with their children after they move away.

Children sent away from their parents at a very young age tend to be aware that their parents were too poor to give them what they needed. Even when these children do in fact receive schooling as a result of being sent away, they tend to lose respect for their parents' authority. The children are at risk of falling into delinquency, ending up in the streets, or becoming victimized by abuse, illness or violence.

Today in Haiti, many voices are speaking out about these situations and huge efforts are being made to raise public awareness. But most proposals to help very poor families remain together have not yet come to fruition. For example, access to schooling is not yet universally ensured.

This chapter will explore some of the means by which poverty separates parents and children in Haiti. This will be accomplished through consideration of the particular challenges that confront families living in extreme poverty and the living conditions experienced by Haitian children who live on the streets or who are voluntarily placed in institutions that provide for their needs at no cost to their parents. Next, the study will take a critical look at the situation of "restavèks" (children who leave their families to work as domestic servants).

The final part of this chapter will examine children's access to education and highlight some innovative approaches that reach out to the poorest families and view parents as partners in their children's education. These include a Field Library project (which brings adults and children together to read stories) and a school that was founded to educate children in an orphanage. These children are not in fact orphans; many were voluntarily placed in this institution when times were too difficult for their parents to continue raising them at home. Over twenty years, this school evolved into a network of three primary schools serving very poor children living in many different situations. Teachers take great pains to ensure that very poor children will be able to attend and excel. Their graduation rate is more than four times higher than the national average. For parents, being able to send their children to a good school makes them much more likely to be able to raise their own children at home.

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ATD Fourth World has been working in Haiti for 22 years: in rural Fond-des-Nègres, and in the Bolosse-Sous-Dalles zone of the capital city, Port-au-Prince. This includes some of the poorest areas in the city: Grand-Ravine, Descaillettes, Tibois, Cité Coicou, and La Cour Watson. Over the years, members of the Fourth World Volunteer Corps have built long-term relationships with residents of these areas in order to learn from their experience and analysis, and to bear witness to their efforts to overcome poverty. The Volunteer Corps team (from 3 to 5 people at any given time) includes both Haitians and people of other nationalities. All of them participate in collective thinking and in "knowledge meetings" in order to understand the lives of the very poorest people, despite the inconsistencies and crises they face. Many other Haitians support the work and

thinking of the Volunteer Corps team. One is a member of the Executive Board of the International Movement ATD Fourth World.

Many other small, local organizations collaborate with ATD Fourth World in order to support one another's efforts to share strength, courage and pride with disadvantaged populations. One of these organizations, CODEHA,<sup>18</sup> has been a partner in the research for this study, by opening the door for ATD Fourth World to meet and interview people in the Vallée de Jacmel rural area. The parents living in extreme poverty who are quoted in this study are known directly through ATD Fourth World, or through CODEHA for those in the Vallée de Jacmel.

## **I. How poverty separates parents and children in Haiti**

### **A. Difficulties faced by very poor families**

#### **1. Overcrowding**

Many families in the shantytowns live with 10 people in a single room of 10 square meters. The shanties tend to be packed closely together. The rare spaces without a shanty tend to be too dangerous to build on because of their steepness, or their filth. There is rarely any safe place, nor time, for children to play. Lack of sleep can be chronic, as the slightest rain wakens all those whose shanties are prone to flooding. Sleep is difficult also due to noise: of weapons, rocks resounding on tin roofs, and loud music. The complete lack of privacy, as well as the extent of violence in the area, can lead to children witnessing a lynching or knowing in great detail about the rape of a child.

#### **2. Economic insecurity and its consequences for children**

Parents who are not sure of being able to bring food home each night may have to leave their children alone in order to earn money. Mr. Justin Vincent<sup>19</sup> recalls:

*"Luc is 9 years old. His mother is out all the time, so he is the one to fetch water and cook for his sisters who are 7 and 2 years old. Luc must also go to the dump to feed the two goats. Before, it was hard for me to understand why Luc's mother seemed so hard on him. But in fact everything his mother said has helped prepare him for such big responsibilities."*

Other children are working to help their family. Mr. Ganage Bruno<sup>20</sup> says:

*"Some children starting at age 7 or 8 join the groups of men working in the fields. One of my students arrives a half-hour late every morning. His sister always arrives earlier. When I asked why they don't arrive together, the boy told me he works with a team in the fields from 4 to 8 am every morning, and again after school ends at 1 PM. He is 14 now, but he has done it for many years. He has repeated two grades so far. He earns just enough for food."*

#### **3. The one source of hope – schooling – is often inaccessible**

*"If only my children could go to school, we'd be happy. Your mother might not have sent you to school, but you should still send your child. That way, if anyone ever gives him a paper, he'll know what it says. There are things a child can do thanks to education and to what's in his head."*

- Mrs. Milord, a parent from Port-au-Prince

Haitian parents make enormous efforts to send their children to school. These efforts are sometimes far out of proportion to the results. For parents with no schooling

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<sup>18</sup> "CODEHA" stands for "Corde Enfant Haïtien," a movement of friendship among children and their families and neighborhoods.

<sup>19</sup> Mr. Vincent is a member of the Fourth World Volunteer Corps, speaking in 2003.

<sup>20</sup> A teacher in the town of Fond-des-Nègres, speaking in 2003.

themselves, the obstacles to putting their children in school are particularly daunting. Very few parents can provide school fees, uniforms or proper clothes and shoes, books and school supplies, transportation, water for washing, or even food. In rural communities, the school is usually so far away that a child who is small or sickly will not be strong enough to walk there. Ms. Kernit Dambreville, a teacher in Fond-des-Nègres, observes: "So often a child comes to class, and could learn, but he's walked so far and he hasn't eaten. You ask why he's lying down and he says, 'My stomach hurts, Miss.' [...] You give the child some food and water and then the child is lively again. But not all teachers do this."

Some children have no legal birth certificate, which means they will not be admitted to the recognized schools, nor be allowed to sit for exams. For a child older than 2, it is a very long and expensive process to establish a birth certificate. Even for a child who already has one, there is a good chance of there being a mistake on it, which is difficult and expensive to have corrected. For instance, in Port-au-Prince Mrs. Jeanne was not allowed to register her 8-year-old daughter for school, for two years in a row. In 2001, the child had no birth certificate. In 2002, the certificate had a mistake saying the child was 18 years old.

Families do not hesitate to go into debt in order to pay school fees. "Mrs. Yolande owes so much back rent that her companion had to hide, but their children are in school. [...] I asked Mrs. Liliane how she is keeping six children in school despite being a widow. She said, 'I pay for school, and we eat less. If someone gives us bread, we'll share it, and go to bed with nothing else.'"<sup>21</sup> However, these situations are very insecure and the children are likely to leave school as soon as a family member is ill or other obstacles arise.

## **B. Causes of separation of parents and children**

### **1. Loss of authority by the parents**

If a child gets into trouble, neighbors will put pressure on the child's parents to punish or beat the child. If it happens again, the neighbors will urge that the child be sent away. Parents may then send a child to live with relatives elsewhere, if possible.

*"Once I saw Mrs. Tilou crying because a rich man was beating her son Jean for misbehaving. Mrs. Tilou said to the man, 'You may as well kill him, for I have nowhere to send him.' But she cried as she said this. The man beat Jean as though he was worthless, and said, 'If you throw a rock again, I will break you.' Jean was sent away after this and hasn't been back since. I wonder if this would have been done to the child of a person of means."*<sup>22</sup>

When a parent loses authority for any reason, the children tend to lose their framework for life and to become extremely vulnerable.

### **2. Death or illness**

The average life expectancy in Haiti in 2001 was 45 years for men and 54 years for women.<sup>23</sup> There are many accidents: on the road, on the sea, fires, floods, landslides. Reaching a hospital is hard enough in broad daylight, and can be almost impossible in the dark or the rain. Malnutrition and lack of clean water are also huge challenges. And even when a family is able to reach a functioning hospital they may be denied treatment. A religious sister working in a health center in Port-au-Prince says:

*"We can serve only 150 children, so we take only the sickest ones. Some 99% of those we can help go home. But some parents never come back for the children. When the children have tuberculosis or AIDS, the parents usually do as well, and they have probably died after bringing their children here. Then there*

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<sup>21</sup> From a report by ATD Fourth World in 1999 about scholarships in Port-au-Prince.

<sup>22</sup> Mrs. Tilou lives in Port-au-Prince. Fourth World Volunteer Corps knowledge meeting, Dec. 2002.

<sup>23</sup> World Health Organization

*are children who are dying when they arrive. Some parents may not return because they cannot afford a burial."*

Death or illness can destroy a fragile family. The family may go into debt to pay for a burial. Children may be separated. Ms. Jacqueline Plaisir<sup>24</sup> recalls:

*"Theresa is 15. Last month, her father told me that after her mother died, he tried to spend time with Theresa and her younger sisters. But he must leave often, and then Theresa raises the two younger girls. She used to sell coal. Now she sells lemons in the marketplace. They haven't been able to pay the rent, so they have been squatting. Now her father says he has no place at all for them to live, so he's trying to put all three girls into an orphanage."*

### **3. Emigration abroad**

Many families send one of their own to live abroad, in hopes that money will be sent home to help them survive. These emigrants are a mixture of very poor and less poor people. Young people going to work in the Dominican Republic tend to have a trade, which is not the case of the very poorest. Those taking illegal boats toward the U.S. are taking enormous physical risks that rarely succeed. However, they have paid sums of money in order to embark, and are not at all the very poorest.

The emigrants who are extremely poor tend to be men near the Dominican border who have no papers and no trade. They live in hiding. They often return empty-handed, having been stripped, robbed and humiliated by soldiers. Most of them continue, seeing no other way to try to get money for their family. When these separations are long, the family tends to fall apart and the children suffer.

### **4. Migration within the country**

Many urban families have relatives in the countryside, where they may send an ill family member to have more food and tranquility, or simply where they will be welcomed when times are hard. For instance, in the Grande Ravine part of Port-au-Prince, when a young man was shot, his mother had to borrow money for the burial. She then sent all but two of her children to live in the countryside. She could not pay back the loans and wanted to move away herself. But in the end it was impossible for her to find another place to live.

A couple who is separated may also send their children to one another. Ms. Nathalie Barrois<sup>25</sup> recalls, "Some parents send their children to the countryside for a few months so the parent can work, or because the children are likely to be better fed. When a father comes and asks to take [even very young children], a mother rarely refuses. But Jude was a baby who died that way, because he was just a few months old and had not been weaned." His father could not wait before traveling, and his parents thought it would be all right, but in fact Jude needed his mother's milk longer.

While boys and men born in the countryside are likely to remain there, many teenage girls leave the countryside for the city. Once they have a child, they are likely to remain in the city. For the past 20 years, 70% of those moving to the cities have been girls and women, "most of whom are illiterate, and have a very low earning capacity."<sup>26</sup>

### **C. Children living in the streets**

*"A child can be dressed decently one week, and in rags and in difficulty the next. Children can fall from respect so quickly. One Tuesday, a new child came by. He was nicely dressed, he spoke French with us, and he easily understood the books we had brought [for an activity.] The next Tuesday this boy had hurt his*

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<sup>24</sup> Ms. Plaisir is a Fourth World Volunteer Corps member, speaking in 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Ms. Barrois is a member of the Fourth World Volunteer Corps, speaking in 2002 about Cité Coicou.

<sup>26</sup> "Women's Struggles and Social Struggles in Haiti," by Ms. Myrtha Gilbert, National Library of Haiti, 2001.

*head. He was hiding behind a car because he was ashamed. At the beginning, he was pretentious; he even called himself 'the best.' He showed us he could read, write and draw. But after several weeks, he had understood that to live in the streets he would have to blend in with the others. Now he speaks only Creole, and he's made friends with the others. But because we saw how he was beforehand, he's ashamed in front of us. It turns out he used to live with religious sisters. But then he was put out."*

- Mr. David Lockwood, Fourth World Volunteer Corps member

Estimates are that some 10,000 children live in the streets in Haiti. Children living in the streets are unlikely to trust people they do not know. It can take months, and even years, to build the trust needed for them to speak honestly about their past. Because their survival can depend on lying, they are likely to say things they may regret later. It is unfortunate that news broadcasts have often been based on scant knowledge of the actual situation. These broadcasts, sometimes shown abroad with the sole purpose of shocking the listeners, can bring undeserved shame both to the country and to the children themselves.

UNICEF distinguishes between "children in the streets" and "children of the streets."<sup>27</sup> The former maintain somewhat regular contact with their family, particularly to bring home their earnings or to have a place to sleep. Some call them "working children." The latter have nothing left but the street and no one to count on but other children in their situation. There are fewer of them than there are children who are still linked to their family. They live in groups and are at an extremely high risk of premature death due to accidents, violence or illness.

The children of the streets are almost all from extremely poor families. Some of them have been ill-treated, either at home, in domestic service, or in an orphanage. Father Stra, who founded the Lakay Home for children of the streets in Port-au-Prince, says: "Most of these 80 to 100 children say they were ill-treated. The older ones, those whose thinking is mature, say they are here because of poverty, because they did not have what they needed at home. They do not usually say this directly."

Mr. Baptiste is a man who lived in the streets as a child:

*"I was the oldest of six children. None of us went to school. One day, an uncle offered to house me and send me to school. In fact, I rose at 5 every morning to work in his house and in the fields. I never went to school. Eventually I ran away. [...] I was beaten up by the other kids in the street, until they said, 'Now you're part of our gang.' There was freedom in the streets, the carnival, friends. [...] But there's also a lot of abuse by the older kids. We would fight with broken bottles. [...] Living in the streets means doing things you can't confess to. It brings shame on your family. [...] Today, more than 60 or 70 of the youths I knew have died violent deaths."<sup>28</sup>*

#### **D. Voluntary institutionalization of children**

Many parents feel that their environment is too dangerous for their children or feel unable to give their children what they need. Some of these parents hope their children will receive education and be taught a trade by being sent to what they call "orphanages." These are centers where the children will be housed and fed at no cost to the parent. Although there may not be one bed per child, there tends to be more room than in the child's home. Parents are encouraged to bring clothing regularly. There is not always a guarantee of schooling. If the center runs out of funding, the children are sent home. Some of these institutions are actually for orphans, who may eventually be adopted. There are also institutions for children whose parents are alive, but who may nevertheless be adopted. In many such cases, parents are not allowed to visit more than twice a month. The parents who live nearby visit whenever they are allowed, fearing that

<sup>27</sup> Lakay: *Un foyer pour les enfants des rues*, UNICEF, 1998.

<sup>28</sup> He wrote a testimony about this experience for the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty in 2002 and was interviewed in 2003.

if not, their child will be adopted. In one family known by ATD Fourth World, the parents were asked not to visit too often:

*"Things were harder for [the Guerda family] because the father was mentally ill. This gave the family a reputation, so Mrs. Guerda decided they needed to move. After this, her son Dieubon began spending time with children living in the streets, ones who worked washing cars and selling things. He was only 10 and he wasn't always welcomed by the others. Only from time to time would he go home to sleep. His mother often went to look for him downtown. Sometimes she came by to ask if we had seen him. [...] When her son Mick was 10 [...], he went to live in an orphanage run by sisters. They asked that his parents not visit him too often 'because then he will not want to stay here.'"*

Some parents feel they must put their child in an orphanage because they have no other options. In Port-au-Prince, one parent registered her two daughters for an orphanage because she could not afford to send them to school, and was also being threatened with the demolition of her home if she could not pay rent for the land. Other parents believe their child will have more opportunities in an orphanage. One mother requested that her son be sent to an orphanage in the hopes that he would become a priest. Were he to stay home, she knew she could not afford to pay for the studies necessary to prepare for the priesthood.

Sometimes a child will stay only temporarily in an orphanage, as was the case with Mrs. Elise's children. Fourth World Volunteer Corps members noted:

- *Sept. 2001: Mrs. Elise of Port-au-Prince asked to have her children tested for AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria so they might be registered for an orphanage that a pastor plans to open soon. Over the summer, Mrs. Elise had to spend a lot of money on health care for one of her daughters, and she can't afford school fees anymore. She is also worried about her 6-year-old, Colette, being in this neighborhood with nothing to do. After the tests, Colette was admitted. Mrs. Elise is allowed to visit every other Sunday. She is hoping to have Colette home during the vacation, but she's not sure it's allowed. Mrs. Elise says Colette will stay in the orphanage 'until she learns a trade.'*

- *December 2001: Mrs. Elise has been visiting Colette and says she's doing well. The orphanage is run by Haitians in collaboration with people abroad. Mrs. Elise does not know if Colette will be allowed home for Christmas.*

- *March 2003: In the 18 months Colette has been in the orphanage, Mrs. Elise has not once been allowed to bring her home for a holiday. Mrs. Elise never misses a visiting day. She is afraid of losing Colette.*

- *July 2003: The pastor explained to the parents that the children might be adopted internationally. Mrs. Elise immediately took Colette out of the orphanage. She did so without saying that she will not bring her back. She did not dare ask for Colette's belongings or her health records.*

Some of these institutions have a serious teaching plan, trained staff, and decent facilities where children can become educated and learn a trade. Usually the best institutions are ones that welcome a specific group of children, such as those who have been living in the streets, have AIDS, or the children of very poor families with whom the institution has made a learning plan for the children. For some families, having one child succeed at their studies in this kind of orphanage can have positive effects for the whole family.

There are other institutions run by people (who may be Haitians or foreigners) whose goal is not to educate but to make money. Here, the results can be catastrophic: educators beating children or dismissing them when there is no food left. Some educators take drugs or use weapons. In these situations, some children have breakdowns or become violent. Children may fight with one another, the strongest bullying the weakest with no consequences. Although many people in Haiti are working on the issue of children's rights, there remains very little inspection of the conditions in these institutions:

*"In Port-au-Prince, a young man opened an orphanage with his friends. Despite their lack of any training, they received funding from an international organization. The orphanage was supposed to be for children living in the streets, but the director started out by recruiting children he knew from his old neighborhood. The children are fed in the orphanage, but [not all of them] go to school. Mrs. Lucile sent her two youngest children there. They ran away after a few days to come home, saying they had been beaten in the orphanage. Mr. Walter's children came home as well."<sup>29</sup>*

Even in the best institutions, it is rare that the institution can afford to keep children there long enough to give them proper academic and professional training. If a child does manage to stay for many years and to receive adequate training, it will still be difficult for this young adult to find work in a harsh job market. The different lifestyle of the orphanage will make it quite hard for the young adult to reintegrate into his family. Often the family's high hopes for this young person have been disappointed by the challenging reality.

#### **E. "Restavèk" children in domestic service**

*"When Jocelyne's mother had no more money to feed her, Jocelyne, then 7 or 8, was sent to live with her father, and then with her grandmother. She was able to go to school. When she was 12 or 13, she had to leave the village to go work in the capital. Her grandmother sent her to a lady's home where Jocelyne did the housework, cooking, fetching of water, and babysitting. But then Jocelyne fell ill, and the lady sent her back to her grandmother's."*

*"Next, Jocelyne spent 18 months in the countryside working in another home. But she had to leave there as well. Not long afterwards, she was arrested for stealing in the market. The whole village knew about it, so she had to go back to the capital to look for work. [...] A friend's uncle welcomed her, but Jocelyne fell sick and the uncle sent her away from fear of catching her illness."*

*"Now 15-and-a-half years old, Jocelyne is alone in the city. She has not seen her parents in many years, and she knows they cannot afford health care for her sickness. [...] ATD Fourth World helps her to get health care, and she asks them to tell her mother she is in the hospital. Her mother visits and Jocelyne says, 'My mother cried because I am ill. She will come again. She loves me very much, even if she hasn't been able to do much for me.'"<sup>30</sup>*

Children working in domestic service are very much in the news in Haiti today. They are called "restavèk": one who lives with another. But this word is not anchored in Haitian traditions, and most children in domestic service find it a shameful term, one they do not choose. Recently "Limyè Lavi," a group of organizations working with children in domestic service in Port-au-Prince began to think about finding another name for these children "because many of them do not wish to be called this. If we use this name to invite them to a meeting, many of them will not want to come."

Many organizations are focusing on domestic service by minors. Nationally known figures and international institutions denounce the situation. Documentaries circulate abroad showing a nightmarish reality. However, we think it is important to put this situation in context, and to show as many different facets as possible. Most Haitian children do a great deal of work, even in their own family. Some rural areas have been under-served for so long that a family wanting schooling for their children has no choice but to send the children to another family in a town or city. For some children, this has been a positive opportunity. There are also some families so poor that they see no choice other than to send their children to another family, simply so that the children can eat.

Nevertheless, the child in domestic service is at the mercy of the host family, which may treat the child as well or badly as it pleases.

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<sup>29</sup> From notes by Ms. Barrois.

<sup>30</sup> *Chronicle of the Fourth World*, Fourth World Publications, 1991.

## 1. The status of domestic workers in Haiti

The law requires that a salaried domestic employee be at least 15 years old. Many adult domestics are required to live in their employers' home, which means leaving their own children to be raised by others. Very little is required of the employer, so salaries tend to be extremely low for very long hours. Children brought together by CODEHA describe these situations this way:

*"Some parents are poor and don't have enough to buy food for their children, so the parents go into domestic service. But not all of them will do it because people say they will feel degraded. Or people say if you are in domestic service, your reputation will be worsened. When you are old, even if your child has become someone, the people you used to work for will say, 'Oh I know that boy, his mother worked for me, she used to clean up our dog's droppings.'"<sup>31</sup>*

Magalie is a 15-year-old who works in a home where she is responsible for all household tasks. She works long hours and is not allowed to go out. But she does continue to go to school, and she is proud to be on her own, no longer with her parents. She may not visit her home, but her brother Robert visits her on Wednesdays and Saturdays. They also continue to see each other in school. Her mother, Mrs. Yvette, says that this is an opportunity and that Magalie is doing well. But she also recognizes that Magalie pays a price by working so hard to do other people's laundry and by seeing less of her family.

## 2. Child domestics receive food and schooling

The law also allows children ages 12 to 14 to work as domestics without a salary, and within certain conditions. The most recent relevant Haitian law was passed in 1984 and stipulates that "no child younger than 12 should be entrusted to a family for domestic labor" and "any person having one or more children in his service has the contractual obligation toward them to treat them as would a good father, to furnish them with decent lodging, appropriate clothing, healthy and sufficient food. He is also required to register them with a center of vocational or academic learning [...] and ensure them healthy pastimes." This law also says: "It is forbidden to employ children: during the school hours fixed by the school at which they are registered, on Sunday afternoons, on legal holidays, and during the night."

When living conditions become too difficult, parents often try to find a place where their children will be fed in exchange for doing chores. In Port-au-Prince, for example, Elifet's father died when he was 12 years old. His mother, who was herself quite ill, explains: "I have nothing left. I can't send my children to school hungry. A man offered a job calling out to people to fill up a bus, in exchange for food. So for the moment, this is what Elifet is doing. He is not going to school."<sup>32</sup>

Sometimes the situation is temporary and the children come home as soon as the family is capable of providing for them. Mr. Godfroy Boursiquot is the founder of CODEHA. In an interview in 2003 about the Vallée de Jacmel, he said, "When the harvest is not ready yet and there is nothing left to eat, there are always some children from poor areas who arrive in a less poor area. Their parents come from the poor areas to ask, 'Do you happen to have an animal that needs to be tended to? I can lend you a child who will tend to it.' So some families agree to welcome one or two children. The children's parents come by to see them regularly. They ask their child how he is, what work he does, what relationships he has with the others he works with. They also ask the host family, 'Do you happen to have dirty clothes? I could do your laundry.' They are offering a service, but in fact you could offer some food afterwards. And as soon as the rain comes, the child hears that things are going better at home, and he decides to return home."

In some cases, a host family will welcome a child for many years as a form of solidarity. The child's own family may have many children, and is usually extremely poor.

<sup>31</sup> Report about families, by CODEHA, 1997.

<sup>32</sup> Report by Ms. Anne-Marie Toussaint, Fourth World Volunteer Corps member, 2001.

The child helps the host family and has her needs seen to by them. The child maintains contact with her own family. Mrs. Alphonse, a parent from the Vallée de Jacmel interviewed in 2003, said: "When a child has to leave his parents because they can't care for him, even though you don't have much either, if you could use the help, you really should ask the child to live with you. The boy I have with me at the moment is not my relative. He is the oldest of his family, and his mother could not care for him nor send him to school, so he was sent to me. If you are sick, the child can help you by bringing water. I help these children and they help me. Sometimes they visit their families, they don't forget them. When I took in children before, I could not afford to send them to school. But more recently, I have been sending them to school."

Mrs. Janette is a parent from Fond-des-Nègres. Also interviewed in 2003, she said, "Of my six children, three do not live with me. [...] My hands are sick, I can do nothing. [...] One of my children lives with his father, you can see him in the courtyard. The other two are 80 kilometers away in Maniche near Les Cayes with strangers [people who are not relatives]. They do chores, and the family sends them to school. I sent them there quite young, at the ages of 3 and 4. One is 11 now. He did not succeed in school last year and he is about to repeat a grade. The other is doing fine. They are not actually in the same family, but they are near each other. I saw them last September. Maybe I'll see them again in August. I have my two little girls with me, who are in pre-school. My oldest daughter is 23. She lives here and does everything. And her young half-brother lives here too."

Some people have said that the practice of employing children in domestic service began during the colonial period, but according to recent publications: "Researchers have concluded that the tradition of domestic service [...] evolved during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the context of urbanization and in direct link with the living conditions of peasants."<sup>33</sup> Most children sent into domestic service are sent from the countryside into a less rural area. But the system has now broadened to include urban children as well, due to population increases and the harsh living conditions of the urban shantytowns.

### 3. Living conditions of these children

In 1998, the Psycho-Social Institute of the Family carried out a study for UNICEF by interviewing 1,320 children in domestic service in Haiti:

- *Some 74.6% of these children were girls.*
- *Although most of them eat only twice a day, and a third of them only once a day, 90% of them say they eat the same amount of food as the host family. They also say they ate still less when they lived at home.*
- *Some 60% of the children are related to their host family. However, 80% did not arrive in their host family directly from their own family, but stayed with others beforehand. This detour generally weakens their links to their own family.*
- *Although every single one of them believes school is the only path to a better future, 77% of them reach the age of 15 without having set foot in a school.*
- *Only 46% of them see their family once a year. Most of them spoke, directly or indirectly, about their nostalgia for home life, and their need for affection and moral support.*
- *Asked why they are in service, 93% said, "My parents are too poor and have too many children." They are all from families of at least 4 children, and some are from families of up to 11 children. Asked how they think the problem of children in domestic service could be solved, 72% said, "The mother should not have so many children."*

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<sup>33</sup> "Radiographie de la domesticité en Haïti," by Mr. Hugo Merveille, published in "Le Nouvelliste," 21 May 2003.

- 63% of them suffer most from the humiliation of feeling worthless.
- Most of them would not be ready to return home unless their family could afford to raise them.

Although there are some situations where children are treated well in domestic service, there are no safeguards to protect them. In the worst cases, they risk abuse, sometimes at extremely young ages. Even in the best cases, they are in a situation that is unnatural, because it is due to their parents' destitute circumstances. They are missing out on their family's affection, and they tend to feel they must do enough work to deserve their food.

Ms. Jacqueline Plaisir has observed the family of René, which hosts three other children in St. Marc:

*"Two of the children in service have been going to school. The third arrived a few months ago, and will begin school soon. When René's family goes to the beach, they bring along the children in service, as part of the family. Recently, the parents of one of the boys in service came to bring him home. They are moving away, and have found work for their son with a cabinet-maker. This boy of 15 has been with René's family for three years, and the whole household was crying. The boy cried the most, knowing he would not return to school. [...] Children are asked to serve adults. It's the same with the family's own children. Every 5 minutes, they are asked to do a chore, sometimes by three adults at once! René has worked a lot with his father. But there is a difference with the children in service. They are up before any of the family members, quite early. And a child in service will always accept to be of service, while the host family's own child can say, 'I'll do it later!'"*

Mr. Felix Laloi, assistant principal of an elementary school in Fond-des-Nègres, observes, "Because a host family is helping a child, they insist the child help them as well. Sometimes it goes too far. For example, it is time for school, but they do not leave the child time to wash or eat before school. The child should set out at 7:30 am, but the family keeps him until 7:45 or 8:00. This is a problem for the school."

Mr. Junior Polo is the principal of an alternative school in Port-au-Prince, meant mainly for children in domestic service. He also founded GREDEVE, a group families helping one another to promote child development. Interviewed in 2003, he said:

*"In my street, all the families, rich and poor, welcome a restavèk child. The child in a rich home is luckier; he will get hand-me-downs. The child in a poor family has a harder time. The families who can manage it put these children in school in the evening or afternoon. The school we opened for them is free. The supplies were provided by UNICEF. We went to each home to speak with people, saying, 'If there is a child here who does not go to school, we can take the child. You have only to see that the child is clean, and not barefoot.' Of a hundred children who were registered, 30 actually attended. We visited the families again to understand why. Some of the children never come outdoors because they do not have shoes. In homes with two children, we see only one of them at a time. The two are sharing a pair of shoes. Sometimes a child arrives wet because he has just washed his clothes and they have not dried yet. None of them come to school every day. Those who come attend 2 or 3 times a week. Most of them are restavèk, but there are also some children who still live at home and whose parents are quite poor. A child in domestic service always has a harsher fate than the others in the family. Say the family has four children and welcomes one restavèk. If the family receives four pairs of shoes, it is the family's children who will get them. And the restavèk child will be doing more of the chores. These children have no stability. The host family is always ready to send them away."*

#### 4. What becomes of these children?

Sometimes there is a tacit agreement between the child's family and the host family. The child's family may occasionally send care packages to the host family. When their means worsen, the child's family will communicate less and less. These children may suffer consequences at the hands of the host family, and on top of this, their relationship with their own family ebbs away until they can no longer return home. In this case, if the host family no longer wishes to keep a child, they will send him or her to yet another family (even if the child is a relative of the original host family). Then the child is completely cut off from his or her family. This said, if the child's family gets wind of any ill treatment or abandonment, they will do anything possible to bring the child home.<sup>34</sup>

When a child in domestic service no longer gives her employers satisfaction, or when the child reaches a certain age, or when there is a "problem," such as the child becoming pregnant, the host family will send the child home if there is still contact with the family. But rebuilding this relationship can be difficult, especially when the family's hopes for their child have been disappointed and when they have no more economic means than before.

The Global March Campaign 2001 Against Child Domestic Labor highlights other dangers of domestic service: mental and physical fatigue of the work, constant verbal intimidation, and hunger can all cause work accidents such as burns from ironing or cuts while preparing food. These difficulties can also erode a child's health and lead to chronic fatigue, migraines and vertigo. These factors, as well as any physical, psychological or sexual violence, can push these children to flee to a life in the streets.

#### 5. Consequences of media coverage of the situation

Estimations of the number of *restavèks* vary, perhaps because people define the term differently. Most estimates are around 300,000. Recent figures from UNICEF and the International Program for the Abolition of Child Labor are from 100,000 to 130,000. A recent article defined a *restavèk* as a child treated like a domestic, and a "*pitit kay*" as a child "of the house," treated as well as a member of the family.<sup>35</sup> "*Limyè Lavi*," the group that works with children in domestic service, defines *restavèk* as "a child who lives not with his parents but with people who make him work, who do not give him the same affection they would give their own children, and who do not always respect this child's rights."

The word "*restavèk*" (which the children themselves find shameful) is now heard everywhere in Haiti, as well as in many industrialized countries where the image of Haiti is becoming one of martyred children. For those host families who take their responsibilities seriously and feel a commitment toward the child's family, this wave of criticism is hard to take. It criticizes not only the host families, but the children's own families for entrusting their child to someone else. For example, UNESCO stated (in the *Courrier* newsletter of June 2001): "Very often, the parents are the first to blame for the slavery of their children. They consider it a normal placement, from which they expect payment in money or in goods."

Mrs. Martin, a parent in Port-au-Prince, says: "On the radio, they speak as though all the children in service are abused. But the fact that a family sends their child into service does not mean they don't love him. The child's parents have a lot of courage to send away their child in hopes that the child will escape the family's miserable circumstances."<sup>36</sup>

All of the press coverage has changed the attitudes of the most well-off Haitians and they have almost completely stopped taking in children, preferring to hire an adult or a young adult. They may be hiring fewer domestics because of improved living conditions (running water, electricity, appliances), but a new awareness of the issue and a growing fear of criticism have also emerged.

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<sup>34</sup> From two articles: "*Domesticité, une porte ouverte sur la rue*" and "*Changeons la domesticité en solidarité*," published in *Le Nouvelliste*, 4 March 2003.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> From a report by Ms. Toussaint on events in Haiti from 1990-2000.

This means that those families who continue to welcome children are mainly poor themselves. These are parents who cannot afford to hire an adult and need someone to look after their younger children and do chores while they themselves earn a living. In a poor family, the child in service has even fewer opportunities than in a rich family to eat properly, receive health care and go to school.

There are positive efforts being made by some organizations to support children in domestic service. One in particular works with both the host family and the child in service, for example, by providing literacy classes to both of them. They try to help the host family and the child get to know one another differently so the child will no longer be considered a *restavèk*, but an adopted child who has been "loaned" by his or her own family, for a limited time. There is much work ahead, but this is a promising path.

## **II. Access to education as a way to strengthen very poor families**

School is the only hope for the poorest people that their children's future may change. Access to free, quality schooling is a fundamental element of giving children a possibility other than orphanages or domestic service. It is a way to build the country's future. The very poorest families in Haiti, as in so many other countries, live in ways that are not valued by their country's culture, whether in their Creole language, their use of traditional medicine, or their religious practices. They are looked down on for their lack of decent clothing and housing. Access to schooling is a way to enable their children to be proud of their culture and history, to build recognition of their families' contributions to this culture, and to contribute to it themselves. None of this is possible without a partnership of mutual respect between teachers and parents. In this section, we will share a model of how one school increased its accessibility to extremely poor children so that fewer of them would need to leave home in hopes of being educated.

### **A. Meeting very poor families through the Field Library<sup>37</sup>**

Fond-des-Nègres is a rural zone of 40,000 inhabitants. It is 120 km. away from the capital city. In Pémerle, a central town, Father Jean De Laatre asked ATD Fourth World to send members of its Volunteer Corps to help him develop a small school for 60 children from very poor families. Three Volunteer Corps members came in 1981. Their priority was first to meet some of the very poorest families, particularly those who were the most excluded and geographically isolated. The volunteers got to know these families and learned about their aspirations for their children's future.

From the first months after the volunteers' arrival, they noticed that some of the girls who were having the most difficulty in class came from the same very isolated region. It became a priority for the volunteers to spend time getting to know these girls' families and neighbors. Every Saturday, they went to this area to run a Field Library where children and adults could come to hear books being read aloud for a few hours and to discuss them. However, there were some children who never came to the activity because they were working in the fields or homes, or because they were too ashamed of their clothing to join the other children. Little by little, the Volunteer Corps members found discreet ways to bring the activity to these isolated children, by walking with them to and from the river or the field, or by visiting their homes. The children were able to show a thirst for learning that no one had suspected. Gradually, more and more girls and boys showed interest in learning.

The older ones became interested in facilitating the activities for the younger ones by reading, telling stories, and singing. Toward this end, it was important to train them, and to encourage their resolve to reach the most isolated and excluded children. This led to a series of Field Libraries in various communities at the request of the young people, who

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<sup>37</sup> Some of the information in this section has been published in *Reaching the Poorest*, by ATD Fourth World and UNICEF, New York, 1996, pages 87-98.

also made a commitment to run the activities. Children opened a door to learning. Young people had a way to show their solidarity. Parents were given the hope that a school might accept their children, no matter what difficulties they had or how far behind they were.

### **B. A new approach to schooling**

Encouraged by the level of community interest and energy, the volunteers helped facilitate changes in the Pémerle school that were geared toward fostering greater participation by very poor families. New teachers were hired, and new "little schools" were established in the isolated hill region, such as the one opened in 1984 in Viau, more than a two-hour walk away from the center of Fond-des-Nègres. This allowed the youngest ones to enter school. Previously, they had not gone because they were too young to make the long walk. As volunteers continued the Field Library activities, they continued to meet children who were not in school, and to give them the highest priority for enrollment for the next school year. The school continued to grow, and admitted children as old as 10. Families with slightly greater resources agreed to enroll only one of their children, since the others could go elsewhere, thereby making more room for the poorest children.

The new students were at a disadvantage because of their living conditions. On harvest or market days, they often missed school to help their families. Other absences came when a child needed to care for an ill family member. But as the teachers got to know the parents and to understand these challenges, they found ways to accommodate the families' difficulties. Schoolmates also offered to help one another.

Interviewed in 2002, one teacher recalled:

*"We went to see children who had never been to school to register. When they came, barefoot and with holes in their pants, not a single child made fun of them. There were a lot of hidden children who never used to go out. We had birth certificates made for them that they would never have had otherwise. In every five houses, we would find 10 or 15 children with no legal existence. So we knocked on every door and spoke with people. Adults would say, 'Well they could go to school, but they have nothing to wear and no shoes.' We said there would be no problems if the children came as they were. So now they go to work in the fields first, and then they hurry to get ready for school."*

At the beginning there were no textbooks or curriculum. The teachers saw their job as preparing the children for life and improving their skills for coping with their environment. Priority was given to: teaching literacy in Creole, and later in French, basic arithmetic, creative activities, and activities linked to discovering nature and the world around them, such as the work of Haitian farmers and craftsmen. The goal was to teach children to take pride in their own background and to encourage their desire to participate in the development of their country.

It was difficult to find qualified teachers at the beginning because the pay was lower than in officially recognized schools. Only some teachers had themselves finished primary school. Some felt inadequate and resigned mid-year. Others fell ill, or moved away. The high turnover was a constant concern. The newest teachers also feared the judgment of their peers, and participating in training sessions that might highlight their lack of skills. Training sessions were hard to impose also because they took place outside of school hours, when so many teachers needed to run a market stall in order to support their families. Over the years, however, the teachers helped each other to improve and took a certain pride in their commitment. "I'm staying and I'm devoting myself to poor children," said a teacher who could have earned twice as much elsewhere. This commitment led to recognition from a school district inspector and the development of various programs to support the teachers' ongoing training.

### **C. Parents as new partners**

From the very start, parents made an effort to contribute by providing vegetables for school lunches, or by donating a symbolic gourde<sup>38</sup> for school expenses each month. Some did not hesitate to beg in order to provide school supplies. A sliding payment scale was developed for the purchase of textbooks. Beginning in 1983, if parents did not come to school meetings or if a child was ill for a long period of time, the teachers and volunteers would visit the home. This innovative practice built good relationships between the school and families. Once parents had been visited, they became less reluctant to meet with teachers at the school itself.

It took great perseverance to convince parents to express their opinions about the content of the curriculum. Imagine what participating means to landless parents of seven children who have had no schooling themselves and who must beg for a living:

*"One day, the school offered to admit the three oldest girls, and their younger brother the following year. The father was astounded. He agreed, even in the case of his oldest daughter, a valuable helper to her mother. Because of malnutrition, only the oldest daughter was able to finish the school year. Despite the period of mourning due to the death of one of her younger brothers, her father allowed her to take her final exams, which she passed. For her father, this was an immense discovery. His eldest daughter succeeded, and will be able to write for the family. This means that all of his children could potentially succeed. He began coming to the parent meetings. There was a time when he spoke with his head down. Now, he shows his face when he speaks. You can look him in the eye. He is a different man."<sup>39</sup>*

The first attempt to set up a parents' committee was made in 1990. It took three more years and the assistance from a training center before the teachers felt less threatened and more willing to establish real collaboration with the parents' committee. In the "little schools" in the isolated hill region, the parents would build or repair the classrooms during school vacations. In Viau, they built a simple one-room house for the teacher who was unable to make the trip back down to central Fond-des-Nègres on a daily basis.

#### **D. Evaluation after 20 years**

The Family School of Pémerle, Fond-des-Nègres, was founded twenty years ago. Recently ATD Fourth World interviewed Mr. Felix Laloi, who studied at the school as a child and became its assistant principal when he grew up:

*"I've been teaching in this school for six years. Things weren't easy for me as a child. It was thanks to this school that I managed to study. I'm still studying, for a law degree. I owe it to this school to serve here, where children have such difficult lives. The school's goal is to help children whose parents have no money. Some 40 to 50% of our students are children who live with other people, with relatives or acquaintances of their parents. These children have work to do before class and they have no time to prepare.*

*"This school has improved over time. We don't give an education for the poor, but the same education a child from a rich family would get. This is why some parents who are better off want to send their children here. But 80% of our students are quite poor. We have 535 students, and the enrollment will be 640 next year. This is because some parents who were sending their children to other schools could not afford it any longer. They asked us to accept their students, even if the children had to repeat two grades, just so they would not stop learning! So we agreed to take some children from other schools by adding a few to each of our 16 classes. That will make 40 students per class. It's a lot. In Cuba they take only 22 students per class and they have very high literacy. But there are other schools in this region with 80 per class! We can't take all the children*

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<sup>38</sup> About two-tenths of a US dollar.

<sup>39</sup> *Reaching the Poorest*, page 95.

who want to come, they would have no room to breathe on the benches and they wouldn't learn well. And the teacher would not have time to correct each child.

*"We provide almost everything free: books, pencils, notebooks. Other schools do not provide this. And some schools have no curriculum, and so children fail. When our students fall asleep or have headaches, the teachers check discreetly to see if they ate that morning. If they are sick, we have a pharmacy to give first aid. Or we can send them to the hospital, always staying in touch with the parents and helping with the cost when needed. It's not easy, because all the teachers must have another job to make ends meet. Some teachers have not finished their own studies and are working to pay for that. So they have very little time.*

*"Depending on a child's situation, we can be more flexible about the rules. It's very hard to teach when children come late. A child who is regularly late for no reason will be punished by spending up to 5 minutes on his knees. But what if the child has walked 2 or 3 km, crossing the river and the mud? Or the child might be in domestic service. We try to know all the children's situations to be flexible.*

*"Three times a year, we invite all the parents to meet us. The teachers can't get to know all the parents. But many of the students are cousins or brothers and sisters. So a parent who is close to the other parents, and who comes to the meeting may be able to tell the others about it later. It can be hard for a parent to speak at these meetings, in front of 500 others, but many are not shy, and we discuss discipline and the curriculum."*

Other improvements he mentioned include: teaching written Creole and French at a younger age, when children learn the spelling more easily; adding books adapted for the youngest children to the school library; and letting older children take books home for a week to discuss later.

There are two small schools of 90-100 students each in very isolated parts of Fond-des-Nègres: The Viau Family School, and the Pélicier Family School. As in Pémerle, the school and the supplies are completely free. All the children in the area can register. In an interview, Mr. Ganage Bruno, who is responsible for the Viau school, and Mr. Erilus Mondésir, who is responsible for the Pélicier school, said:

*"We always ask that parents tell us if a child has a problem. If we hear that a child is ill for several days, we'll close the school early in order to go visit the child. It takes about an hour and a quarter of walking to visit the children who are the furthest away. Here, we know all the parents, and we get along well with them.*

*"The children entering our school at the lowest level may be only 6 years old, or they may be as old as 13 or 14. For recess, we separate them by age so that the older ones don't knock over the younger ones. We allow them to attend school even in sandals and even with no uniform. I buy pencils for them, and when they run out, I break a pencil in half so they don't waste time without writing.*

*"I am part of this milieu, so here is my situation: sometimes my life is hard, but I know that some people are having an even harder time than I am. There are days when I can count on only 50 gourdes for my whole family, but I know families who must scrape by on a fifth of that amount. This is why I must be patient. I always remember what Miss Marie [van Dijck] said: 'Knowledge isn't in clothing, but in the mind.' So even if a child doesn't have proper shoes, you mustn't treat him badly. With patience, you will help him, so that when he gets somewhere some day, he'll know who he is and be able to write his name."*

## **E. Interview with the director of the Family School network**

Dr. Charles Antoine Louis directs the Family School network in Pémerle, Pélicier and Viau. ATD Fourth World interviewed him twice: once in 2000 to prepare for the seminar run by UNICEF and the government of Mauritius, and once in 2003 for this study:

*"This school is reserved for the poorest. We don't advertise. Children are the ones who tell their parents when registration day is. It's not rare for a single family to have 5 or 6 children in attendance. I register the children myself, in order to ensure that we are taking the very poorest. With all the respect and discretion possible, I question parents, especially new ones, about their situation. I try to accept brothers and sisters, but sometimes I ask a parent not to register all their children at once, in order to leave room for other families. We never have enough room.*

*"Some 70% of our children graduate after 6 years of primary studies without having repeated a grade. Another 20% graduate after repeating one or two grades. Our students do quite well in secondary school and some earn a baccalaureate. Not long ago, this was unimaginable. [...] As for those who do not graduate, we never ask a child to repeat a grade for a third time. Although we want to take all children, in this case we look for another place for the child. There is also a small number of students who leave the school, sometimes because their family has moved, and very occasionally because the student has a baby.*

*"Our teachers today are much more educated than they were 20 years ago. In Pémerle, at a minimum, they have spent 10 years in school. This is not the case in Viau and Pélicier, but that's another story. We have on-going training for the teachers twice a week, and annual seminars, with the help of the national pedagogical inspectors in our district. I do fire the ones whose students are not succeeding. But with documents from the internet, and my own passion for teaching, I have a lot of tools to help the teachers.*

*"I am a dental surgeon, and I began this as a sideline, but it has become my main occupation. I love the work. Giving the poor education is a mission for me. I must recall the memory of two men: Fr. Joseph Wresinski, who saw the poor in this district and swore to help them; and Fr. Jean de Laatre, who gave me the chance to be of use in entrusting the Pémerle school to me. There will be no progress without basic education for people. These children of poverty come from hovels where ignorance has reigned for generations. Today, with education, they have become the hope of their families, and the light that gleams in their homes.*

*"Our figures speak for themselves. More than 90% of our students graduate, while the national average is 17%! This proves that once the economic obstacle is lifted, and when the teachers are motivated to make the very poor welcome, schooling is possible for all."*

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Poverty separates parents and children in Haiti in many ways. Because the poorest families are often unable to provide for their children's needs, children are regularly sent away from their parents to orphanages or to work as domestic servants in other households. Sometimes a family's poverty can even drive youth to live on the streets. Such conditions leave children at a greater risk of abuse and ill treatment.

One of the biggest challenges that families living in extreme poverty face concerns education. Access to education is not guaranteed for all children in Haiti, especially when schools are sparsely located, require costly supplies, and cannot accommodate families' complex needs. Even when resources are scarce, it is possible to make these schools more accessible and welcoming to children in poverty by enabling the teachers to learn more about their situation. Parents need to be seen as partners in their children's education and schools must be attentive to ways in which some children can be left out. Generations of Haitians have lacked the opportunity to receive an education but moving out of poverty is nearly impossible without one—through greater flexibility and respectful collaboration between families and educators, this can change.

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## CHAPTER THREE:



# Burkina Faso



## Introduction

As happens in many countries, groups of children live in the streets of Ouagadougou, the capital city of Burkina Faso. This chapter is based on 23 years of work by ATD Fourth World to build relationships with many of these children, and with the families they have left behind. Economic insecurity, globalization and urbanization are major factors compelling children from rural communities to attempt to survive in the city on their own at younger and younger ages. Life in the streets has certain attractions, but the children's health, survival and well-being are constantly endangered. Even those children who do manage to get by are missing their families' love and solidarity, as well as on cultural and economic traditions they did not have time to learn before leaving. In recent years, it has been possible to support the reunification of more and more of these families. This is done while continuing to support the children's vocational training.

Sometimes children are able to board in a vocational learning center, where they may receive preparation for their future. In Burkina Faso, no adult, with or without a trade, will find a lasting place in society unless the adult can carry on the honor of his or her family. This is why all children, even if they are succeeding in a trade school, need to clarify their relationships with their families before setting up shop or beginning their own family.

There are also children who do not succeed in vocational schools. The family is then all the more essential in helping them find a place in society. These are the children with whom ATD Fourth World chose to work most closely in the Courtyard of 100 Trades,<sup>40</sup> an open structure where children do not feel the constraints they may have fled in leaving their families. This openness created a framework for trust with the children, and later with their families. As members of the Fourth World Volunteer Corps, in our daily ties to these families, we are their friends, and we are welcomed like members of the family. So we try to offer what support we can, particularly with health problems. We also systematically support their efforts to put their children in school. These are concrete gestures that show that we are not a social service agency, but a Volunteer Corps that is committed to their future. In this chapter, we will share our experiences in supporting the children's efforts to re-establish their ties with their families, and some of our common thinking, built with both the children and the families, about their place in a rapidly changing country.

### I. Why children leave home

#### A. Leaving home is not necessarily seen in a negative light

##### 1. What families say

*"Children living at home may leave during the dry season. They are looking around. But they must come home to help plant during the rainy season. Those who leave and don't return were unable to earn any money. But even if you earned nothing, you must come home. You left home to succeed. But if you did not succeed, it's best to come home. You won't find a better place to live. It's your way of being that will make a good place to live."*

- Madi's uncle

*"If a youth leaves to go to the city and prospers there, we would not ask him to come home. But the youth who is barely getting by should come home where he can help us farm. If there is enough for the village to eat, the youth will be glad and can leave again."*

- Mr. Amidou (another of Madi's uncles)

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<sup>40</sup> An open-air vocational workshop for children living in the streets of the capital city, founded by ATD Fourth World in 1983.

It is to some extent part of the rural tradition that youths will leave home for a while to try to bring earnings home, and to prove themselves. Today, however, as rural survival has become increasingly harder for families, it has become more and more necessary for some family members to leave home. What a family can grow is scarcely enough to feed itself, as the soil continues to degrade. Most families do not grow enough to be able to pay for "modern" medical care, which is never free, nor for school fees and materials.

## 2. Children leave home earlier and earlier

*"When we were children, we wanted to learn our family's work: raising sheep, goats or chickens, making pottery, as our parents had always done. We didn't even know where the road to the city was! Back then, you wouldn't leave home until you were 25 or 30 years old, and even then you would ask your father's permission. And chances were, you'd be back in the village a year later. If you were successful, your father would let you leave again. If not, he would ask you to stay home.*

*"Today children of 15 are leaving, even when their fathers ask them to stay home. About half will listen to their fathers and stay, but the other half leave anyway. It's hard, we disapprove, but we have no solution. They are leaving at too young an age; they lack maturity and experience. They will meet people who are bad influences, and will follow them. For them to learn and to become someone, they'll have to meet someone who will love them like a parent."*

- Mr. Amidou

Rural parents are aware of the risks their children run, but they see no way to keep them home, where prospects are dim. In the past, there was no quest to "do better." The goal was to equal the achievements of one's ancestors. But today "doing better" has become the world's ideal. Hadji Ibrahim Zougmore, a nurse charged by the state with running health programs, has been part of ATD Fourth World for many years. He says:

*"A child's tolerance for constraints is negatively influenced by what he sees and what he thinks he understands. People believe that in the city it is easy to get rich. You see a person leave the village for the Ivory Coast and come back with enough money for a bicycle. Years ago, you could work abroad for many years before earning enough for a bicycle or a good blanket.*

*"When children see this, they want changes as fast as possible. [...] Even those who remain home have a changed mentality. They wonder why their father cannot afford that bicycle."*

There are also many families who have joined the rural exodus and come to live on the outskirts of the cities. They survive in semi-rural conditions, planting what they can around their home, and walking downtown to find odd jobs from day to day. Their children are even more vulnerable, living as they do with a front-row view of those who are "doing better." Little by little, some of these children doing odd jobs downtown stop coming home to sleep. They have left home too young to have learned the family values and traditions that could have anchored their personal growth.

The vast majority of the children living in the street who have been part of the Courtyard of 100 Trades over the years have been boys. There are also girls living in the streets. Mrs. Joséphine Yameogo, a social educator with the Ministry of Social Action, says: "I have begun meeting the families of girls living in the streets. Every last one of them is in great difficulty. I've realized that in fact what has been observed with boys could be said about the girls as well. In 1997, people did not think a girl would cut off all links with her family and live in the streets. But the sad fact today is that they do. Their mothers are in tears. [...] It is so important to support these families."<sup>41</sup>

## 3. What children say, and what can be understood about their lives

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<sup>41</sup> From an interview preparing a seminar on "Joining the families of children who live in the streets," run by ATD Fourth World in May 2003.

Most of the children we know say they came to the city to earn money to bring home. Some hoped to start practicing their own trades in their villages, or to help their families. What they say is consistent with their communities' traditions. And yet, within a single family, it is extremely rare to find siblings who have left together. What makes one child leave when brothers and sisters remained home?

- Some of them are running away from situations they did not accept. For example, their parents may have entrusted them to a religious master for study, but when things went badly, the child fled.
- Other children had a little schooling, but had to stop because of the death of their father or uncle, and the ensuing loss of income. It is growing harder and harder for any family of modest means to send children to secondary schools, as scholarships have disappeared. These children do not accept their fate. After having hoped for a future in the office work that society values, they would feel that they have failed if they were to return to their families' traditional livelihood.
- Some children are more curious than others. Albert explains, "I used to live with my aunt. One day a boy came to beg from us. He said, 'I live in the streets with other children and we have fun and do whatever we want. Come with me and you'll see.' So I followed him."
- A traumatic event may have prompted their flight from home; for example, a violent incident in the village or a parent's remarriage. It may take a very long time for the child to come dare speak to us about these situations. When the parents' generation has been decimated by death, children may find themselves being raised by a grandmother so elderly that she lacks the means to impose the parental authority needed.
- Some children were not being raised by their parents, but by a relative or a family friend. In these cases, it may be that there is no one whose emotional ties to the children are strong enough to keep them home.

Guibrina left home at the age of 12. We got to know him in the city. When we asked to meet his family, he took us to meet his father, a poor peasant in a situation similar to most others in their village. The father's only income comes from scouting for precious metals here and there. Over the years we have known Guibrina, he has come home for several long stays, but he has always returned to the city. It was just in the last two years that we came to understand that before leaving home Guibrina had almost never lived with his father. He was raised by his maternal grandmother in a neighboring village, and by his mother who lives in a distant region. So there is little common history to keep him with his father. Complicated family relationships are of course not unique to situations of poverty. However, when a family is already living in great material insecurity, a lack of strong family ties means one less reason to hang on.

When we asked Guibrina why he left home, he would give the same answer as many children: "It's no big deal!" And yet, he had been living with his uncle, and his mother was still alive. He had been going to school and helping the uncle sell parts for motorbikes. No one could understand why he left home. We have come to the conclusion that the insecurity faced by the entire country has made a life in the streets seem relatively normal. Children lack the knowledge needed to understand the abundance and wealth they see that has been imported from abroad. For many children, the only way they can imagine "doing better" is the myth they have heard of "being adopted by a white person."

In Bonkin (part of the village of Boulwando), during every dry season, we run a Street Library activity, reading books with children who are not enrolled in school. One day we were showing the children a book of photos of a village in Thailand. In the book, the village elders are expressing dismay that their children have left for the city. We asked the children in Bonkin whether they too planned to leave:

*"Yes!" they shouted in chorus.*

*A mother who was listening put in, "They all want bicycles, and once they have them, there's no keeping them home!"*

*So we pushed the children, saying, "Would you leave the elders all alone?"*

*"The younger children will stay!" they cried again.*

*"But what if the younger ones grow up and leave as well?"*

*"By then, we'll have come home!"<sup>42</sup>*

For rural children, leaving is the only way they will ever have a chance to try their hand at the modern world. City children tend to end up in the streets due to a crisis. In the end, it is a wave of innocence, ignorance and fatalism that continues to wash children up in the dangerous life of the streets.

## **B. Very poor parents have been made more vulnerable by changes in society**

Having many children was the traditional source of wealth, as fields sown by many hands were able to produce more abundant harvests. A large extended family also provided security when a parent died, as other adults were prepared to step in to care for the children. Today, on the contrary, having a large family has become financially disastrous. Traditional medicine has given way to more expensive health clinics. Payment is expected for schooling and rent. Families now tend to be nuclear, which allows for simpler financial management than a complex extended family. But the most fragile families are losing another resource. This creates particular difficulties in the realm of education.

### **1. Parents' support networks are eroding**

Professor Badini, an education science researcher,<sup>43</sup> says: "There used to be a collective education. This could counter-balance a crisis in any single family. For instance, a child would identify not only with his or her parent, but with all the adults of that generation. This meant that a single man might be a bad father, but his brother, or another uncle of that generation would remain nearby and be able to compensate for the situation."

In 1998, UNICEF and ATD Fourth World organized a group of social partners who work with children in difficulty to reflect together on the relationships within the children's families. They said:

*"Initiation rites served an important purpose. By the end of the rite, it would be apparent that if one child was behaving wildly, another child could go to set him straight. At the time, anyone in the village or even from another village could correct someone else's child. Parents were not left alone to raise their children. And when a parent said no, the entire village would back the parent up.*

*"Every child had an aunt or a grandfather who could help them through difficult times with their parents. Today, children cannot make it through difficult times. There are no more initiation rites. They haven't learned to overcome obstacles. And they have no network of supportive adults. Everything is limited to a nuclear family. So when a problem occurs, the child sees no other option but to flee to the city. Children think they can escape a problem by rushing into a void."*

Hadji Zougmoré observes, "Times have changed. A proverb says, 'You are the whole family's child when you are doing well. But when you're doing badly, it's over.' Today, particularly in big cities, if you correct someone else's child, their parents would have you arrested." The nuclearization of families and the tendency toward individualism have had some negative consequences in Burkina Faso. Nevertheless, the most privileged nuclear

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<sup>42</sup> "Boulwando," Annual Report, ATD Fourth World-Burkina Faso, 2002.

<sup>43</sup> Professor Badini teaches at the University of Ouagadougou, and directs an elite institute in Koudougou. He has been part of several meetings in the Courtyard of 100 Trades, including a major seminar to evaluate its work in June 2003.

families have managed to accommodate themselves to the trend, which allows them to fend off requests for assistance from their poorer relatives, who may be quite numerous. It is the most fragile families who are becoming increasingly isolated.

## 2. Traditional and modern sources of knowledge

*"Children are caught in the middle of a conflict in values: those of their families and those in modern society. [...] How can a child choose between them? If the child is not intellectually and psychologically flexible, the child will choose the easiest path, which may well be the worst."*

- Professor Badini

*"For those children who do go to school, they meet people their parents have not met and hear things their parents have not heard. This can lead them to talk back to their parents. The parents are caught off guard when their children announce things they know little about. For example, children may have heard a lot about family planning in school, and they may laugh at their parents for not knowing as much. It is hard for children to listen to parents who did not go to school."*

- Hadji Zougmore

Obviously it is important for schools to teach children knowledge from different sources, particularly curriculums that are slowly incorporating human rights education. What is hard to swallow is that respect for traditional culture is taught less and less. Illiteracy is equated with ignorance. Oral history traditions are not valued. This makes people feel invaded by foreign knowledge and values.

In village life, youths are never idle. They may occasionally leave their work for a game of table soccer, but they do much more: brick making (in great need due to the shortage of straw); collecting the grasses woven to make roofs and mats; transporting produce by bicycle to the roadside for sale. But parents say young people are no longer interested in weaving baskets or roofs.<sup>44</sup> Salfo, a child living in the streets, says, "My aunt brought me to the city to help her sell grilled meat in the marketplace. But other children there made fun of me. I left to join these children in the street who do what they want." Activities that once brought children honor for contributing to their families' livelihood have become a source of derision.

## 3. Struggling with schools and the many other influences on children

Having a child enrolled in primary school should be a victory. But given the overall lack of funding in the country, many schools are overcrowded and ill-equipped. Parents like Mrs. Josephine Ouedraogo know this: "I struggled so hard to enroll my son in school. But in fact, almost every morning he comes home because the teacher was absent and the class dismissed. Or when the teacher does arrive, she sends my son out to push her motorbike to a repairman, and to wait there for the repair to be made. What is he learning in all that time?"

*"There is nothing left to guide families. [...] The street and the school, which are not integrated with family life, are stronger than the family. [...] Parents see their children react in a certain way and wonder where they learned this. The children do not know, because the process is so insidious. Because parents do not know why their children behave in certain ways, the family's responsibility for educating its children is eroded. [...] Children are doubly lost for they are seeking themselves through parents who are seeking themselves as well. This creates instability, and some families may be accused of giving up on their responsibilities. For instance, when parents do not come to school meetings, others say: 'They paid the school fee, good, but now they think it's all up to the teacher.' But what*

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<sup>44</sup> "Boulwando" Annual Report.

*else can these parents do? As society modernizes, just what role is left for parents to play in educating their children? The parents are not welcome in school, and it is assumed that they have nothing to say."*

- Prof. Badini

As parents have been losing the community support that once helped raise children, this idea that parents are giving up on their children is widespread. Many of them do make unseen efforts to support their children, but they often do not succeed.

*"I've always wanted my children to suffer less than I have. I tried to teach my daughter to sow a crop. [...] She did not succeed in the fields. She did not succeed in school either. One day, her friend asked her what good it was to begin schooling, knowing that we were too poor to keep her there very long. So she quit school and went looking for a job. She's 20 now, but she does not have work."*

- Mr. Emmanuel Ouedraogo

#### **4. Authority becomes dependent on economic power**

As in Bonkin, ATD Fourth World also runs a Street Library activity every three weeks in a rural marketplace in Ourgou-Manega. During one of these activities, a member of the Fourth World Volunteer Corps was showing people a book of photos documenting rural life in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. In this Volunteer's report, she recounts that she explained how much life has changed in Europe:

*"A young man looked at the photos and reacted by saying, 'It's not the same anymore. My father sells meat, but I work in masonry. It's not good [that I am not in his trade] but we have no choice. We must earn money where we can.' [...] Other adults continued by explaining that girls no longer spin cotton because there is a lack of cotton. Crops that used to grow no longer thrive.*

*"Another photo shows a family sitting around a fire in the evening. Men are shelling nuts, women are darning, and an elder is telling a story. I tell the group that the fireplace used to be for us what a talking tree is for them. But today in Europe, most people listen to the television in the evening, not to grandparents.*

*"Here too, they answer, if there were a television, everyone would go watch it.'*

*"But since there's no television?"*

*"We still don't listen to the elders.'*

*"Why?"*

*"Because we're poor. Your child doesn't want to listen to you if you're poor."<sup>45</sup>*

Mr. Amidou told us the same thing: "When you have a child, you want him to learn what you do, and you want him to improve on your work. Today, we're poor. Children listen to parents when they have money. [...] We are so poor that children say, 'Let us leave to try earning money elsewhere.' When a child leaves, it's a separation.'" A group of workers for the Province Social Action Office has said: "Generally, when a family does have the minimum needed to live, there are fewer misunderstandings. Money can have a positive or negative influence." Hadji Zougmoré comments: "If you don't have the means to dress your children well for a festival, you become a weaker parent in their eyes. If your children must leave school because you can't afford it, they stop listening to you. [...] Even among brothers, the one who has the means to support the others is listened to more. This is because people's needs have increased."

A family may be visibly economically weak, and yet only one or two of its children leave. One could argue that this shows that extreme poverty, in and of itself, is not the main reason the children leave. But that would mean ignoring the fact that a context of widespread deep poverty in the country, endured for several generations, shapes people

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<sup>45</sup> Ms. Patricia Heyberger, as recorded in a report from February 2001.

in ways that go beyond what their community carries and hopes to pass on. Although not all children leave their families, it is rare to meet a child who does not dream of leaving and who is not looking for an opportunity. It is also rare to find parents who dare to hold their children back. There is in fact an entire generation of children and young people who—whether or not they leave their families—live with their eyes looking elsewhere, anywhere different from where they are. And yet there is no pathway linking their home to an “elsewhere” that respects where they came from.

## **II. Why it is difficult for children to return home**

Once children have left a rural community to try their luck at “doing better,” economic failure can become an enormous obstacle to returning home. Many children say, “But if I go home, people will expect gifts, and I have nothing!” or “In the village, you should be well dressed to be respected.” And yet their parents say, “Even if my child has nothing, if only he would come home!” The situation is similar for children who grew up in a city.

### **A. The family’s work, culture and identity are disdained**

Joseph was 17 when we met him. He had been living in the streets for quite some time. After knowing him for a while, we were preparing to accompany him home. We asked him his father’s occupation. He answered, “Nothing,” even though his father grows food for the whole family. This is the same answer given by many children. “Nothing” usually means agricultural work. By the same token, the parents we met in the villages usually began by telling us, “There’s nothing for my child to do here.” (This was understood to mean: except for planting during the rainy season.) Over time, as we got to know these families better, they taught us that the word “nothing” is a reflection, not of reality, but of the widespread disdain for rural work.

Inoussa, at the age of 15, began coming regularly to our training program in the Courtyard of 100 Trades. His father had been without news of him for two years. After the father finally got a visit from Inoussa, the father came three times to the city to visit. Each time, he came to see us as well, and each time he began the conversation by saying that Inoussa had his permission to remain with us. We explained repeatedly that Inoussa was not living with us, and was in fact homeless, as our program was not residential.

It is very common for parents to assume that their children must be better off in the city than in the countryside, and that city dwellers (and even more so, white foreigners) must have something better to offer their children than what they themselves can provide. In this country, where almost everyone has roots in a rural community, the definition of success is linked only to urban professions: as an office worker or a business person; or at the minimum a welder, mechanic or carpenter. It is significant that when a citizen of Burkina Faso has an identity card made up and cannot show proof of any profession, it is automatically noted that the person is “a farm worker.” In this context, parents who can offer their children only rural work are often at a loss as to how to keep them home.

It was not until our fourth visit to Joseph’s family that his father finally dared to tell us that in fact he would like Joseph to remain home to work the land with him. Previously the father had spoken only of trades that it would be impossible for Joseph to learn in the village.

The chronic lack of money for the poorest urban families leads to similar behavior. Parents assume that anyone other than themselves will be able to offer their children a better situation. Ali, for example, grew up in one of these families living on the outskirts of the capital city. It took us a long time to convince Ali to return to his family, and a long time as well for his father to believe he could offer Ali stability. Finally, the father had found a friend willing to take Ali as an apprentice carpenter. Tragically, both the father and the carpenter died shortly afterwards, leaving Ali bereft, and underscoring again the extreme fragility of the plans of families in extreme poverty.

## B. Attitudes concerning money

Children living in the streets see money all the time. Some of it passes through the children's hands (usually from begging), even though they rarely have the foresight to spend it constructively. Should the children return home and learn a trade, they must accept living without money for a time. For the parents, who have other children still at home, welcoming a child back means a household where the children have different experiences and attitudes concerning money. It may even happen that a child who has returned home misses having money so much that the child robs a neighbor—an act for which the parents will have to assume responsibility.

Guibrina spent 10 years living in the streets. He has almost become a man, but he has learned no trade, and his reputation in the city limits his possibilities. Because he knows this, he is now ready to return home. Since he began planning this, we have visited his family several times. Despite the years of failure, and a strained relationship with him, his parents are ready to welcome him "as long as he can be content with village life." But Guibrina is worried as well: "I don't want to have to ask my grandmother or mother for a few coins every time I want to smoke." He knows that learning how to earn money in the village will take time, as will his re-adaptation to village life.

## C. Competition from ill-planned interventions

The dangers faced by children living in the streets have inspired many projects intended to help them. However, too many of these projects are based on a limited understanding of what the children are going through. This can make the project's emergency assistance both superficial and ill-adapted to the child's needs. For instance, welcoming children from the streets in institutional homes can further worsen the children's estrangement from their families' communities. Mr. Georges-Joseph Nana, the director of a specialized center, observes:

*"Some institutions have unintended consequences. They should not become a kind of encouragement for children to leave home. When we bring children into a structure, they are well cared for concerning their clothing and health. They play plenty of games. They go to school or to a vocation workshop depending on their aptitude. When we go to see their family, we drive in a vehicle, and an educator accompanies the child. When we arrive in the village, everyone sees us. Everyone sees how well the child is dressed, and he is like a hero. If we consider the way people think, I worry that not only will we incite other children to run away from home, but we may even lead their parents to say, 'Look at that child who went to the city, he turned out so well. You're just sitting here, you're not clever.' That's my fear."*

From what we have seen, despite the array of services proposed in these centers, very few children's lives actually become more stable there. Nevertheless, the context of these centers keeps a hope alive for them that a "perfect center" will exist one day. So each time a new center opens, they rush to try it, quitting all the projects they have begun in other centers, no matter how much time they have already invested. This new infatuation usually wears off soon, but it is sometimes too late for them to return to the previous project they had not completed. In the context of the poverty of this country, new private initiatives (usually funded by partners in industrialized countries) crop up continually, with no common standard to measure their competence. The children find themselves buffeted from one experience to another, failing again and again, and growing increasingly disillusioned.

*"[...] Even those centers with a solid foundation<sup>46</sup> [...] have not worked because they create a false social reality. [...] It is better for children to be*

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<sup>46</sup> The speaker refers to centers opened for groups of children who have undergone specific common experiences, such as surviving a war.

*identified and helped within their family, either with a surviving parent, or with those who have taken them in. They should receive support for health care, schooling, and even material help to their families. But grouping them together in centers, this is artificial. You will foster in them identities that do not exist.*"<sup>47</sup>

Many of these centers offer an abundance of services: meals, activities, outings, camps. They are sometimes offered for the long term, without any encouragement for the children to build relationships with their families. Fidèle, a child who lived in one of these centers, says: "I don't think it was the teachers' advice that led me to return home. I finally realized that I'm getting older, and I can't remain in the streets. [...] The teachers might bring you home, but unless you have made the decision, you will just go back to the street."<sup>48</sup>

#### **D. Time for the community to adapt to the child**

*"When Boureima first returned home to stay, his father did not trust him. He was afraid Boureima might become a bad influence on his brothers. So at first, the father had Boureima stay with his uncle. One day the father came to me and said, 'I think Boureima has decided to return after all.' So Boureima moved back with his father, and they have been trying to make things work."*

- Hadji Mohamed Tombiano, a friend of Boureima's father

We have observed that when a child moves home, the parents do not immediately make plans for future activities. The parents see that their child has changed in the city streets. They don't know what their children have been through or how they have survived. They often suspect the worst. Nor do they know what the child is able to accept. They need time to observe the child, particularly before they ask an acquaintance to play a role in the child's education. First they need to find out whether the child is really ready to stay, whether the child will fit back into the life of the family and the community, and whether the child is helpful with chores. The child dreads this period of being on trial, with no money or freedom. But the parents need this time.

Amidou had lived in the street for years. His family lives in Ouagadougou. One day, he finally decided to go sleep at home. And then he stayed there. We visited him and his parents almost every week. The parents spoke of some difficulties, but mostly of satisfaction at seeing the child staying home more and more, and doing chores for his mother. Two months later, the father told us, "Now that I see he will stay home, I will ask my friend to train him as an apprentice carpenter." The poorer a family is, the more protective they must be of their honor, and therefore the more reluctant they are to risk creating tensions with their neighbors. This makes it hard for these parents to welcome their children home unreservedly.

#### **E. Time for the child to adapt to the community**

Parents tell us how hard it is for their children to readjust to the destitution of their living conditions: the lack of health care, the lack of amusements, the food. Rice, which is everyday food in the city, is saved for celebrations in the countryside.

Fidèle says: "I was taken home to my village, but I came back to the city. [...] It's hard to leave behind the relationships you had in the city. There's solidarity among the children. Children get together to make sure there will be a burial for a friend who died. We get together to build a hut for a friend's mother. You don't often find this kind of solidarity, even in a family. You really have to be prepared to go home, especially back to a village."

In fact, more things are possible in the countryside than many of the children imagine. But relationships take time, especially in a rural community where strength is limited. So

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<sup>47</sup> Professor Badini.

<sup>48</sup> During a seminar run by ATD Fourth World in June 2003.

time and preparation for readjustment are essential.

### III. Supporting the renewal of family ties

#### A. Building a positive relationship with the children

##### 1. Avoid meeting the family in conditions of crisis

Sidiki is a child who participated in our Street Library activity in the city. His behavior was erratic: he would walk around naked, or would throw stones at passers-by. He was taken in hand by a very new organization. They drove him back to his village, which was quite far away. Their arrival was a shock, and the uncle, who was the head of the family, lost his temper. Nevertheless, Sidiki was left in the village. Less than a week later, Sidiki had found his way back to the city. Over several months, we supported Sidiki's efforts to get medical and psychiatric treatment. We then contacted the family, first visiting them several times without Sidiki. In this way, a solution was found: Sidiki returned home for a long visit, and then was welcomed by a relative living in the Ivory Coast.

Similar experiences have taught us several things:

- Even in a crisis, family relationships must be treated delicately. It is a bad idea to show up without warning. Bringing home a child who may have run away long ago requires preparation.
- Crises can foster unhealthy relationships, inciting lies or silences. A child may have hurt his family greatly.
- It is more effective to build a relationship with a family over time, beginning as soon as we start working with a child, even if the child does not plan to go home. Ideally, we enable the family to gain perspective on their difficulties with the child, without having to make a decision during a first meeting.

##### 2. Discover the child's deep connection to his or her family

*"I ran away from home, but I knew people from my village would come regularly to the city with wood coal. When I went out to sell cakes, I would take the same route as they would, in hopes of meeting them. I wanted to ask whether my father might be thinking of coming to look for me. One day, one of the villagers told me that my father had cried because I was gone. By the end of that month, I made sure I was able to send money back to my father."*

- Daniel, a child living in the streets

*"A child can live in the streets without being 'of' the streets. [...] It's true, they live in the streets. But in listening to them, I understood that they were not 'of' the streets because they are aware of the reason that they came to be in the streets. [And] they are aware of the news from their village, they make sure of this. If a situation alarms them, they will head home. Some go back and forth all the time. This means that the street is a framework for them. It is not a place where children thrive. But it can be a functioning framework from which [...] they continue to contribute to their village, even without returning home. They try to help their parents as much as possible. [...] We must not think they are children with no links to other people."*

- Prof. Badini<sup>49</sup>

A child can be living in the streets and yet maintain contact with the family. Many children have taught us this. Rasmane, a child living in the streets, came one morning to tell us how disappointed he was that he had not realized earlier that the Tabaski festival

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

was that day. He begged us to help him find decent clothes quickly, in time to visit his family during the festival.

More generally, we are often struck by the children's determination that their family not be an object of scorn. Even when they have differences with their parents, there is usually at least one relative whom they hold in high regard. This can become a source of strength from which to build reconciliation.

### 3. Support children in rebuilding a relationship with their family

*"When I left home, I had childish ideas. I didn't listen to what I was told. But my childish ideas are leaving me to make room for adult ideas that are still maturing. I used to go back and forth between my family and the city. But I hadn't decided to change. Now I have."*

- Boureima<sup>50</sup>

It is often hard to know exactly what leads children to speak to us about their families, or to decide to return home. We do know what kind of relationship we are trying to build with the children. In our way of being and of working with them, we try not to lose sight of their hopes and expectations, as the children have expressed them to us, explicitly and implicitly.

- Most often, children take a new step at a time when they have been speaking to us about their frustration at living outside a community. In us, they see a chance to change things. Joseph once said, "The Street Library advised me to return home." This does not mean that the adults running the activity had spoken to him about his family. But in the stories and the books chosen for the activities, Joseph found an echo to the idea he had been considering privately.

Bassirou spent eight years in the streets. Every time we met him, he spoke to us about his family and his village. He would say that we should go there together, but he never followed up on the preparations we asked him to make (saving some money, finding appropriate clothes, planning a date...). He changed his mind each time. But he knew he could continue to come speak to us about this, and that we would continue to believe in him. Because we took notes on everything he told us about his family, we could be very specific in our exchanges with him. He knew that when the time came, we would encourage him. In May 2001, Bassirou told us that he was tired, and that this time his mind was made up. He left a week later to travel the 300 km. to his village. There he found his brother, who was very supportive. We visited him a number of times. In early 2003, he was still at home.

- Children will take a positive step only when they are sure that we are not pressuring them to return home. Inoussa spent more than two years away from his family, and could not make up his mind about returning, even though his father had come to the city to see him. A lot of patience was needed to help him build a relationship with a brother who lived in the city. It was important that we leave him free to make his own decision. Finally, he agreed to visit the village with his brother's wife for a religious festival. He was made welcome, and this helped him decide to spend the next planting season in the village. We later learned that, before speaking to us about his family at all, Inoussa had visited the family of a friend. The friend's parents told him that our team had visited them several times and had a good relationship with them. Learning that this family trusted us helped Inoussa to trust us.

Very few children living in the streets are immediately ready to return home for good. If we lead them to think that a visit home has to mean moving back, neither will happen. So our first request to children is simply to allow us to visit their parents, so that we can greet them in friendship. The children tend to find it reassuring that they need not accompany us on this first visit. The news we bring back can help them decide to make a visit themselves.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

- Children are more likely to take a step forward when they are convinced that we will not sully their reputation in front of their family. They need to build confidence gradually. Georges, for instance, began by introducing us to his sister, who lives in the city. He told us that his father lived in the Ivory Coast. When we met the sister, she listed the problems Georges had caused for the family. When Georges saw that we said nothing negative about him, he brought us to visit his father, who in fact lived in a neighboring area.

The children may also fear having to explain to their parents how they survive in the city and where they sleep. They gain confidence from the fact that they have been part of workshops in the Courtyard of 100 Trades. They can speak of their accomplishments, and can prove them by showing photographs.

It is hard for children to trust us, to trust their families, and to trust themselves. It helps when they see that we have kept the promises made to their friends, and that things have worked out for these children.

#### **4. Enable all children to show their solidarity with one another**

In the very first years after the founding of the Courtyard of 100 Trades, in the 1980s, the children made it clear that they did not want to be called "street children." "The street has no children!," they would say. It is true that at the time, the term "street child" was often used as an insult, or a synonym for "thief," "thug," or, at best, "lazy one." Over time, this situation has changed. Gradually, the children began to feel less judged. Many documentaries have helped people understand the realities of their situation. Today street children are commonly seen as victims of the country's social imbalance (or as victims of their parents!). The children have taken on this identity, which is marginal, but which excuses their situation. They will say: "I'm a street child, you'd better help me!" or "I'm a street child, UNICEF gives money to help me!" In the Courtyard of 100 Trades, we know the children well enough to know how deeply they respect their parents and relatives. So by and large, we ignore their new way of speaking, and continue to think together with them more broadly.

In 1998, to prepare for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Courtyard of 100 Trades held a series of six meetings with youths who were not living with their families, but who had not joined in the projects of any organization, despite having had several opportunities. We began with the question of acting on behalf of others: Who had helped them? How had their families helped others? How did they try to help others, and to help their families? This led us to define human rights through their experiences. By the last meeting, our theme was, "How we contribute to human rights." Here is an excerpt from the message the youths wrote together: "Human rights means recognizing every person. If you pretend not to see your friend who has gone crazy, so that you will not have to say hello, that is not human rights. Human rights are what lead people to be responsible and to create something that will help your parents and your family."

In 2000, we invited the children living in the city streets to write a letter to children in a correctional institution in the United States. They were taken aback by our proposal and wondered what they could possibly have to say to children in the United States, one of the biggest countries in the world. And yet, when they began to write letters, they discovered that they had a lot to say. And we, in turn, were surprised how much they spoke about their families and their native villages. Writing to people so far away pushed them to begin to define themselves. One child began by suggesting that they write, "We have no house to sleep in." The next time they worked on the letter, an adult running the activity showed the children a book called, "Everyone has a home," which showed different kinds of housing from around the world. After discussion, the children reread the draft of the letter and decided that it was a mistake to write that they have no house. They decided to change the sentence to: "We have houses, but we left them."

In 2001, a Canadian non-profit organization put together a public event in Burkina Faso called, the Day of Childhood. Different associations came one after the other to the

podium to introduce themselves. The phrase “street children” came up again and again. The children from the Courtyard of 100 Trades were disturbed by this. They would say, “I don’t like those words. They spoil it!” When it was their turn to get on stage, they showed a silhouette they had made from wood, called “the child of tomorrow.” They said:

*“The child of tomorrow respects his parents, and everyone. This child has learned a trade and will be able to care for his parents. This child obeys his parents and respects the rules of life. For this, the child needs to be educated, to go to school, to have spiritual education. The child needs to learn to work, to farm, to raise livestock. The father should be behind him, guiding him. The child needs reflexes and intuition. The child needs toys to play and have fun.”*

What we learned from these projects was that we could rediscover the children in a new light. Their behavior defines them to some extent; their thinking plunges them and us into a completely different dimension. Children who left their parents can be the same children who say, “The child of tomorrow respects his parents.” These children can build reconciliation when they feel linked to other children. When children have an opportunity to support and to give advice to other children, they feel useful and discover what is of value in their experience. This is why it is important that personal support of children be paired with possibilities for them to discover themselves as involved members of society.

Fidèle had the opportunity to participate in a march of young people representing ATD Fourth World. To mark the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, they spent three days marching from Ouagadougou to Manega and meeting young people and families in the villages along the way. Fidèle said, “I learned something on that march: that the family is very important for a child’s future. By marching together, we got to know one another, we were close. It’s not every day you have the opportunity to stay together and live as a family. That was what truly happened.”

## **B. Creating conditions for the family to reunite**

### **1. Getting past the appearance that parents seem to have given up**

In meeting parents, we always try to be reassuring. But when the children’s future is discussed, ambiguity surfaces. Parents who had been joyful to see their child would say, “My child may stay with you if he wants.” It is very difficult for a family of scant means to imagine that any non-profit organization or social service, whether local or international, would not have something better than themselves to offer their child.

For our part, we have seen how hard it is for children to integrate into formal apprenticeship structures. So we feel we must seek out family solutions. We visit families regularly and maintain these visits over time. This is how we measure what they mean when they seem to offer us responsibility for their children. This is how we discover more. In almost all cases, parents eventually express something quite different than what they said in the beginning.

For instance, Inoussa’s father began by saying: “No one in our village can live without having someone elsewhere to support them,” although Inoussa was clearly too immature to be of assistance to his family from the city. After Inoussa spent an entire planting season in the village, he began to speak of leaving again, perhaps to go to another city, one with a reputation for both business and trafficking. At this, his father became firm, and said it would be better for Inoussa to stay home. The father began to prepare Inoussa to raise livestock.

The situation was similar in many other families. This motivated us to maintain contact with the families over time so that we could understand what they mean when they seem disengaged from their children. Sometimes these remarks come on the heels of specific behavior by the child, or hark back to problems created for the family’s reputation when the child first left. Sometimes parents make these remarks when they are feeling disrespected. Over time, parents’ feelings change.

Mr. Lassina Zampou, an educator,<sup>51</sup> says,

*"In fact, these families underestimate themselves. They let die in themselves creations that could help their children. Often resigned to what they see as failures to solve their children's education problems, the parents do not show initiative. This is why, when a non-governmental organization develops a project aimed at the child of one of these families, the collaboration of the family should not be taken for granted. Parents latch on to these organizations as a drowning person would clutch a lifeguard. What I observe is that the parents' underestimation of themselves is not irreversible if only we exchange views with the parents about things that could give them the confidence to do something for their children."*

## 2. Meeting a community

Before meeting a child's parents, it is of course essential to know something about their region. This includes learning: the major occupations; how clans may be organized; and whether many people from this region have succeeded by emigrating, or not. We must be aware that any child, whether in a village or the city, comes not just from parents or a guardian, but from a complex web of relationships. Even if economic rivalry and the individualization of relationships are weakening extended families, the family and the community nevertheless remain a key recourse in a country where one's rights cannot always be defended. A child's situation is not only a question of one individual's rights, but of the child becoming recognized as part of the community.

- Relatives and neighbors see our visits to a child's family. The parents may draw them into our conversation. The visits are leisurely, in keeping with the environment and the comings and goings of others to whom the parents may wish to introduce us. In one family, it took many meetings before it was clear which relative felt the most responsible for the children: the three siblings had lost both parents, and had left the village one by one, over several years. They began by introducing us to their father's brother, who had an important role in their ethnic group. We saw however, that the children did not seem to count on him. Gradually links developed through other people we knew, and it turned out that these siblings had in fact been raised by their father's sister, and that their mother's brother also felt responsibility for them. The children had begun by introducing, not their closest relative, but the most widely known. Gradually, the children, who continued to live in the city, began to take seriously their responsibilities in the village at times of traditional festivals and burials.
- Other children in the family or neighborhood are also present when we visit. We try to make it clear that we are not visiting "to solve a problem." Usually starting on the second visit, we relax the atmosphere by spending time with the other children, developing a warmer relationship. We bring an illustrated book, maybe a folktale or a non-fiction book, and we show it to everyone, as we do with the children in the city in the Street Library. Parents are interested as well. In one family, the father, who could read, shared the book we had brought with children in the courtyard. He translated it from French into their language. In the book, which was written by children in the Courtyard of 100 Trades,<sup>52</sup> there is a moral about not chasing a member of the community away. The father added: "It's wrong to banish a person rudely. If a child makes a mistake, you should talk to him gently to help him discover his own error." Many parents add moral commentary to the stories we tell, or begin speaking of village life in their youth. Sometimes, it is the child visiting with us from the city who will share the book, showing how it is done in the Street Library. These are joyous moments, gathering girls, boys, men and women of all ages.

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<sup>51</sup> Mr. Zampou works with Doctors Without Borders running a project with children who live in the streets. He also meets the children's families to speak of educational plans made with the children. He is part of the Fourth World Family Group (see page 17).

<sup>52</sup> *Et l'on chercha tortue [Searching for Tortoise]*, Fourth World Publications, Paris, 1992.

### 3. Having more than one vision of success

As noted above, children usually say they left home to find work or earn money, with the idea of coming home eventually to help their family, or to do business in the village. Most people in society say that children should not come home without constructive plans. Most projects with these children follow a clear pattern: stabilize the children in a residential center and train them for a profession. Some children succeed at this and find a more stable life, with decent work. But many children are too fragile and do not manage to undertake this kind of project. Many cannot adapt to the structure of the residential centers or the apprenticeships. This path does work for some children, but not for others.

Joseph for instance, did not react when his father spoke of an apprenticeship. But when he was asked to help planting, he went home immediately. Three years after returning home, he spoke of feeling at peace in the village because he knows what is appropriate to do, and what is not. In a public seminar, he spoke of the responsibility he feels for carrying on rural traditions:

*"In the village, you see real life. [...] If you're not there, you can't discover things. There are family traditions that require the children to play a role. If the children are not there, it's hard. We will take up the traditions, so we must learn them. There are sacred objects that must not be dishonored. [...] My family is in the village, and I'm happy to see them. [...] Working with my family helps them see me differently; they tell me I've changed for the better."*

In addition to a profession, Joseph also has a feeling of belonging to his people. Learning a trade and earning money are important. But the process can be strengthened by belonging to a community that shelters you, teaches you, and stands by you. You may learn a trade far from your family. But learning to be part of a community is extremely difficult without family support. Particularly for the children who are the most at risk, links to their family and community can make all the difference in their future.

There are many valid pathways for children. Giving them the idea that farming or making mud bricks are not the professions of tomorrow does them a disservice. In a balanced world, many different professions and trades are needed. Guibrina found a completely different pathway in life. We have watched him grow up over ten years. He has become an adult who travels from place to place, and may look like a vagabond with no place in the modern world. And yet, he is known and respected and visits his mother regularly. Born into a caste of storytellers, today he goes from place to place, drumming on a tin can, and singing the tales of ethnic groups. He often asks us to make recordings of him telling the story of one family or another, as a way to thank them for having cared for him in illness, or for having treated him to a meal in a restaurant. He fits into no structure or category, but he is at home in the city, and telling stories is his reason for living.

Pégué, who came to the city quite young, is blind. He is now an adult who lives by begging. And yet, knowing his life, we cannot say he has failed. As a child, he was in many residential centers, but they did not work for him. People accept that he begs because of his blindness. He, in turn, shares his inner vision with people he knows all over the city. He sleeps in the courtyard of a member of his original community. He keeps in regular contact with his father, who is elderly and quite poor. For the children who live in the streets today and who come to the Courtyard of 100 Trades, Pégué plays the role of an older brother. In a video about the Courtyard, he says: "There are ideas in this Courtyard. If you take these ideas, it's as though you had your own father there with you. Once you have ideas from the Courtyard, you don't want to stay in the streets. It's like being pinched. Helping a child is not about giving money or clothes. When certain words are heard, it can build your life." A man who speaks to children this way is not a failure. The many people who invested time with him in so many centers may not have turned him into an artisan or a farmer, but they helped him to build a strong human and social identity.

It is important today for Burkina Faso to continue development and modernizing. In so

doing, the Burkinabé people question their priorities. What is proposed to them by industrialized countries is not always appropriate. The children and youths we meet in the streets carry this question: Who will the Burkinabé be in twenty years? What will remain of their history? The projects we plan must not trap people into a single answer to this question.

#### **4. Believing that families have ideas and can take initiatives**

Although we have stressed that it takes time for some families to make plans for their children, other families have ideas right away for reintegrating their children into the community. Boureima's mother is a market gardener. The very first time we visited her, she said, "Boureima visited me a few months ago and helped garden for two weeks. He is the oldest. If he comes home to stay, he will be a big help to us in the garden."

Bassirou returned home after eight years away. On our very next visit, we were surprised to find that not only was he comfortable in family life, but he also had a role. With his family's donkey and cart, he was the one who brought water to those panning for precious metal. With the money they gave him for bringing water, his older brother (the head of his family) said Bassirou would eventually buy his own livestock.

For those children who had a particularly hard time in the city, the straightforward activities proposed by their families were often an ideal beginning. This did not mean their role in the community would not evolve. Once a child is stable and building relationships, other possibilities may appear. In the case of Joseph, who took strength from the three years he spent farming with his family and studying his community's traditions, he eventually returned to the city when he was older. He found lodgings and work as a waiter in a restaurant. He hopes to earn money to marry and found a family in the village.

#### **5. Enabling families to participate in collective thinking about overcoming poverty**

In this rapidly changing society, where children set out at younger and younger ages to seek their "fortune," in the modernity of the cities, parents may be shaken up, but they are not passive. They have a strong vision of education, which is an advantage in any project with their children. What is hard is finding ways for them to express and debate their thinking, and to overcome the sense of failure that they feel when a child leaves home.

Currently, the Courtyard of 100 Trades is able to gather very poor adults in order to have this kind of dialogue that goes beyond people's individual situations. This "Fourth World Family Group" meets once a month, in link with the preparations for the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, every October 17<sup>th</sup>. Some parents live too far away to attend, but the group's existence can give a context to their experiences and thinking. Women, who do not always feel free to speak in discussions that include men, are given encouragement to participate. New people join this group every year. We sadly note that premature death also claims several members or their children each year. The group of about 30 people is quite diverse.

Most participants are the families of girls and boys we met when they were living in the streets. One of the girls we met in the streets died quite young, leaving two daughters. They are being raised by their grandmother, Mrs. Anne-Marie. In 1994 she described why this group meets:

*"Today I am among them. [...] I've done this since I understood what they wanted to do. But I must say, I thought long and hard before committing myself. They are trying to struggle against poverty, against misery. We've lived through that ourselves. That is why we must agree to follow them, not to watch them work, but to contribute our words, and to safeguard what is precious to them. We must help them back up when they slip. We have become seeds that have already sprouted. From what is left, we must nourish them. Then we will be sure they in*

*turn will be like us."*

- Some members have known ATD Fourth World for twenty years, longer than the Courtyard of 100 Trades has existed. At that time, the Fourth World Volunteer Corps members were living on the outskirts of Ouagadougou, working with women who had been accused of witchcraft, in what is now the Delwendé Center.
- Others are people who can speak about one aspect of the city that affects children's lives: the elderly and the blind who beg near the mosque; or the small tradespeople, like cart pushers, who do hard work, and sometimes find work for the children as well.
- Still others are not from very poor backgrounds. They are friends of the Courtyard, from all walks of life, who live in friendship with very poor people.

All these adults whom we met through the children know our commitment, and their goal is to help us support the children. Their wisdom has often helped us to understand the hardships faced by the children's parents. All these parents are faced with the urgency of surviving. Every day some of them set out from their villages, looking for work, food, or medicine, or in hopes of putting their child in school. All of them tell us they are looking far and wide for recognition and honor.

Here are some elements from the thinking at these meetings:

*"It is very hard to educate your children when you live in poverty. When the child has not eaten, how can you make the child understand? [...] My wife does a lot to educate our children. She does what she can. Sometimes, she does not eat so the children may eat. I listen when she advises the children. She is intelligent."*

- Mr. Kafando, 17 October 2002

*"Are children their parents' future? Look at their lives: when children are afraid and worried, even if they eat, they will never feel full. But if children are reassured, they can sleep. What they eat nourishes them. If there is war in a country, it's difficult for children. [...] It's also hard for children who have not been to school to be their parents' future."*

- Mr. Lazare, 12 February 2000

*"Our children will grow up and they'll see that we have lived in poverty for a long time. But this doesn't mean the children will be poor of heart or of spirit. On the contrary, I am not afraid. I know that, having lived the same conditions as their parents, they will become men and women like us. This will make them stronger and give them roots, and they will be fearless. Even if they have not gone to school as other children have, I know how much they are learning from us, their parents. This is education. They are in the school of life."*

- Mrs. Josephine, preparing for an international meeting in May 1998

*"Having a dialogue with people in other countries has enabled us to have ideas we would not have had otherwise. We have seen many things. For example, in [the industrialized countries...], we have seen how some people have their children taken away to be educated by others: this is a source of suffering. Here, even if we are poor, we still have freedom."*

- Mr. Ablassé

#### **IV. How reuniting families helps overcome poverty**

##### **A. Family ties give much needed strength**

*"If a child leaves home when the family needs him and there have not been words [conflict], we don't understand. [...] It is a loss for a family when a child leaves. It is often hard to understand one's own child."*

– Omar’s father, May 2003

Joseph’s father once wrote us a letter: “It is raining hard here. I request that you allow my child to return home to work with me. Will you give him permission?” In a very poor family, every single member of the family has something to contribute. When children have not succeeded in the city, and when they have not found a program they are willing to stay in, returning home is the most straightforward way for them to give meaning to their lives. Boureima explains: “I have seen that when I leave home and leave the work to my brothers, it does not go well. Now my older brother is in the Ivory Coast and we have no news of him. My younger brother went to Pama for the market-gardening. This is why I decided to stay to help the family. We help each other.”

A brother of Madi’s says, “I see my father growing weaker. How can I go to the city to eat rice, when here there is even less to eat? I want to help my father; I can’t give up on him.”

And Fidèle says, “I came back home because I know that one day the younger ones will be counting on me.”

Mr. Zampou, the educator, has seen how a family can take strength from the return of a youth: “This child, who had been supported by us while he was living in the streets, asked to train as a mason, and we found him a place. This meant his moving home. But there was a difficulty. His mother was not sure she would be able to feed him each night. She asked us to help him. We continued the dialogue with the mother. After a while, she decided that in fact she could support her son after all. Her idea was to visit homes to ask for laundry she could wash. After two weeks of this, she had earned enough money to begin selling her fritters. This mother who had thought she was unable to help her son, found herself doing better than before. Three years later, the son, who was grown, had built a home for himself in the family courtyard. He remained there to support his mother, who had given up the laundry business in order to focus on her fritter business.”

Reuniting families also gives parents the honor of contributing to their child’s future. When a child returns, the family can cease to feel they have caused their child to flee. This too can contribute to the strength they take from welcoming a child home.

## **B. Family reunification broadens the horizons of whole communities**

During the three years that Joseph spent at home (before coming to work in a restaurant in the city), his activities eventually influenced those of his father. In the first year after Joseph returned home, he helped his father growing millet, corn and also some peanut plants we had given him. Then Joseph built a chicken coop, and we helped buy some poultry for the family. Next Joseph’s uncle loaned him some land for market gardening. This was a source of tension with the father, who was not familiar with this kind of gardening and was not sure it was worth the effort. But Joseph kept up his efforts. Each year, he continued helping his parents with their planting in the rainy season, all the while pursuing his own initiatives. Thanks to Joseph, his family was growing more than ever before. They have now begun growing rice for the first time. Father and son also collaborated on starting a small pig pen. We contributed a small pig. Together, they made plans to buy a donkey and cart. And Joseph was able to make his father the gift of a pig.<sup>53</sup>

It was more difficult for Madi to fit into his family’s work making pottery. Madi’s hands had atrophied, making it impossible for him to make pottery. After seeking advice from many people, it was remarked on that Madi often helped children to water their livestock near the well. People felt Madi would probably be able to raise livestock as well. He would have liked to raise a bull, but this was too expensive for us to be able to help purchase. One of the elders in his family pointed out that it is possible to begin small, for example by raising chickens, and to work up to a bull one day. We were able to help buy a goat, and an uncle contributed a sheep. Despite this, Madi came and went between the village and the city. But concern for raising the two animals always brought him home. One day, Madi

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<sup>53</sup>Annual Report of ATD Fourth World-Burkina Faso, 2001.

spoke of selling the animals and keeping the money for himself. Instead, the uncle proposed taking partial ownership of the animals from Madi in return for caring for them during his absences. But Madi remained responsible for them when he was at home. The uncle knew that without the livestock, Madi would drift further away from his family. He helped Madi to keep a goal in sight, no matter what his weaknesses might be.

The family's role in supporting these young people is much more than economic. They are supporting their child's development. We must take pains to collaborate appropriately with the parents and other relatives. If we contribute too much, too easily, we may take the place of someone in the community who could take pride in contributing. This is partnership: seeking a balance between the contribution we can make, and the contribution made by the family and the community.

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# CHAPTER FOUR:



# The Philippines

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## Introduction

In a time of crisis, parents look for ways to ensure their children's safety. When they need assistance but cannot turn to their neighbors, some families in extreme poverty in the Philippines see no other possibility but to entrust their children to orphanages temporarily. This chapter will focus on the relationship of these families with these orphanages.<sup>54</sup> Most are making an important contribution by providing needed services with small budgets and little infrastructure. They tend to be private organizations that are registered with the government, and receive referrals from the government. Many staff members of these institutions are sincerely committed to improving the situation of all children. In one of the cases in this chapter, however, a girl's involuntary removal from her parents' care eventually led her to run away from the orphanage, and back to her family. This was her way of defending what she considered her own best interests.

ATD Fourth World works in four different communities in the Philippines, in places where people live in situations of extreme poverty, such as under a bridge, or in a cemetery. In these communities, ATD Fourth World runs an outdoor Street Library program where children can read and do art activities. Very often, the parents or older siblings are involved in running these activities. As Fourth World Volunteer Corps members build a relationship with them, some parents speak of other children who are living in institutions, whether they are orphanages or places called drop-in centers or daycare centers.

Although the focus of ATD's actions in the Philippines remains the Street Library, it has become increasingly important for the team to understand the relationship between these families and the institutions that have temporary custody of some of their children. This study is an initial exploration of those relationships. This chapter will profile the lives of two families who made this choice, as well as a third whose children were taken into custody against the parents' will. All three families live in a makeshift community under a bridge along a major highway. They are also families who have been singled out by others as being needy. For instance, once one of these families was chosen to speak on the radio about their impoverishment, in return for which they received canned goods. These three families are not the only ones who have difficulties, but they have few relatives or friends who can help them out, which means they lack a safety net to fall back on in crisis.

### I. The situation of three families<sup>55</sup>

#### A. Sending children away when faced with eviction: the Mendez family

*Mrs. Mendez's maiden name is Mercedita Villar. With her first husband, who died in 1990, she had three children: Marites, Juanito and Roselina. It was in 1990 that ATD Fourth World got to know this family. Marites participated in the Street Library. As the years went by, Marites grew up and married. Juanito was placed in an orphanage. After being widowed, the mother began a family with Mr. Mendez and they had two daughters: Rowena and Rosana. The four of them, together with Roselina, were living in the community under the bridge.*

*In early 1999, the whole family moved from the city to a town where Mr. Mendez took care of banana and coconut trees planted by his father-in-law. But just nine months later, Mr. Mendez died. Mrs. Mendez returned with the three daughters to the community she knew better: those living under the bridge in the city.*

*She discovered that she was pregnant. In May 2000, she gave birth to a baby boy in a health center. She did not bring him home; the baby was immediately adopted.*

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<sup>54</sup> The term orphanage refers to a variety of places, from drop-in centers offering temporary shelter to children who may be returning to their parents, to places for abandoned children destined for adoption.

<sup>55</sup> All italicized portions in this section come from internal meetings of the Fourth World Volunteer Corps members and from reports by Volunteer Corps member Marilynn Gutierrez.

When she was pregnant, she said to the Fourth World Volunteer Corps members: "What can I do? I need to work for us to have something to eat. If I keep this baby, how will I be able to work? I also think of sending my daughters to an orphanage, but they do not like this."

Her oldest daughter agreed, "We do not want to go to the orphanage. We never complained to her. We just want to be together."

Their mother continued, teary-eyed, "It pains me to think that they would be separated from me, to think of sending them to an orphanage. But I thought about it because I know that the government could give them opportunities I may not be able to give them. They could go to school — the one thing I very much wished for them. The government could provide them education — something I don't think I can provide for them."

So during her pregnancy, Mrs. Mendez spoke to the family whose laundry she washed regularly. She asked this couple to adopt her baby because it was so hard for her to raise the three girls. This couple then went to the health center and in fact they filled out the birth certificate using their own names as parents. The baby boy was immediately adopted and Mrs. Mendez had lost all rights to the child. When her daughters learned this, they were angry. Mrs. Mendez was very confused. She then wanted to reverse the process, and she turned to ATD Fourth World to find a way to get the baby back. But it proved impossible because she was not named on the birth certificate. Her relationship with the couple soured and she could no longer wash their laundry.

It was Marites, the eldest, who was not yet married at the time, who was the only one earning regular money for the family. Her work as a housemaid could not provide the daily meals, the schooling of the other children, and the rent for the home they were occupying under the bridge. So the children had to stop school. They started begging along the highways. Mrs. Mendez needed to do something to send her kids back to school. She also needed to find work because she did not want her kids to grow up under the bridge. She said: life here is always "dark." She did not want her children to grow up begging.

Just six months later, the situation of the Mendez family became even more challenging. The older son, Juanito, ran away from the temporary shelter where he had been living in a distant part of the city. He lived for some time in the streets, and then came to live with Mrs. Mendez. In addition, Marites lost her job as a housekeeper and was no longer able to support the family. With these added responsibilities, Mrs. Mendez was no longer able to pay the rent required to live under the bridge. Faced with eviction, she temporarily entrusted her three younger daughters to an orphanage in November 2000. This was done through an amicable agreement with the social workers that would allow Mrs. Mendez time to find work. The orphanage offered temporary shelter to the children on the conditions that the mother would visit them once a month, and would keep the orphanage informed about her job hunting and livelihood.

Finding regular work took a long time. Finally in August 2001, she found a job as a cleaning woman for a public institution. The three daughters had been in the orphanage for ten months at this point. Although Mrs. Mendez maintained this job for a year, her situation was not considered secure enough for her to bring her children home. In September 2002, Mrs. Mendez came to the ATD Fourth World center. Even though she was still worried that her salary would not be enough to support the schooling of her children, she wanted them home with her. She wanted help to write to the mayor of her city to ask that she be made a permanent worker. Having a permanent position would also meet a condition allowing her to take the children back and to send them to school. But in the end, she did not write the letter.

Mrs. Mendez said: "My dream is to have my family together, but it seems that, whatever I do, there is no way out. I have space and electricity now, but what use is

*it if I come home alone, and feel lonely. It is very difficult." Whenever Mrs. Mendez visited the community under the bridge, people would say, "You are having a good life, you are happy, well-off," because they saw her dressed well. She said that this was not true at all: "They just do not know what it means for me to live without my children."*

*She has no relatives nearby. Her relationship with her in-laws is bad – they refused to let her file an application for the children to have the social security benefits earned by Mr. Mendez's employment. They said Mrs. Mendez had no rights because Mr. Mendez had had a previous marriage. Mrs. Mendez gave up fighting because she did not want to be sued for having lived with him without legal marriage.*

*In August 2003, Mrs. Mendez still had work, and Rowena and Rosana were finally living with their mother again, although she had moved back once again to live under the bridge. Roselina remains in the orphanage.*

Being widowed twice has made it particularly hard for Mrs. Mendez to raise her children. We do not know the conditions at the time that Juanito first entered an orphanage, but her willingness to welcome him home when he returned years later shows that she continued to think of him as her son and to love him. When Mrs. Mendez gave birth to the baby boy in 2000, still in mourning for her second husband, it seemed to her that she would be offering the baby a better future by giving him up for adoption. Her later attempt to regain custody of him was the last gesture of love she was able to show for him.

When Mrs. Mendez finally put her daughters in an orphanage, she was taking the initiative to ensure that her daughters would not have to undergo homelessness upon their eviction. She took precautions by making an agreement with the orphanage and by respecting it so that she would get her daughters back as soon as her life was a little more stable. Although it took her a long time to find stable employment, she worked hard and managed. As her material conditions improved markedly, it was all the more incomprehensible for her to be refused the return of her daughters for so long.

## **B. Convinced the children will be better off elsewhere: the Roda family**

*Mrs. Liwanag Roda first met ATD Fourth World in 1993 at a holiday party organized by a charitable organization. At the time, she and her husband, Mr. Merlito Roda, had just one child. Mrs. Roda participated in workshops organized by ATD Fourth World to prepare for the International Year of the Family in 1994.*

*Today the Rodas have five children: Rolando, 12, Romeline, 9, Michelle, 6, Romel, 4, and Meldy, 1. They too live in the community under the bridge. In November 1999 (before Meldy was born), Mrs. Roda grew frustrated with her husband's drug addiction. They often got into arguments. Each time, Mrs. Roda ran away to stay at a crisis center. In addition, Mrs. Roda was afflicted with tuberculosis. Because of her family situation, the social workers there advised her to temporarily place two of her children in an orphanage. Mrs. Roda agreed to place Michelle, who was also consumptive, and Romel, then a newborn, in the institution.*

*The agreement with the orphanage was that Mrs. Roda would visit her children every month and, as long as she fulfilled this requirement, the social workers would not declare the children free for adoption. In the meantime, another organization helped Mrs. Roda cure her tuberculosis, and gave her a small sum of money so that she could sell newspapers and cigarettes on the highway to earn a living. They also offered Rolando a scholarship for his schooling.*

*Things were going well until Mr. Roda was arrested in 2000 for using illegal drugs. Although Mrs. Roda had fought with him in the past about his drug addiction, and had even separated with him over it, when she visited him in prison, he sought her forgiveness, and she decided to help him. Mrs. Roda invested all her earnings, capital and time in visiting her husband in prison, bringing him food, and processing all the*

*papers and attending the hearings to get him out. She had little time left for selling newspapers and cigarettes, and she used up the little capital she had for transportation to the prison. She could not repay the charitable organization for their loan. This made her ashamed to ask them for any more support.*

*Also as a result of Mrs. Roda's choice not to abandon her husband, she was not able to visit her children for several months. While Mr. Roda's prison was not far from Mrs. Roda's home, the children were in a center located in another city. The journey there takes anywhere from two to three hours, and the cost was equivalent to Mrs. Roda's entire day of earnings selling cigarettes. She needed these earnings to feed the older children who remained at home, and to continue sending them to school. The fact that she did not visit the younger children worried the social workers, who encouraged Mrs. Roda to leave her husband. In November 2000, the social workers asked ATD Fourth World to tell Mrs. Roda that they planned to declare the children abandoned and thus available for adoption. Mrs. Roda explained to no avail that she lacked the money for transportation to visit the children.*

*By the next month, Mr. Roda had been released on parole. Mrs. Roda was very happy and wanted the two of them to make the journey to visit the two youngest children. She looked forward to Christmas, saying, "Christmas is a time of the year where I hope and wish for nothing but to keep my kids in school and to see my family together again." However, two or three months later, the couple separated again. Mrs. Roda left the city and went to work in a province as a housemaid. Her older children, Rolando and Romeline, remained at home and were looked after by Mrs. Roda's mother, Mrs. Evangelista, who lives next door to them. Mr. Roda replaced his wife at the monthly parents' meetings required for Rolando to continue receiving his scholarship. It was not easy for him to attend, as it took away from time he needed to earn a living. This was frustrating, but he nevertheless attended.*

*Mrs. Roda visited whenever she could. The journey back to the city was quite expensive and took a half a day. Her employment allowed her just one day off each month. For her to visit the younger children in the orphanage, she was supposed to first speak with the social workers in the city where her family lived, and then travel to the adjoining city where her children were located. This proved impossible for her because of her lack of time off, her lack of money, and also her ambivalence about her relationship with the social workers who had encouraged her to leave her husband. Although she had left him, she trusted him to raise their older children.*

*A few months later, Mrs. Roda traveled back to the city to be part of the observance of the World Day for Overcoming Poverty<sup>56</sup> on 17 October 2001, and then to visit her family. She wanted to stay in touch with all her children, including those in the orphanage. But it seemed to her that Romel and Michelle were better off in the orphanage because there were too many troubles at home. After the visit, Mrs. Roda returned to her job in the countryside.*

*In February 2002, a social worker from the orphanage asked ATD Fourth World to inform Mrs. Roda that she would like to speak with her, and that if this was not possible, the orphanage would be forced to put the children up for adoption. On hearing this news, Mrs. Evangelista tried to speak with the social workers on behalf of her daughter, who was working in such a far-off province. Mrs. Evangelista was ready to carry on her daughter's responsibility and to visit Romel and Michelle regularly. But the social workers made it clear that they had to speak with the children's mother. On hearing this, Mrs. Roda immediately quit her job in the province and rushed back to the city. Over the next few months, she met a few times with the social workers and sorted out the children's paperwork. She remained in the city, reconciled with her husband, and wanted to bring Romel and Michelle home to live with her. The social workers refused to do so because she no longer had a job, because her home under the bridge was not a permanent home, and because her husband had not overcome*

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<sup>56</sup> First observed in 1987, this date was recognized by the UN General Assembly in 1992 and renamed the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty.

his drug addiction. With so many conditions, Mrs. Roda felt there was no way she could get her children out of the orphanage. She continued to live under the bridge.

The Rodas' youngest child, Meldy, was born in September 2002. Mrs. Roda needed a caesarian and stayed more than two weeks in the hospital. At the time, she hesitated to give any name to the baby girl. She was not sure how her family was going to live. She had left her husband again; she now had a baby to nurse; she wondered how to find food for the two other children at home. She needed to be able to work. Mrs. Roda considered giving the baby up for adoption. At this time, the family's only income came from Rolando and Romeline who would beg at the traffic lights. Mrs. Evangelista worked selling rags, but Mrs. Roda hesitated to ask help of her mother who blames her for not leaving Mr. Roda. Mrs. Evangelista voiced both concern and hopelessness for her daughter, not knowing how she could help when her means were so little.

On leaving the hospital, Mrs. Roda stayed with a neighbor because the electricity in her home had been cut off again. She worried that in a home with no light, rats might attack the baby. When Fourth World Volunteer Corps members visited her, Mrs. Roda voiced her confusion: "I see how beautiful my baby is. She has beautiful dimples on her face. When I look at her, I feel that I cannot send her for adoption. But how are my kids and I going to live? I do not have my husband with me. We are really separated now. I really have nothing to clothe my baby. My neighbors just let me borrow some of their old baby clothes. I am also breastfeeding her, even though I do not have enough milk, because I cannot afford to buy milk... Bahala na,<sup>57</sup> maybe there is still a way..." In the end, she kept Meldy and managed to go back to work after the caesarian.

Meanwhile, the family faced another challenge at home. During Mrs. Roda's absence from the city, Mr. Roda had attended several of the parent meetings linked to Rolando's scholarship, and he received a three-month allowance for Rolando. But because Mr. Roda did not attend other required meetings, the charitable organization suspected that he had spent the money on drugs. They asked him several times to meet with them. When he did not, they suspended Rolando's scholarship for 2002-03. For this reason, and because of the business loan she had not repaid, Mrs. Roda felt she could no longer dare ask the organization for help in her dialogue with the orphanage.

By December 2002, Mrs. Roda thought that Michelle and Romel might already have been adopted because she had not been able to visit them for a year and a half, and they had been declared abandoned. She said to the Fourth World Volunteer Corps members: "Maybe they have been abroad in an adoptive family. Maybe they will have a better future than they would ever have had with me." Her only hope was that, no matter where they had gone, one day they would come back to see her.

In fact, the children had been moved to another orphanage, but had not been adopted. Finally, in April 2003, Michelle and Romel were allowed to return to the Rodas' home. The orphanage personnel had visited their home to be sure of the living conditions. They also loaned Mrs. Roda a sewing machine that she could use to earn income.

The crisis in the Rodas' life stemmed from Mr. Roda's drug addiction. Over the years, Mrs. Roda has continued to show love for him and to want to support him. She has also tried arguing with him about his drug use, and leaving him in hopes of changing the situation. She worries about his health and does not want her children to grow up thinking of their father as an addict. Following others' advice, she tried to protect her youngest children from this situation by entrusting them to an orphanage. She also wanted to ensure that Michelle's tuberculosis would be treated, and that she and Romel would have regular meals and go to school regularly. When another child was born, Mrs. Roda thought

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<sup>57</sup> A Filipino expression used when a problem seems too complicated to have a solution. It means letting things take their course, and hoping that efforts will bring a solution.

the baby might be better off without her. But she also wanted to offer Meldy the love of her family, and to welcome home her two older children. Finally, she was able to do so. Ms. Gutierrez writes:

*"Mrs. Roda never wanted her kids to be adopted. She feels it may be better for them to stay in the shelter [with regular meals and schooling]. But she also believes that the kids should stay with their parents. It is important to see how many times she tried to bring her family together, and how hard this was for her. She dreams of seeing her grandchildren grow up with their parents."*

### **C. Losing custody of one's children: the Luna family**

*Mr. and Mrs. Luna have eight children, now ranging from two to fifteen years of age: Nena, Nora, Teodora, Cora, Clara, Maria, Teofisto, and Isidoro. The family lives in the community under a bridge. The father works as a pedicab driver. He also participates in regular meetings of fathers from different places who discuss their experiences and think together about overcoming poverty with ATD Fourth World. There is a development organization that provides financial assistance for some of their children to be in school.*

*When Nena was 12, she was put in an orphanage. At the time, the family had nothing to eat and everybody went to bed with empty stomachs. Following a fight in the family, a neighbor went to seek a community leader who works for a private organization. This woman in turn called on social workers from her organization. The social workers took Nena away from the parents. They said they would temporarily keep Nena until Mr. Luna was rehabilitated. They thought that he drank too much.*

*The social workers also wanted to protect Teodora, one of Nena's sisters. They were therefore taken at the same time and ended up in the same orphanage. The social workers did not tell the Lunas where the children were, because they first wanted Mr. Luna to attend a seminar on how to take care of his children. When Mr. and Mrs. Luna went to this organization asking for their daughters, the social workers said, "Nena is no longer in our care. We have already sent her to an orphanage."*

*ATD Fourth World met the Luna family in 1996, when they were participating in a nutrition program run by another organization. In 2001, when Mr. and Mrs. Luna were told the name of the orphanage Nena and Teodora had been sent to, they did not know how to get there. So they came to the ATD Fourth World center to seek help. Their neighbor, Mrs. Franco, accompanied them. Mrs. Franco's granddaughter, Zita, was then (and still is) in an orphanage. Mrs. Franco had agreed to send Zita to an orphanage because she was getting older and could no longer look after all the grandchildren and children living with her. She felt that Zita was better off in the orphanage than under the bridge, and at less risk of marrying early. In the orphanage, Zita could go to school, eat twice a day, have clothes, and medical treatment when required. These are things Mrs. Franco could not afford. Neither could Zita's parents, who were separated. Zeny, another grandchild, also stayed in an orphanage. Zeny was born with a physical malformation, which was well monitored in the orphanage.*

*Drawing on her own experience, Mrs. Franco was trying to tell Mrs. Luna not to worry so much because Nena would be better off in the orphanage than at home.*

*After a few days in the orphanage, Nena escaped with some other children. The social worker announced the news to Mr. and Mrs. Luna, but did not give them any assistance finding Nena. Because Nena had run away not from the organization that employed these social workers, but from a separate orphanage, the case was no longer considered their responsibility.*

*Mr. and Mrs. Luna looked for Nena. As part of their search, they even went to a radio station to make an announcement. A month after her disappearance, while Nena was still not found, the Lunas managed to see Teodora at the orphanage. At*

*their request, the social workers agreed to release her.*

*Four months after running away, Nena finally returned home. She explained that she had run away because she wanted to return home to her family. But after escaping, she had gotten lost, and had tried to live by herself in the streets. She then found shelter with a family in a part of the city very far away from her home. As soon as she figured out how to get home, she returned to her family.*

When the social workers first took Nena and Theodora away from their parents, they spoke about Mr. Luna's dependence on alcohol. Fourth World Volunteer Corps member Ms. Marilyn Gutierrez writes:

*"He drinks, like other men I know in the community. But it is not because he gets drunk that he cannot be a good father to his children anymore. I have seen him taking care of his kids, bringing them to school and fetching them in the afternoon. When he has work driving the pedicab, every evening he goes home with milk for the youngest ones, Teofisto and Isidro. I have seen him stop working in the afternoon to cook for the family or to bathe the other kids because his wife is busy with the smaller ones, or is attending a development organization meeting."*

Mrs. Franco told the Lunas of her own positive experience with two orphanages. But Nena's experience was different. Although the intention of the social workers who first sent Nena and Teodora to an orphanage was to protect them, Nena ended up alone on the street, facing dangers far greater than the hunger that plagued her family. It was perhaps for this reason that the social workers agreed to send Teodora home. The situation was hard for the parents to understand, given that their other children remained in their custody with no suggestion that they were not fit to raise them.

## **II. A perspective from a social worker in an orphanage**

In the process of understanding social service institutions involved in supporting and uplifting very poor families, ATD Fourth World interviewed in 2003 a social worker who has worked for nine years with a non-profit organization. This organization is licensed by the Department of Social Welfare and Development to operate as a child-caring institution. It has several programs:

- An orphanage for girls, ages 6-16, first opened at the end of World War II. The girls are enrolled in elementary and high school nearby. Not all of them are orphans. Most of them have lost one parent and some have lost both. Some girls stay for as long as eight years.
- A center for boys living in the streets was opened in 1981. This center now welcomes both boys and girls, ages 6 to 12, for a period of six months. They occasionally admit children over 13, especially girls. Some children have stayed for as long as three years. "Depending on the case, we are now going to be strict and try to let them stay for just 6 months. This does not have an educational component; they're just given a non-formal education."
- There are also services for the parents of the children living in these two institutions. This social worker says, "We give them seminars, we give regular meetings because their children will not stay here for life. They will soon return to them. So [the parents] must be equipped with enough skills to take care of these kids."
- Still other programs include: a daycare program for children ages 3-5 living with their parents in squatter areas; a new crisis intervention center for families, including battered women; a vocational course in food preparation and service technology for high school graduates; a boarding facility for university students on scholarships; and a community outreach program to provide school supplies. The institution plans to open a new center for sexually abused children as well, to accommodate their needs, which are different from those of other children in the existing residential facilities.

Revenue to fund these activities comes from a foundation, from renting out spare rooms in the dormitory to transient lodgers, and from selling food made in the vocational class. In past years, donations from private local citizens helped build the facilities.

For the children in residential care, “we also allow them to go out. For example, during Christmas they can stay with their parents. For example, if the father lives in a park and the child has to be with him during Christmas, they look for friends, where they can stay during Christmas, then after two days, three days, the children return here. At least they stay with their parents during that time. We [...] do not deprive them of the bonding.”

Occasionally, in a crisis, a child’s parents may stay in this organization’s facilities as well. The parent may be fleeing a situation of domestic violence, or the family may have traveled from another region to receive medical treatment.

*“If they have enough money to pay the lodging facilities, [...] in our crisis intervention facility we can accommodate up to six families at a time. Families can stay here for a maximum of three months. By that time, they should have overcome the situation.”*

Some children move from one program to the other, beginning in the center for children in the streets, moving to the residential center, and then to the vocational program or even to university.

The social worker: *“There are three categories of street children. There are ‘children on the street’ — they have parents and they just go to the street, like they sell Sampagita,<sup>58</sup> they play in the streets. That’s why they are called ‘children on the street.’ ‘Children of the street’ are those children who are more frequently in the street than in their homes. They still have their parents but [of the] 24 hours in a day, they spend 20 hours in the street and 4 hours with their family, with their relatives. And the ‘abandoned children’ are those who have not seen their parents. Those are the children who really stay in the streets. They don’t go home.”*

ATD Fourth World: *“We hear the word ‘street children’ a lot. It’s not always clear what people have in mind. And then you discover that these children have family... In fact they are in the street during the day, because their living space is so small, a whole family is crowded together, they take turns to sleep. So where could they go?”*

The social worker: *“There are also families who are street dwellers. [...] They think that when they come to the city they [will] have better opportunities. And they end up staying in the streets. They no longer want to go back to their provinces. Because it’s easier to beg, it’s easier to fool others... [...] I don’t know if there has really been a study [about families who are street dwellers], but that’s what our professors in social work cite as one of the reasons these families migrate to the city.”*

The children and families may be walk-in clients or may be referred to this institution by the government Department of Social Welfare and Development, by the police, or by other non-profit organizations.

*“Walk-in clients [...] come here and seek assistance. And upon assessment that they really need the services, we usually go for home visitation first before accommodating these children for shelter.... if they come! Some try to stay [with us], because most of them [...] live in the parks. [We can provide only] temporary shelter. [...] Those who are refused, some of them are already dependent on institutions. Maybe they have been released from a center. [...] Their parents really don’t [take] responsibility. They become dependent on institutions and centers. So, we take time to do the assessment if there is really a need. Because in that case, we are already tolerating [that] these parents be dependent.*

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<sup>58</sup> Flower garlands.

*“Those children who have parents, we require the parents to come here at least once a month. And there is a policy for them that if they will not come for six consecutive months, their children can be declared abandoned. But the declaration of abandonment usually takes a long process in our judicial system. The court will require us to have this child [participate in] media exposure and to exhaust all the possibilities so that the parents will be located. This media exposure [should include] at least three times by radio, three times on television, and three times in at least three newspapers. [...] So] sometimes during the process the parents would come. They are afraid that they will be totally denied their responsibility of being a parent, so they come. And when they show up, we can no longer pursue the declaration of abandonment.*

*“[If a child is declared abandoned, they may be put up for adoption or] they can be placed in foster care. We refer these children to agencies that have foster care services. There are also prerequisites before a person can be a foster parent. [...] Because some children get exploited when they are placed in foster families that are not well studied.*

### **III. Issues of concern**

#### **A. Inconsistency and lack of information**

In the Rodas' situation, it was puzzling that the social workers refused to return custody of Michelle and Romel, as if it were not relevant that they were successfully raising the three other children. Similarly in the Lunas' situation, Nena and Teodora were taken from their home, whereas the other children were considered safe with their parents. When parents ask that their children return home, the fact that they are able to care for other children who have remained home should be taken into consideration.

When Nena ran away, the social workers who had originally taken her into custody offered no help in finding her because she had run away from a separate facility. Although there may have been administrative reasons for this, the parents, who had been told they should not be caring for Nena, were in the end the only ones trying to look for her.

Lack of information was also a problem for the Lunas. When their children were initially put in an orphanage, they were not told where the orphanage was located so that they could visit.

In Mrs. Roda's case, the procedure she was given for visiting her children was first to meet with the social workers she knew before visiting the children in another center. On one of her visits to the social workers in order to arrange a visit, she was told that her children had been transferred to another orphanage and that they did not know where her children were. She then went to the center where she had previously visited the children, but no social worker there was available to speak with her.

#### **B. Marital issues**

This became a subject of discussion between Mrs. Roda and the social workers responsible for her children. When Mr. Roda was in prison, she had to make choices about investing her time and money in visits with him or with the children. Knowing that her children were being cared for in the orphanage, she felt it was more important that she visit him. She also said she felt that getting him out of prison was one of the most important ways she could protect their children's future.

For many years, the social workers had advised her to leave her husband, because they believed him to be the cause of her not being able to get out of poverty. One social worker spoke to the Fourth World Volunteer Corps members as well, insisting that Mrs. Roda should become strong enough to raise her children without her husband and should make a life without him.

Although for a time she did leave him, in the hope that this would push him to overcome his drug addiction, she did not agree that he was keeping her poor. Instead, she saw him as an ally in her efforts to get the children out of the orphanage, and as a person who was special to her, and who had stood by her in difficult times as well. She also sees him as an important person in their children's lives. Mrs. Roda recounts:<sup>59</sup>

*"When I was in my second year of high school, I was so good in school that even my teachers sought my help for some activities. They also often asked me to run errands for them. One time, our school organized a "Beauty contest." Students had to sell some tickets. Each of us was given several booklets of tickets to sell. My teacher gave me some, worth 2,000 pesos, and she expected that I could sell all of them. My parents did not like the idea that I take such a risky responsibility. They were afraid that the tickets might be stolen from me or get lost. [My parents had no way] to pay for these tickets if this happens. And if I had to go to prison for this, they could not have done anything. But because it was for the school, I went on to take the risk.*

*"One day in school, I accidentally left my bag in the compound. Some of the tickets and some money [from ticket sales] were there. When I came back to look for my bag, the tickets and the money were no longer there. I was very scared that I could not tell this to my teacher or my parents. For one week, I would leave our house to go to school but I could not go to class because I was afraid the teachers would demand the tickets and the money. I ended up staying just at the gate of the school each day. This did not go on for long because my parents discovered it. I told them what happened, and of course they scolded me. They went with me to the school to tell the teacher what happened. But the teacher did not believe me. She suspected that my family or I used the money [for ourselves] because she knew we were poor. She required my family to pay for the amount. But they could not, in the end I had to stop school because of the humiliation. My parents got frustrated with me and they did not insist anymore to send me to school. I was 15.*

*"But I really wanted to be back to school, even if it was no longer high school but just a place for me to learn a skill. I tried hard. I even dared to go to a night school, like a self-supporting student. But when the school had to ask me to pay 200 pesos for the tuition fee, I stopped because I had nothing. I said to myself that nothing would happen to me anymore. No matter how much I desire to go back to school, if I do not have any money, it is not possible.*

*"It was at this moment of my life that I met Merlito Roda. He used to be a student at the high school I was in before. I was 15 years old and he was 17. He was the one who helped me not to feel depressed about my situation. He was always beside me, cheering me up. He was very kind and thoughtful. One day, he started courting me. I had begun to love him."*

Mr. Roda supported his wife when she was very low. Now that drugs have eaten away at his goodness, and others are telling her to leave him, she wants to help her husband regain the goodness she sees in him. Asking her to leave her husband in order to regain custody of her children puts her in the position of having to choose between ending her own relationship with her children and ending their relationship with a man she sees as a loving father.

### **C. Gender issues**

Around the world, families and communities carry a long history of sexism and a lack of education and economic opportunities for women. Social policies today try to compensate by focusing mainly on the empowerment of women. Studies have also shown that women are more likely than men to spend their income in ways that benefit their children and the

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<sup>59</sup> In conversations with Ms. Gutierrez.

whole family. Although it is crucial to increase poor women's income, in the experience of the Fourth World team in the Philippines, the process can have unintended consequences that are not helpful to the women nor to their families. It sometimes leaves men feeling that they do not count when it comes to uplifting their families.

Micro-credit projects, for instance, usually target only the woman of the household. She is the sole contractor of the loan and the signatory of the savings book. Project operators emphasize that they consider women more trustworthy and resourceful than their husbands or companions. This emphasis, combined with the men's growing dependency on women, increases their humiliation. It is especially difficult for men in poverty to see women given precedence in so many domains at the same time – in micro-financing and income-generating projects, in job opportunities and vocational training, in adult literacy programs, in education of the children, etc.

Without support, the men lose face. Remaining unemployed is a daily humiliation. Some also feel driven by this experience to abuse alcohol or drugs. The Fourth World team feels that Mr. Roda's drug abuse stemmed from his need "to feel that he still exists." When Mrs. Roda was given a small loan to run her business selling newspapers and cigarettes, her husband was embarrassed. Often, he would take the box of cigarettes to the highway to try to sell them himself, as a way of showing his family that he too could provide for them. One day, Mr. Roda went to see a social worker from the charitable organization that made the loan to his wife. He was very angry when he said: "You keep helping Liwanag. Why do you never support me?" The staff of this organization, who saw Mr. Roda only when he was angry and not when he was caring for his children, do not understand this couple. They think Mrs. Roda is a victim of abuse by her husband and stays with him out of fear.

Life is challenging and unfair for women mired in poverty around the world. But the policies designed to empower them are too rarely designed and evaluated in partnership with these women. The policies can sometimes create unintended consequences that end up worsening the women's situation by breaking their husbands' spirits and driving them to despair. This can make it still more difficult for a couple to raise their children and can lead to the family splintering apart.

#### **D. Tensions in the relationship between parents and social workers**

Good relationships do exist that help strengthen parents' abilities to raise their children. But the relationships can become strained, for example due to situations like the Rodas' where money loaned for a micro-credit project was spent in a crisis. Other tensions grow out of the pressures that weigh on parents in the midst of a crisis, and those that weigh on social workers who may lack time, resources, funding, and sufficient knowledge of a family's situation. Ms. Gutierrez gives this example from another family she has known for many years:

*"One day the mother told me she was scared to go and speak with the social workers in a charitable organization that was caring for her children. One of them had spoken to her in a mean way. The mother used an idiom in Tagalog to describe to me that 'even a dog could not eat the words this social worker uses to me.' Later, a relative of this mother asked me to accompany her on a visit to the same social worker. The relative wanted to borrow crutches for a child who had had an accident. I heard the social worker respond by saying, 'You only come here when you need something.' Her words were not in a joking tone, and this helped me understand why parents may feel uncomfortable or embarrassed to approach some social workers."*

When tensions such as these grow too great, it can be very hard for parents who already face many challenges, and who may have very low self-esteem to begin with, to have the courage to maintain dialogue with social workers. If these are the same social workers who have custody of their children, the parents' possibility of regaining custody of the children is severely compromised.

## E. Ensuring that residential placement be temporary

*"All while Mrs. Roda's children were under the care of an organization, she was thinking only of temporary care. She sought support from these organizations, but never dreamed of sending her children away to live and grow up with another family. When she learned that her kids were to be put up for adoption, she did not think twice about leaving her job in the province and rushing back to the city. She gathered all the identity papers of her children and wanted to take them back immediately. But she was then denied custody because she did not have a good job or a place to live better than the accommodations under the bridge. [...] We often hear the word 'orphanage' from the families we know. But they give the word a different meaning than does society. Orphanages are not seen as places where they wish their kids could find another family. Instead, they are seen as places where they wish they could find support for their family, with opportunities for their children to be in school and to grow up properly, like any other children, and with the opportunity for them, the parents, to act on their obligations to their children. "*

- Ms. Gutierrez

Many institutions, like that of the social worker interviewed above, hope that the residential placement of children will be short-term. This is something the institutions have in common with the many families who see putting their children in an orphanage as a temporary last resort. Parents living in extreme poverty are often ready to face all kinds of problems, but they look for ways to protect their children. Mothers, even more than fathers, want at all costs to keep their children away from the dangers of the streets. Neighbors as well often tell them that an orphanage will be the best solution.

When the initial crisis has passed, however, if the parents have not been allowed or enabled to bring their children home again, neighbors look down on the parents for having left their children in an orphanage. As for outsiders to the neighborhood, they often assume that parents such as those profiled here are not good enough to deserve their children. The weight of these judgments can make it even harder for parents to show that they do love their children and are doing all they can for them. Parents' efforts often remain unseen, like those by Mrs. Mendez who worked hard to find a job and a decent home with the hope and expectation of bringing her children home.

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In preparing this chapter, Fourth World Volunteer Corps member Ms. Gutierrez wrote,

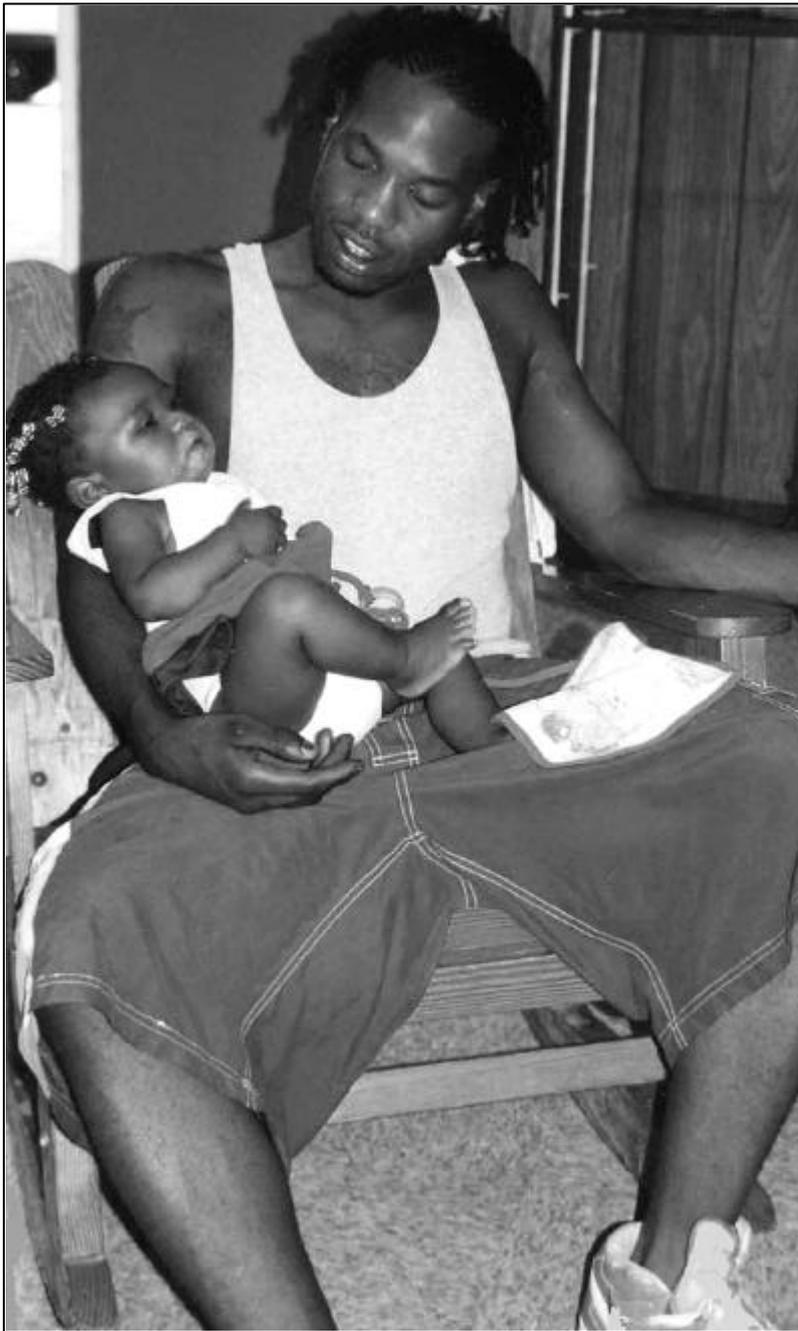
*"I am thinking of the children of yet another family we know whose children spent many years in the orphanage. In all the years we have known their mother, she never dared speak with us about it. Or perhaps it is we who did not find the opportunity to speak about it with her."*

It is painful for families to share their humiliation at not being able to raise their children. It is hoped that those who did share their stories will have helped to change things for those who have not yet found ways to speak out.

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## CHAPTER FIVE:

# The United States



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## Introduction

The United States is a wealthy country, with the 8<sup>th</sup> highest per capita gross national product in the world; nevertheless, poverty continues to persist. The U.S. government counts 34.6 million Americans living below the poverty line. Some 20.3% of American children live in poverty, a rate higher than that of any European nation.<sup>60</sup> This is an issue close to the heart of many American citizens who volunteer on behalf of children's rights, both through organizations, and individually in reaching out to children and families in their communities. It should be noted that laws and policies in the United States vary widely among the 50 states as well as from city to city. They will not be summarized here. This chapter will instead highlight common threads and coping strategies in the experience of very poor families. The sources of research for this chapter reflect the experiences and efforts of many members of the Fourth World Movement-USA, as well as that of several other non-profit organizations. The second part of this chapter focuses on the child welfare system in New York City, on the efforts made by parents in poverty to do their best for their children, and on the way in which some of these parents, as members of a non-profit organization, are beginning to shape a dialogue with the child welfare agency.

### I. An overview of various ways in which poverty separates parents and children

#### A. Homelessness

*In autumn of 2002, an apartment building in Harlem caught fire. Not only did Mr. Joseph Suber, a single father of two boys, aged 5 and 10, lose their home; Mr. Suber's mother and two aunts who lived in the same building lost their homes as well. Mr. Suber also lost the equipment for his work photographing weddings. At first, the family received emergency assistance allowing them to stay in a hotel for the winter. But in May, still without work, Mr. Suber had to enter a shelter. "He tried to send his sons to live with various relatives, but after the fire, the relatives were scattered [...] trying to reestablish their own lives. That meant there were times when the boys had to stay with him in the shelter. 'I didn't really want them to go through that. It was just bad. There were cockroaches and rodents.'"<sup>61</sup>*

Most local or state governments and communities maintain systems of alternative housing for people who lack stable housing. Some parents, like Mr. Suber, feel that these shelters are unsafe for their children, and would rather be apart from their children to spare them the experience. Emergency shelter systems throughout the U.S. are known for their substandard living conditions. Ms. Hilda Garcia, a mother of two who spent four years in a shelter, says: "There are drug problems, and people spend time in hallways with other people, making noise." In a report by the government of New York City, the conditions in this shelter were called "deplorable."<sup>62</sup>

There are also many shelters that are segregated by age or gender. For example, some accept only men or only women with children below a certain age. In these cases, families who have no choice but to accept emergency housing are not able to continue living as a family unit. Ms. Christine Boulet is a mother who lost her housing when she left her husband. "She could have had a bed [in a shelter] but they wouldn't take children at that shelter, and she's not about to leave her 10-year-old daughter, Sophie."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> These figures come from: The World Bank Group, Private Sector Development, Report on Competitiveness Indicators; the U.S. Census Bureau's annual report on the nation's poverty and income levels, 2002; and *Child Well-Being, Child Poverty and Child Policy in Modern Nations*, edited by Koen Vleminckx and Timothy M. Smeeding, The Policy Press, 2001.

<sup>61</sup> "Fire Leaves Life in Ruins," by Arthur Bovino, *The New York Times*, 10 December 2003.

<sup>62</sup> "Bad Housekeeping: The city's other emergency shelters are no haven from catastrophe," by Jamie Katz, *City Limits - New York's Urban Affairs News Magazine*, January 2003.

<sup>63</sup> "Homeless in New York," by Jay Newton-Small, *Habitat Special Session on Cities Conference News Daily*, A publication of International Media Services with the Earth Times, 7 June 2001.

Active involvement of fathers and mothers is widely acknowledged to impact positively on children's development. And yet there are family shelters that do not allow fathers to stay, forcing a couple to choose between staying together, and sheltering their children. In New Orleans, for example, there is no city-run shelter that will accept fathers or even male children over the age of 11. For this reason, some families known by the Fourth World Movement there avoid the shelters. Other families find no room in the shelters. Instead, they try to find a friend who will take them in, even if this leads to severe overcrowding. Fourth World Volunteer Corps member Hyacinth van Delft-Egner notes: "I am amazed to see parents with so few resources going through so much to keep their family together through several years of seeking shelter with one neighbor, and then another."

In other cases, parents have feigned domestic abuse so that the mother and children can have better housing—in those cases, fathers have an especially high price to pay. A mother may pretend to be a battered woman in order to get temporary housing for herself and her children, while her husband is left both homeless and in danger of arrest.

In the shelters that do allow children, mothers, and fathers to live together, there can be administrative complications in keeping the family together. Ms. Elizabeth Laboy's husband had been working full-time in a plastics factory to support her and their six children. Because his salary was too low for them to afford rent, they were living in an emergency shelter where families pay rent on a sliding scale, depending how much they earn. This government-funded shelter required the husband to appear at an appointment that conflicted with his working hours. Because he missed the appointment and had some incomplete paperwork, the shelter ruled that he could no longer live there. In order for Ms. Laboy and the children to remain, she had to sign a contract promising not to let her husband on the premises. Her husband then slept in a car for weeks. Sometimes, Ms. Laboy violated the contract by allowing him to visit the family and to sleep in the closet of the shelter apartment. Once, their 13-year-old daughter Xiomarah recalled, caseworkers dropped by unannounced while he was asleep in the closet and she feared they would find him. Finally, the local government paid for the family to leave the state. The father had to leave his job, and the family began sleeping on the floor in the one-bedroom apartment of relatives.<sup>64</sup>

There are also situations where families who lose their housing must choose between keeping the family together or giving their children the chance to remain enrolled in school. The Lawrence family lost their home when an electrical fire spread through their building. The Red Cross found room in an emergency shelter for both parents and all six children. However, the shelter was so far from the children's schools that the parents felt their children could not travel so far each day and still be rested enough to learn. Registering them in schools near the shelter would have meant a disruptive change in the middle of the school year, one hard to justify given that the family did not know how long they would remain in the shelter before finding more permanent housing. So the parents decided to let their children stay with other people closer to the school. The 11 and 12-year-old children stayed at the home of a teacher from their school. Three younger sisters stayed with their grandmother. Because it would have been difficult for the grandmother to take them to school, the father commuted each day to their old neighborhood to bring the children to school in the morning, and back to their grandmother's at night. After a month, the children moved from their grandmother's to their aunt's home. By the end of the school year, the children had all moved into the shelter with their parents. "This situation showed the generosity of people wanting to help the family. [...] We also saw how relying on others can have serious implications. It is one thing to take in children for a few days, but when the situation lasts, it can put strains on people. When the children are not with their parents for a prolonged period of time, they can grow away from their parents. Additionally, taking children in can become too much for the people who initially wanted to help. They begin to blame the children and/or the parents. Friendships fray

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<sup>64</sup> "Strict Shelter Rules Force Many Families Out," by Nina Bernstein, *The New York Times*, 29 November 1999.

because they feel they have failed.”<sup>65</sup>

## **B. Child-care is lacking as parents move from welfare to work**

*Ms. Kimberly Paul often works until 9:30 at night. Because she cannot leave her 6-year-old son alone, she must leave him with her mother five days a week, about two hours away from her home. Earning her living “is contingent on the fragile web that holds up the working-class—subsidies coming through, nobody getting sick—and carries with it a price that no middle-class mother would consider paying: her child doesn’t live with her.”<sup>66</sup>*

Ms. Paul is one of many parents in the United States who used to receive government assistance to survive. This kind of assistance has been steadily less available since 1996, with a lifetime limit of five years placed on most recipients, and a strong emphasis by the government on trying to help poor families transition from welfare to self-reliance.<sup>67</sup> As many families who live in persistent poverty have had their income subsidies drastically reduced or completely eliminated, parents are working longer hours – with scant options for their children’s care during their absence. In order to comply with strict work requirements set by the government, parents often have to commute long distances to work low-skilled and low-paid jobs.

The new work requirements have created a boom in the unregulated, informal child-care sector. Ms. Milagros Espinal cares for 13 children in the two-room home where her own three children, her husband, and their dog live. She can be spoon-feeding a 1-year-old, making sure a 2-year-old keeps a steaming nebulizer over his nose and mouth to treat his asthma, and supervising the meal of five slightly older children, all at the same time. She works six days and 65 hours a week. Most child-care providers don’t have health insurance, sick days, or holidays.<sup>68</sup>

Parents are also at a loss as to how to protect their children in neighborhoods they consider dangerous.

*“Many people [in the United States] are trying to leave the welfare system. Like me, they are trying to be part of the working world. But even when you do your best to handle the job you are given, you can be assigned a job with very early hours, very far from home. You have no [chance] to explain that you cannot in good conscience leave your young children to get to school safely on their own and there is no one else to take them. When I was told to sign a form reprimanding me, I refused to do it without writing my own comment on the back of the form. All I could do was write it down. That was my way to defend my rights.”*

– Ms. Emma Speaks<sup>69</sup>

## **C. Immigration**

*Jose and Sergio Cruz Velazquez, 8 and 6 years old, were arrested at the border of Arizona. Their parents, living without legal papers in Pennsylvania, had hired a smuggler to bring their children across the border to them. Their mother, Rosa, said, “I did not feel good when my sons were so far away. I wanted them with me. Both of us have crossed the border. We know that it is difficult. But we believed that our sons would be fine. [When they were caught], I asked myself, ‘What did we do?’” The boys were taken to a shelter behind a barred fence.<sup>70</sup>*

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<sup>65</sup> “Families Split Up by Homelessness,” by Hyacinth van Delft-Egner, Fourth World Movement-USA, 2003.

<sup>66</sup> “Market Babies,” by Tracie McMillan, *City Limits*, January 2003.

<sup>67</sup> These massive changes to the social welfare system across the U.S. emerged with the 1996 introduction of TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families).

<sup>68</sup> “Market Babies.”

<sup>69</sup> Delegate, ATD Fourth World, speaking at the United Nations headquarters for the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, 17 October 1998.

<sup>70</sup> “Littlest Immigrants, Left in Hands of Smugglers,” by Ginger Thompson, *The New York Times*, 3 November 2003.

Poverty is a critical factor in shaping immigration. Although migration can promote cultural, economic and human well-being, there are also instances when it can splinter a family and send its members further into poverty. Many parents are forced to migrate when work is unavailable or does not pay a livable wage in their community. Because of their lack of resources (and sometimes lack of proper documentation) many parents must leave their children in the care of others while they work elsewhere in order to sustain their families. In fact, some 85% of immigrant children experience separations from one or both parents during migration. Of non-Mexican Central American children, 47% were separated from their mothers for 5 years or more.<sup>71</sup>

Many mothers leave their children behind and immigrate to the United States in order to care for other people's children: "The immigrant women who occupy these jobs find that they must be on-call during all waking hours, and often through the night. There is no clear line between work and non-working hours, no boundary between job space and private space. The South and Central American women immigrate with the understanding that the separation from family is a temporary solution, but circumstances may cause it to endure for long, and sometimes undetermined periods of time. Bringing children to the United States causes its own set of problems. [...] Children of undocumented immigrants [...] enter the country surreptitiously, often only in the company of strangers."<sup>72</sup> A mother who left her two-year-old son in the Dominican Republic for seven years says, "My great regret is my son. [...] What is important is to be there when he needs you. This love is missed [...] not to have had that love at that age."<sup>73</sup>

There are also children born in the United States whose parents feel they must send them out of the country. Mrs. Xiu works sewing women's pants. Her son Henry was born in New York and has an American passport:

*She spent four months nursing him, but: "knowing that every day she did not work was another day without money to pay back her \$20,000 smugglers' debt. She spent her nights awake, hushing the baby so he would not disturb her husband or the three other restaurant workers who shared their apartment. [...] After four months,] she placed her son in the arms of a friend of a friend who, for \$1000, agreed to take him back to China. Xiu's mother is raising him there now, along with the 10-year-old daughter she left behind last year when Xiu joined her husband in New York. [...] For weeks after Henry was shipped off, she would hear him cry at night. [...] A social worker [said], 'It's really killing her. She said no words can express her sadness.' [This practice] appears to involve hundreds of babies a year in New York, if not more. [...] It is the combination of the large debts owed to their smugglers and the long hours they must work that has made this practice increasingly common among Chinese immigrants."<sup>74</sup>*

As families seek new economic opportunities in other countries, the consequences for their children can be drastic when their parents can no longer care for them.

#### **D. The criminal justice system**

The United States currently has a higher percentage of its population imprisoned than any other country in the world—about 2 million people, or 0.7% of the entire population.<sup>75</sup> In the case of the poorest prisoners, it can be particularly hard to find others to care for their children during their imprisonment, as well as to maintain family ties. This is the case for Mrs. Mary Arable of Louisiana. She is in prison. Her husband died a few years ago. The children are staying with friends: "The man who has taken in the children feels responsible for getting the children to visit their mother. But visiting hours at the prison are during

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<sup>71</sup>"The Transnationalization of Families: Immigrant Separations and Reunifications," by Carola Suarez-Orozco, Irina Todorova and Josephine Louie of the Harvard Immigration Project.

<sup>72</sup>"Families on the Frontier: From Braceros to Braceras in the Home," by Dr. Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo, University of Southern California, [www.afta.org](http://www.afta.org).

<sup>73</sup>"Apple Pie But Not Motherhood," Eliana Korin, American Family Therapy Academy, 2001, [www.afta.org](http://www.afta.org).

<sup>74</sup>"Squeezed by Debt and Time, Mothers Ship Babies to China," by Somini Sengupta, *The New York Times*, 14 September 1999.

<sup>75</sup> The International Centre for Prison Studies at the University of London, 2003.

school and work hours. This has meant that the children have not been able to see their mother in over a year. The children have made several gifts for their mother, with help from the Fourth World team. But prison regulations permit only regular-sized postcards to be mailed, so Mrs. Arable has not received these gifts. The children have told the team that they love their mother very much and want to be able to see her."<sup>76</sup>

Low-income, minority adolescents make up the majority of youth offenders in the juvenile justice system. These children also tend to have difficulty maintaining family ties. Many of them arrived in the justice system after having lived with foster families, and their own families do not know where they can be visited. Their lack of family ties may have played a role in their involvement in a crime, but also in the sentence handed down in court. "The presence of family members [during a trial] can have an impact on the outcome. [...] The lack of any family members in the audience can further sully the accused. [...] 'If you're alone in this world, it's much harder to rehabilitate yourself,' said Mr. Kapner, a Legal Aid lawyer. [...] 'Intuitively, judges and juries understand that.'"<sup>77</sup>

### E. Ill-health

*"Mary's children used to participate in the Street Library. She tried to raise her two sons, but the boys were put in foster care. She really wanted to raise her children. I don't think she will get them back because she has AIDS. It's very sad that the children can't come to her."*

– Mrs. Doris Lewis, member of the Fourth World Movement-USA<sup>78</sup>

The death rate of young adults in poverty, as well as of their infants and children, is much higher than that of other socio-economic groups. A Fourth World Volunteer Corps member living in an isolated rural region notes that family separations also occur due to hospitalizations, both long-term and short-term. When the parents have few means, they may not find transportation to be able to visit their children in the hospital, or they may have no one with whom they could leave their other children while visiting the one who is ill or if they themselves become ill.<sup>79</sup>

### F. Sterilization

Until 17 April 2003, a law remained in effect in the state of North Carolina allowing the "Eugenics Board" to sterilize people deemed "unfit to reproduce." This kind of law, applied in large measure to people too poor to defend themselves, was once widespread in the United States, and led to the sterilization of about 65,000 people. The North Carolina law had not been used since 1974, and was stricken from the books with an apology from the Governor "to the victims and families of this regrettable episode. [...] assure them that we will not forget what they have endured."<sup>80</sup>

Although this kind of imposed sterilization by and large occurred in the past, less formal efforts to sterilize certain population groups continue. Children Requiring A Caring Kommunity, or "CRACK," also known as Project Prevention, is an organization founded by Barbara Harris in California in 1997 which offers men and women \$200 to be sterilized or put on long-term birth control if they are addicted to alcohol or drugs.

*"Critics counter that it is little more than a bribe to women to make an irreversible decision [and is a] stance aimed not at helping children, but at selective breeding. They point to comments like those Mrs. Harris made in 1998 [...] saying: 'We don't allow dogs to breed. We spay them. We neuter them. We try to keep them from having unwanted puppies, and yet these women are*

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<sup>76</sup> Hyacinth van Delft-Egner and Corrinna Bain, Fourth World Movement-USA, internal note, January 2004.

<sup>77</sup> "In Teeming Courts, Finding Strength in Family Ties," by David Rohde, *The New York Times*, 7 July 2000.

<sup>78</sup> "Success in Disguise," by D. Lewis, D. Skelton, M.-E. Ayassamy and D. Cretinon, Terraviva, December 2000.

<sup>79</sup> Fanchette Clement-Fanelli, Fourth World Volunteer Corps member, internal note concerning Appalachia, December 2003.

<sup>80</sup> "Bill to Rid State of Eugenics Law Signed," Associated Press, *The Virginian Pilot*, 18 April 2003.

*literally having litters of children.’ [...Critics] argue that counseling is the best method for both ending drug use and promoting responsible parenthood.*

*“[...] ‘What she’s doing is suggesting there are certain neighborhoods where it is dangerous for some people to be reproducing,’ said Lynn Paltrow, executive director of National Advocates for Pregnant Women. ‘It suggests they are not worthy of reproducing. It is very much like the eugenics history in America.’ [...]*

*“Dr. Van Dunn, the Chief Medical Officer of the New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation, said [...] ‘It raises a lot of ethical questions. Reproductive choice should always be an option and people shouldn’t be paid. You provide family planning counseling and let them make their decision.’”<sup>81</sup>*

Although people of all social backgrounds may fall prey to drug or alcohol addiction, it is only those also living in poverty who are targeted by this organization. Campaigns like this are not widespread, but as long as they exist, they reflect a view in society that very poor people are unfit to raise children. Researcher Ms. Beth Cooper Benjamin sums up the situation as follows:

*“For many women, sterilization can mean permanent and empowering freedom from the fear of unwanted pregnancy. But for others it is not a choice. [...] Although the women’s health movement has made great strides in publicizing sterilization abuse, the practice continues to claim victims from those strata of society least prepared to fight it. These women: poor, black, Puerto Rican, Chicana, Native American, or mentally retarded, have been sterilized either without their consent or with consent obtained under duress.*

*“Often women in active labor have been pressured to sign consent forms so that physicians could perform a tubal ligation or hysterectomy immediately after delivery. In many cases, the women spoke little or no English, and were forced to sign consent forms they did not entirely understand. Today, sterilization abuse has become linked to the unsafe promotion of new contraceptive devices.”<sup>82</sup>*

## **II. How families in poverty experience and cope with the child welfare system**

*“A boy [I met] was very upset that he had been put in foster care. He really missed his own parents and the love they showed him. He makes me think of a girl I know here in New York who is very sad because she may be put in foster care soon. Another child lives [...] in an institution, and he wants to be at home with his parents and sisters and brothers. He wants to be free. I want to be free too.”*

- Raneisha, age 14<sup>83</sup>

### **A. Situation of families whose children are removed and put in foster care**

In the United States, one of the primary ways that poverty can divide families is through the child welfare system. In 2001, an estimated 542,000 children across the country were in foster care, with 18% of them living in institutions, and the others in homes or other settings.<sup>84</sup> The system remains necessary to protect children and can sometimes be a real support for families. However, the majority of children removed from their parents’ custody have not been abused. The most common charge is neglect, which can mean simply having too few resources to provide for all the needs of one’s family. Many questions have been raised about whether the premature removal of children actually harms them.

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<sup>81</sup> “Sterilization Offer to Addicts Reopens Ethics Issue,” by Cecilia M. Vega, *The New York Times*, 6 January 2003.

<sup>82</sup> “Sterilization Abuse: A Brief History,” by Beth Cooper Benjamin, Haverford University, 23 April 1996.

<sup>83</sup> From a talk presented at the annual conference of the Committee on Teaching About the UN, where Raneisha represented ATD Fourth World, 30 January 2004.

<sup>84</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

*"Of 30,000 New York City children currently placed in foster care, less than 15% are victims of child abuse. [...] Often, in the child welfare system, the term neglect is a euphemism for poverty and its roots and repercussions: homelessness, family conflict, untreated addiction and mental illness, social isolation and lack of access to the supports all families need. The correlation between poverty, race and involuntary foster care placement is real and well documented. 97% of the 30,000 New York City children in foster care are African-American or Latino. [...] Social problems such as addiction, domestic violence and mental illness cut across lines of race, class and geography. But families with wealth and other resources can protect themselves from government intrusion into their personal lives. [...] The fact that the children of New York's most privileged families virtually never wind up in our foster care system tells us that it is not a good place to be.*

*"In 1995, the Administration for Children's Services was formed, with a mission statement that any 'ambiguity' about child safety would be resolved in favor of removal. [...] Mothers were arrested on child endangerment charges relating to offenses such as living in substandard housing, or leaving children inadequately supervised while they went to work in factories and sweatshops. [...] Children were removed from their homes, usually in the middle of the night, while their mothers were taken away in handcuffs. The former Police Commissioner described this as 'erring on the side of safety.' His assumption that such errors could be easily corrected once they were recognized was wrong. The foster care system is tenacious. It is much easier to enter than to leave. Once children are in the system, poverty forms the rationale for keeping them in it: their homes are too small or overcrowded, their parents' income is inadequate, their neighborhoods are dangerous. Factors such as these which, in and of themselves would never form a basis for removal, become insurmountable obstacles to family reunification."<sup>85</sup>*

Ms. Claudia Morataya is one of the parents caught up in these obstacles. When her husband abused her physically, she decided to leave with her two children. Her husband tried to prevent her from leaving and his sister called the police to stop their fight. Ms. Morataya recalls:

*"The police took me to jail. I did not stay in jail long, because I was able to prove that I [...] did what I did in self-defense. But when the police receive a report of domestic violence with children involved, they call ACS [the Administration for Children's Services]. When I got out of jail, [...] my children had been placed in other people's custody. When I went to court to ask for my children back, they gave me all kinds of requirements: parenting class, domestic violence class, counseling, find my own housing. I have done most of these things in the past year. My children are still in foster care. [...] I could not defend myself in Family Court. [...] They never saw me for who I really am. [...] I also know, even though I am poor, people are making money from keeping my children. [...] But I am not giving up hope. I see my children every week. I never miss a visit. I have learned a lot about my own rights, and I am helping other parents like me."<sup>86</sup>*

When Ms. Morataya refers to people making money from keeping her children, she is speaking of the foster care agencies that have contracts with ACS to provide beds to children. Mr. Arsham notes that many of these agencies "are capable of providing family preservation services at a fraction of the cost of foster care. [But] they are reimbursed in a manner where the key to fiscal stability is to keep beds filled and deal in a high volume of children."

A social worker in a rural community of Virginia<sup>87</sup> describes a similar situation there.

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<sup>85</sup> Mr. Michael Arsham, Executive Director of the Child Welfare Organizing Project, during a panel discussion hosted by the Non-Governmental Organization Committee on the Family, at the United Nations, 28 June 2001.

<sup>86</sup> Ms. Claudia Morataya, Parent Leader, Child Welfare Organizing Project, also during the panel discussion of 28 June 2001.

<sup>87</sup> Interviewed by Ms. Clement-Fanelli in December 2003.

This is a county where the percentage of children in foster care is one-third higher than in the rest of the state. More than 90% of the children in foster care in his county are from poor families. The number of cases due to abuse is very small. Ms. Clement-Fanelli summarizes his comments:

*"If there were more jobs, there would be less foster care. In many cases, a pattern within some families goes from generation to generation. Men he sees living in the street were in foster care when they were children. He thinks the system is failing the children [because of] increased regulations. The amount of paperwork that is now required prevents social workers from being in the field as much as they would want to be. Much is left to the discretion of the judges who rarely consult the social workers. Foster parents are poorly prepared to have children in care, especially older children with behavior problems. Most children end up in a juvenile facility rather than with a family, as there are not enough certified foster families. Reuniting families is a big concern, but social workers have little means to act with the natural parents outside of advising them to take advantage of such and such a program. Parents could be helped to work out their problems, although a lot of extra support would be needed in cases involving drug addiction."*

Although similar situations exist throughout the United States, our exploration of child welfare will focus on New York City, which currently has 23,469 children in the child welfare system.<sup>88</sup> Ms. Nina Bernstein is an award-winning New York Times journalist who spent many years researching the child welfare system. She writes:

*"[C]hildren in foster care and at risk of entering foster care are overwhelmingly the children of the poor. During long periods of American history, the relationship between poverty and family breakup was unambiguous: with no public relief, parents too poor to support their children had to put them into orphanages or up for indenture or adoption. The old and familiar conviction underlying such policies, that parents who cannot rear their children without public aid are almost by definition unfit to bring up the next generation, still holds sway in this age of welfare reform. The effort to sever the destiny of needy children from the fate of their unworthy parents repeatedly slams against unyielding truths of child development: the need for intensive human attachment, the traumatic effect of childhood separations, the rapid transformation of yesterday's children into today's child bearers. It defies hard economic realities, too, like the fact that even mediocre substitute care for children (whether in foster home or institution) costs much more than family subsidies, and that adoption, which is ideally both cost effective and humane, is also governed by unforgiving laws of supply and demand."*

Ms. Bernstein also notes that a policy change in 1935 offering the possibility of financial support to poor parents: "[...caused] the number of children in out-of-home care [to] decline dramatically, [and] to stay down during more than two decades of narrowing income gaps. The placement rate rose again after 1961, when new rules allowed federal money to follow the poorest children into private, nonprofit foster care of every kind."<sup>89</sup> Summing up the period following a change in policy in 1996, Ms. Bernstein writes: "In New York City, the same sorts of child neglect cases that other cities still treated as matters for counseling and assistance were being prosecuted as crimes. Poor mothers were led away in handcuffs because they had left a child unattended while trying to buy milk at the grocery store, or because a child had wandered away during a family eviction."<sup>90</sup>

In New York City, two different non-profit groups are finding innovative ways to support parents whose children are in foster care:

- The Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), begun in 1995, organizes and empowers clients of the child welfare system to influence its policies and programs.

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<sup>88</sup> New York City's Child Welfare System: Management Review, December 2003.

<sup>89</sup> *The Lost Children of Wilder: The Epic Struggle to Change Foster Care*, by Nina Bernstein, Pantheon Books, New York, 2001, pages xiiv-xiv.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, page 438.

CWOP is an independent organization that gives voice to parents whose children are at risk for, or are in, foster placement.

- People United for Children (PUC) provides support to parents with children in foster care who are struggling in court to bring their families together again. It runs a weekly support group for parents and friends of children living in institutions, prisons, and foster care. PUC assists them in understanding and navigating the system.

When People United for Children began in 1992, its aim was to build relationships between the community and incarcerated children, aged 16 and under. Founder Ms. Sharonne Salaam and Assistant Director Ms. Aisha Greaves, who has been with the organization since its inception, observed that many of these children had grown up in the foster care system and had no one visiting them. “We realized that many had run away from their foster homes and had no way to contact their own parents. They couldn’t pinpoint why they had been taken away from their parents. Very few said they had been abused.” Ms. Salaam and Ms. Greaves felt it was important to offer help to parents at risk in order to prevent their children from entering the foster care system. “Most organizations start with the kids, but to prevent the situations from arising, you need to start with the parents.” Based in Central Harlem, which has the highest percentage of children in the child welfare system of any New York neighborhood, PUC tries to offer support to parents everywhere, despite having a small and almost entirely voluntary staff. Some parents telephone asking for help from as far away as Florida, having heard about it by word of mouth.<sup>91</sup>

Ms. Greaves recalls some of what she learned while getting to know families of children in foster care:

*“I thought foster care was about protecting children from the abuse of mean, horrible parents. I was amazed to see how often the issues were lack of food, decent housing, or lack of money. [...] One woman I know is a loving caretaker for two children. ACS saw that the plaster in her ceiling was falling down and removed the children because this is bad for their health. But in fact they lived in public housing, where it was supposed to be the government’s responsibility to maintain the building. [...] Another family had their children removed because the parents had stolen electricity from their neighbors. It was wrong and unsafe, but they were not bad parents. Their children were returned to them after a few months. Now the children are so afraid of being taken away again, they run and hide every time there’s a knock on the door. [...] Domestic violence is another issue. Children may be taken away before a mother has left an abusive husband. But when they do separate, it’s too late for her to regain custody, the children are in the system. This situation has been challenged in court, but the results are still pending.”<sup>92</sup>*

- **The factor of racism**

*“Some 96% of the children in foster care in this city are black or Hispanic. This sounds strange. These children are a minority in the city. We aren’t the only ones not ‘parenting correctly.’ But more black people are poor and poverty plays a large part in removal of children.”*

- Ms. Greaves (PUC)

Of children across the United States, 64% are non-Hispanic white children, with the other 36% being African-American, Hispanic or of other ethnic origins (as of 2000).<sup>93</sup> In the child welfare system, the percentages are reversed, with only 37% of the children being non-Hispanic white children, and the remaining 63% being African-American, Hispanic or of other ethnic origins. For the largest group of children affected, African-American children, the trend has been toward some improvement since 1998 at which

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<sup>91</sup> From an interview with Aisha Greaves in December 2003.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-25, No. 1130.

point they made up 44% of all children in the child welfare system. By 2001, this had dropped to 38%; while the rates for white children, Hispanic children and other ethnic groups rose.<sup>94</sup> Despite this, the picture remains heavily unbalanced, which further heightens distrust of the child welfare system in many communities.

*“The Bureau of Indian Affairs [...] launched the Indian Adoption Project in 1958 to stimulate the adoption of Indian children nationwide. Huge numbers [...] were relocated to adoption homes in distant white communities. [...] The government’s reason for this wide-scale transfer of Indian children was the familiar child-saving rationale. [It was] a response to [...] unsanitary housing, illiteracy, unemployment and alcoholism. [...] One hundred years from now, today’s child welfare system will surely be condemned as a racist institution—one that compounded the effects of discrimination on Black families by taking children from their parents, allowing them to languish in a damaging foster care system or to be adopted by more privileged people. School children will marvel that so many scholars and politicians defended this devastation of Black families in the name of protecting Black children.”*

- Dorothy Roberts, *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*<sup>95</sup>

While Ms. Roberts compares the child welfare system to the Indian Adoption Project, Child Welfare Watch makes a comparison to the way slavery sundered family bonds:

*“Many minority leaders argue that because our child welfare system serves minorities and the very poor, it has become a series of interventions that ruptures families, rather than providing a support network that gives them what they need to survive and function healthfully. Indeed, in several African-American communities, growing anger is directed toward child welfare authorities. Speakers at recent community meetings in Bedford Stuyvesant and Harlem drew some stark and painful parallels between modern-day child welfare and 19<sup>th</sup> century slavery. The child welfare system separates siblings, dismantles families and terminates parental rights; African-American children are a source of income for foster care agencies run by whites. It is a frightening metaphor.”<sup>96</sup>*

The extreme racial imbalance in New York City’s child welfare population contributed to a class-action lawsuit brought by People United for Children against ACS (see explanation below), which includes a charge that African-American communities are unfairly targeted for child removal and that this amounts to a form of racial profiling.

- **Children are often removed based on a single anonymous phone call**

Parents from CWOP said in an interview:

*“My children got into the system when someone called ACS to say I was doing drugs and my kids were eating out of garbage cans. No one ever even asked me if it was true! They just assumed I was guilty. While I was at work, they took my kids. I didn’t see them for 30 days.”<sup>97</sup>*

*“It just takes one person to make a phone call on you. You have an argument with someone, they call [ACS] and it starts the whole ball rolling.”*

*“There’s no repercussions for fake phone calls because they’re anonymous. Every kid in my building knows they can make a call to ACS as a prank. Kids in rich neighborhoods have never heard of it.”*

*“When they knock on your door, no one reads you your rights.”*

Once the allegation has been made, a child is rarely returned to his or her family within

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<sup>94</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

<sup>95</sup> Basic Civitas Books, 2002.

<sup>96</sup> Child Welfare Watch, Spring/Summer 1998.

<sup>97</sup> *The law in New York City says that within 72 hours of a child being removed, parents must be able to see them. Parents are often unaware of this right, however, and case workers may be busy with too many cases to implement this law.*

the federally mandated requirement of fifteen months. People United for Children is seeking to overturn laws on anonymous reporting in order to discourage unfounded accusations. In January 1999, PUC initiated a federal class-action lawsuit against New York City's ACS for removing children from their parents without proper investigation; in April 2003, the case was certified, and it is currently moving forward.

- **Unnecessarily harsh investigations spawn fear**

When Ms. Bernice Guyton, a member of CWOP, came home from work one evening, her children were gone:

*"I lost my mind. I called the police. I called the school. I said, 'Where my kids at?' I was screaming. The only person I didn't call was the president, and he crossed my mind."*

Her children had been taken into foster care by ACS. A month later, ACS returned the children to Ms. Guyton. An article in City Limits included her experience in its report:

*"Guyton says the experience made her kids fearful, and left her with a fierce anger at child protective services. 'They totally violated my rights as a parent, as a human being.' [...Another parent who had a similar experience says], 'The memories of it still terrorize me.' [...] Investigations can be aggressive and punitive, and make parents and children scared and angry. As a result, families hide their problems, even when they need and want help. Investigators can mandate preventative services, but the counselors who work with families say much of their energy goes simply into battling parents' distrust. [...] It's clear to virtually everyone working in child welfare that something must be done to make investigation something other than a home invasion. [...] It's a rare day in politics when legislators of any state agree that the law is too tough on parents who may have abused or neglected their children. Since 1993, however, more than a dozen states as dissimilar as Missouri, Florida, Minnesota, Texas and South Carolina have decided they can keep more children safe if they treat child abuse and neglect less like crimes and more like a public health problem. [...] 'The assumption was that an approach that's adversarial and provokes fear insures child safety, says Tony Loman, one of two researchers in charge of studying Minnesota's [...less adversarial] program. 'The first thing we wanted to be able to show was that there was no decline in safety, and in Minnesota, we did.'"<sup>98</sup>*

- **Other reasons for removal of children**

A parent may voluntarily place a child in temporary care during a crisis, but later not be allowed to regain custody. Ms. Amanda Sherman has been trying to regain custody of China, now 8 years old, since 1996 when a family emergency meant that she needed temporary help caring for China. "The foster care agency never offered [Ms. Sherman] resources, services, or a plan for the return of the child. [...She] was told that she was 'not the one' China would be going home with when she was finally released from foster care."<sup>99</sup>

Children may be removed when a parent is ill or hospitalized. "One severely depressed mother [was] criminally charged with endangering the welfare of a child after she notified the police that she had taken an overdose of sleeping pills in a suicide attempt."<sup>100</sup>

Sometimes parents are unaware of what is expected of them, particularly if they grew up elsewhere. One mother says, "I didn't send [my daughter] to school on a regular basis, although at the time I didn't know that was neglect. I grew up in Puerto Rico and my family was very poor. Because I didn't have decent clothes to wear, my mother didn't send me to school most of my life, so I thought that was normal."<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> "Safe and Sound," by Rachel Blustain, City Limits, July/August 2003.

<sup>99</sup> "News and Views," People United for Children, Volume 3, July-August 2003.

<sup>100</sup> Bernstein, page 438.

<sup>101</sup> Ms. Bertha Marquez, in "For Parents, by Parents," the CWOP newsletter, Spring 2002.

In cases of drug abuse by the parents, the child welfare system can play a life-saving role. In Ms. Rosalie Douglas's case, however, the charge of drug use was completely spurious. In the hospital where she gave birth to her son, she was given codeine for pain relief. Her urine then tested positive for drugs, and her infant was removed from her custody. Within six days, a lawyer proved to Family Court that Ms. Douglas was not a drug abuser, and her son was returned. Child Welfare Watch notes about this case: "There was no reason for her to be subjected to a drug test in the maternity ward. She had received pre-natal care. She had no history of drug abuse. But the authorities apparently had something else in mind: Douglas is poor. She is African American. She is unmarried. And she lives in Harlem."<sup>102</sup>

- **Difficulties encountered in reuniting parents and children**

Children may be disoriented by placement in a family of a different language or culture from their own, or simply by the length of the separation.

*"A young man, who came from a culture where most resources were shared, said that the experience of living in a group home where everything was locked up seemed to prepare youth more for prison than for independent living. [...] A pre-school child who spoke both English and Spanish was asked by ACS workers to tell his Spanish-speaking mother that he and his siblings, including a 20-day-old infant, were being removed until further notice."<sup>103</sup>*

Foster parents are asked to respect the religious origin of a child placed with them. But placements are based on availability, and there can be many other differences between the birth parents, the foster parents, and the ACS workers that are hard to bridge. Many parents from the Child Welfare Organizing Project raised this issue:

*"They make you feel they can do a better job than you can looking after your kids. But they don't know what values I was teaching my kids. My child's a black child. How will my child grow up in [white culture]?"*

*"It's important they stay with their culture because they have to come back to it."*

*"When you remove children from their home, you take away a vital part of the children, of what makes them who they are."*

*"My children were unhappy in foster care. They had less privacy than at home. When they were removed, no one asked about their medication, or if they could fall asleep in the dark."*

*"One child learned Spanish from his foster family. His father, who doesn't speak Spanish, can't understand a word his son says now. So ACS says there's no bonding, and they won't return the child home."*

*"A mom I know speaks Spanish to her kids. They stopped her from visiting her children in foster care because she did not use English with her kids."*

*"In one case, a [Spanish-speaking] child had no idea what the [English-speaking] foster family was saying."*

*"For a parent whose kids have been in care for seven years, if you finally get them back, you have to wonder, am I ready to get them back? Do your kids even know you?"*

*"I was fortunate to get my kids back quicker than many other parents, but the experience of losing them turned my whole world upside-down. I no longer felt safe in my own neighborhood. I no longer felt the same confidence in myself as a parent."*

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<sup>102</sup> Child Welfare Watch, (a joint project of the Center for an Urban Future and the New York Forum), Spring/Summer 1998, Issue Number 3.

<sup>103</sup> "Struggling in Silence: Uncovering Obstacles Faced by Immigrant Families and Youth Within New York City's Child Welfare System," by Margaret Weeks, the Immigrants and Child Welfare Project & Columbia University, 2001.

Ms. Philneia Timmons, a Parent Organizer with CWOP, says that when parents do get custody back, many new issues arise: "There may be withdrawal by the children from the parents. They have to live with different rules. In some cases, they were in a foster home where there were no rules. The parent has to grapple with all that."

Ms. Greaves of PUC notes: "Sometimes when the parents get their children back, the children blame their parents for having been unable to protect them from foster care. The children are angry and fighting all the time."

While children are in foster placement, their parents may be allowed to visit them only one hour every two weeks. One parent interviewed suggested that, when children are returned to their parents' custody, it would be helpful for it to be done in stages, with a transitional period. During this time, children and parents would receive support both for language issues and to recreate their family life given the fact that the children have grown older since living at home.

- **The impact of the child welfare system on children's education**

A father from CWOP has been told that if he finds a larger apartment, he can get his five children back from foster care. As much as he wants to have them home however, he is afraid that the spring would be the wrong time for this. It would mean them changing schools just before the end of the school year: "The last time they changed schools, the school records for one of them got lost, and another one got left back to repeat the year."<sup>104</sup>

A mother from CWOP lost custody of her son when he was 11. When he turned 18, he was allowed to return home. She is frustrated because during his years in a group home, he was not able to earn a high school diploma: "He worked so hard in school. He was an honor roll student. But he got no diploma because they moved him around. He did so much work in New York. Then they sent him to Pennsylvania where the school wouldn't recognize his records. When he turned 18 and came back here, he tried to return to the school where he did so much work, but they won't take him because he's an adult now. He gave up. He's tired of fighting." The mother is also frustrated with the measures the foster care system took to try to help her son begin his life independently. Their plan was to offer him furniture so that he could live on his own. But because he returned to live with his mother where there was no room for furniture, he had to argue for them to instead find him clothing for job interviews. "That did no good anyway. People won't hire him without a diploma. And the only references he has are from his family, his lawyer and his social worker. How can you get a job like that? All the teachers he knew, none of them gave him a reference."<sup>105</sup>

Her son is far from being alone. A recent study of young adults on the verge of leaving foster care systems "reveals a bleak portrait of these 17-year-olds in Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa. Many are lagging desperately behind in school, running into trouble with the law and struggling with psychological problems. [...] They were reading, on average, at a seventh grade level."<sup>106</sup>

Mr. Richard Wexler, of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform raises the question of how infants learn in foster care: "In a University of Florida study of so-called 'crack babies,'<sup>107</sup> one group was placed in foster care, the other with their birth mothers caring for them. After six months, the babies were tested using all the usual measures of infant development: rolling over, sitting up, reaching out. Consistently the children placed with their birth mothers did better. For the foster children, the separation from their mothers was more toxic than cocaine. [...] It] is extremely difficult to take a swing at 'bad mothers' without the blow landing on their children. [...] If] we really believe all the rhetoric

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<sup>104</sup> From an interview by Fourth World Volunteer Corps members at the Child Welfare Organizing Project, East Harlem Neighborhood Center, 30 April 2003.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> "Youths Leaving Foster Care Are Found Facing Obstacles," by Monica Davey, *The New York Times*, 24 February 2004. For a 17-year-old to read at a 7<sup>th</sup> grade level means being about four years behind.

<sup>107</sup> Babies born addicted to crack because their mothers were addicted during pregnancy.

about putting the child's needs first, that means putting those needs ahead of anything, including how we may feel about their parents."

Ms. Greaves of PUC comments: "The child welfare system removes children in order to offer them better opportunities. In some cases, they will even tell the child that they will put them through college—and in some cases they actually do. Yet most of them don't go to college. Their lives are not necessarily improved by being separated from their parents; their problems still remain. When so much money and so many services have been provided, why isn't there a better outcome?"

- **Parents face a series of obstacles to regain custody**

*"To get your child back, you take classes: anger management, drug programs, this program, that program. You have to prove you can deal with their system. They just let you know the rules as you go along. Every time you finish a class, you think you're about to get your kids back. You're ready with new clothes for your kids—but no, ACS knows the rules and says there's another class you should take first. You keep jumping through hoops."*

– A parent from CWOP

Length of time needed for a series of classes: Many parents are instructed to take a series of classes. These classes may take so long that the time limit for them to regain custody simply runs out and their children will have been put up for adoption before the classes are completed. Ms. Greaves of PUC notes: "Parents are sent for a psychological evaluation. If they are angry about their children having been removed, they are told they need anger therapy. How can you not be angry when your children are removed? Sometimes parents even talk themselves into more classes. Years before the children were removed, the parents may have gotten over a drug addiction. But because they speak honestly about it, they are sent to more drug treatment classes."

Amount of time needed for court appearances and classes: Once an investigation is opened, parents must make many court appearances to defend themselves against charges of neglect. These appearances, sometimes compounded with the time for mandatory classes, cut into the hours they have left to work and can lead to them losing employment.

*"A slight, soft-spoken mother of four arrived at 10 a.m. [in family court] to try to prevent the termination of her parental rights. Her children were placed in the foster care system [...] when she was diagnosed with manic-depressive disorder. Since then, she said, she had tried to do all that was asked of her—took medications, attended therapy. Mostly, she has waited for the legal system to return her children. On this day, she and her husband spent the hours holding each other tightly on a bench. Not until 5 p.m. did she learn that her case would be adjourned."<sup>108</sup>*

*"The requirements asked of parents sometimes have conflicting demands. [...] Parenting skills and anger management classes, mandated for reunification, are offered almost exclusively in the daytime, leaving parents making a decision whether to work so they can afford adequate housing, or participate in these programs."<sup>109</sup>*

The momentum of a system whose funding depends on keeping children in care: Money is among the first obstacles mentioned both by advocates and by parents themselves. Although child welfare is funded by the government, it can be provided by private agencies under contract to the local government. Some 79% of New York City's foster care cases are handled by these private agencies in what Child Welfare Watch calls a "delicate dependence by the city."<sup>110</sup> The private agencies that make recommendations

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<sup>108</sup> "In Court, Families Sit Waiting on the Law," by Somini Sengupta, *The New York Times*, 20 August 2000.

<sup>109</sup> Ms. Nanette Schorr, a lawyer, speaking during a panel discussion hosted by the NGO Committee on the Family-NY, at the United Nations, 28 June 2001.

<sup>110</sup> Child Welfare Watch, Summer 1999.

about whether children should be returned home are also receiving funding based on how many children they have in custody. Funding is also available to support foster parents in ways that birth parents are not supported. This makes it hard for a court to do a fair comparison of the care a parent living in poverty can give a child versus what a foster parent can provide.

Lack of legal support: In the U.S. legal system, lawyers are assigned to represent anyone who cannot afford one. These lawyers, however, are usually working with a dearth of institutional support or training. They often have no offices or secretaries, and are assigned more clients than they have time to represent. They are paid very little.

*"Usually [low-income] families wait for a year before they find representation. [...] Everybody is represented but the parent."*

- Ms. Jane Golden,  
Project Director of Child Planning and Advocacy Now (C-PLAN)<sup>111</sup>

*"Sometimes a judge mandates that a child be returned home. The lawyer feels the case is over. But the judge's decision was never put in writing, and the child is not returned. This happens all the time."*

- Ms. Greaves (PUC)

*"Even after the city's right to hold [Jeremy M.] expired in July 1997, it illegally kept him from [his mother] for two and a half more years, causing physical injury to the boy and severe emotional and psychological damage to them both. [...] The system seemed to have lost her son entirely. [...] It turned out that the boy had been taken into custody under the wrong last name and birth date."*

- New York Times article about a lawsuit<sup>112</sup>

*"If you come into this courthouse, see the facility, suffer the long wait, if you're talking about the most intimate details of your life and doors are opening around you and people are harried, it has to give you the impression that your dignity as a person is not respected."*

- Judge Lee Elkins, Kings County Family Court (Brooklyn, New York)<sup>113</sup>

*"When a parent is investigated, both sides need to be decently equipped to make arguments for the truth to come out."*

- Mr. Arsham (CWOP)

Ms. Nanette Schorr is a supervisor at Bronx Legal Services, which provides free legal assistance to low-income people. She comments: "Our office is based in what I've been told is the poorest Congressional district in the United States. [...] Social policies which deem it appropriate to err on the side of caution and favor speedy removal of children, with fast-track moves to terminate parental rights and move children toward adoption, while investing little in legal representation and preventive services delivery, dehumanize the parents and families in the system, and reinforce the feelings of powerlessness which make it so difficult for people to rebuild their lives."<sup>114</sup>

## **B. Adoptions of children who have been in the child welfare system**

The idea that a financially stable adoptive family is better for a child than an impoverished natural family is a common one. In 1997, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) was passed by the federal government stating that if a child remains in foster care for 17 of the previous 22 months, the state must file a petition in court seeking to terminate parental rights. Although the number of children in the child welfare system across the United States has declined slightly in recent years, fewer children than before are reunited with their parents. The increase in children leaving the child welfare system

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<sup>111</sup> Child Welfare Watch, Spring/Summer 1998.

<sup>112</sup> "Suit Charges That Boy Was Illegally Kept in Foster Care as Mother Sought Return," 31 August 2000.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Panel discussion, 28 June 2001.

comes partly from those being adopted.<sup>115</sup>

In New York, the issue has been raised “that the law could result in the unfair dissolution of many families. AFSA’s fatal flaw is that it accelerates the termination process, but does virtually nothing to assure that parents get equally speedy access to the services they need to get their kids back. [...] Case managers must create ‘concurrent’ plans that simultaneously provide for reunification and adoption, beginning on the day a child is removed from home. The agency must identify potential adoptive parents and document grounds for termination, even while it pursues efforts to reunify families.”<sup>116</sup> Child Welfare Watch notes: “Performance on adoption-related work is still given more credit in ACS evaluations than an agency’s track record on sending children back home. Agencies report to Child Welfare Watch that this reward for putting an emphasis on adoption skews how they deliver services. ACS’s evaluation process must reward agencies first and foremost for safely restoring families.”<sup>117</sup>

In Louisiana, “Case workers are becoming more efficient and more aggressive in their efforts to get children adopted, said Carmen Weisner, assistant secretary of Louisiana’s child welfare agency. For instance, they post pictures of children who need homes on a department website and also on a national, computerized listing of available children.”<sup>118</sup> A New York lawyer notes: “I’ve had agency attorneys say to me that basically all children are on an adoption track. There’s this unspoken assumption against parents, so a parent really has to swim against the tide.”<sup>119</sup>

*“Adoption can be wonderful when there are no other options. But there is an overemphasis on adoption driven by federal law. We know children on the adoption track who will not be adopted. For instance, there in one family, the parents were addicted to crack, and they needed to have their two children removed. The removal of the children motivated them to get treatment and recover from their addiction. They have a third child today who they are raising successfully, with no neglect. But the two children who were removed cannot be returned to them. The timetable is very short, and because they had not completed their treatment when the time ran out, their parental rights for the first two children were terminated. No one has been found to adopt those two children, so they are stuck in the foster care system. Their birth parents are today considered to be good parents and allowed to raise the third child – but the law does not allow them to adopt their first two children, because their rights were terminated. [...] There are also children who are adopted, but who are not treated well by the adoptive family. Once the adoption is finalized, there is no follow-up by social services to ensure that things go well. When the children turn 18, many of them come home to their birth parents. This just underscores some of the absurdities. Adoption is not a panacea.”*

- Mr. Arsham (CWOP)

The AFSA law was inspired and drafted by Mr. Richard Gelles, chair of the Child Welfare and Family Violence program at the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work. But even he calls the way the law was finalized by the federal government deeply flawed: “The adoption part was basically an ‘afterthought,’ Gelles says, [...] a way of sanitizing the bill to make it more appealing to a broader group of people. Adoption is a very popular concept in the country right now. [...] But] I have always been in favor of a sliding timeline, not the one-size fits all thing. The 15 months was a terrible compromise. It’s too

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<sup>115</sup> According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service, in 1998, 62 percent of children who exited foster care were reunified with their families. In 2001, 57 percent of children who exited foster care were reunified. In New York City, where the number of children in child welfare has been declining steadily since a high in 1991, the number of adoptions finalized each year has more than doubled, according to New York City’s CWS Management Review, December 2003.

<sup>116</sup> “Too Fast for Families,” by Shalini Ahuja, Jonathan Bowles, John Courtney, Peggy Farber and Glenn Thrush, 20 January 2000, Center for an Urban Future.

<sup>117</sup> Summer 1999.

<sup>118</sup> Adoption of Foster Children on the Rise,” by Joan Treadway, *New Orleans Times Picayune*, 20 October 2003.

<sup>119</sup> Linda Holmes of Brooklyn Legal Services, quoted in *The New York Times*, 31 August 2000.

long for the small kids and too short for the big kids.”<sup>120</sup>

In rural Virginia, Ms. Clement-Fanelli describes people who grew up with a more informal kind of adoption a generation ago: “Some very poor families have had experiences when children were practically adopted, and at times legally adopted, by members of the extended family who were better off. [...] We know of cases where the ‘adopted’ child is never completely part of the family or treated as such; he or she remains different. In other cases, people are proud that their parents refused to give their children away to better off relatives who might even have offered money in order to take them. One of these people said: ‘They wanted to buy me from my parents, but my mother said that even if we were poor, she had all the love I needed.’”

### C. Preventive services<sup>121</sup>

Parents from CWOP say:

*“The social workers don’t know what to do to help you. They read a book as they go along. The support you need as a parent is a place where parents can go, a room like CWOP where you can find help before ACS even gets involved in your life. If you say, ‘My boy is rebelling,’ ACS says, ‘Let’s have him evaluated.’ Parents don’t know their rights, and ACS takes over.”*

*“When they tried to get custody of my grandson, I had to have three people call to get me preventive services: my doctor, my neighbor and myself. They didn’t need three phone calls before they came for my grandson. I took their parenting classes, and they helped, but my kids were removed.”*

*“ACS is an administration. Workers in different departments don’t know what the others are doing. They’re just overwhelmed because they have too many children in the system. So some of them give the wrong information.”*

*“ACS doesn’t really know the parents they try to reach. They were speaking [at a recent meeting] about a ‘neighborhood-based program’ with the idea that parents would not leave their neighborhood. Look how far we go to work. Look how far we come to a program like CWOP.”*

Parents are rarely offered comprehensive services and don’t know what kinds of assistance are available to help them deal with stress or difficult relations with their children. Sometimes they need to fight hard to get support in keeping their family together. One mother from CWOP described how a family court judge mandated that her adolescent daughter should receive therapy. She repeatedly asked that ACS help her carry out this mandate and find a counseling service for her daughter, but her pleas were ignored. Getting help could have made a significant difference to her family.

The removal of children from their parents needs to be the last resort, one that should follow only intensive efforts that promote family functioning. Research suggests that multiple breakdowns in foster care placements have immediate and long-term negative effects on children’s behavior: “Once removed [...], a child confronting further disruption through numerous placement failures is likely to experience difficulties trusting adults or forming attachments with adults and children.”<sup>122</sup> Some 60% of homeless adults grew up in foster or residential care.<sup>123</sup>

Working supportively with parents before a crisis develops has indisputable economic and social advantages. Efforts aimed at preventing the removal of children result in many fewer foster care placements. Building on family strengths has enormously positive effects on children’s psychosocial development. Keeping families together with the aid of preventive services and the identification of existing social supports is far more cost effective than foster care or residential placement. In New York City, for example,

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<sup>120</sup> Child Welfare Watch, November 1999.

<sup>121</sup> Cf., [http://pubadvocate.nyc.gov/pdf/Risky\\_Care\\_for\\_Foster\\_Kids.pdf](http://pubadvocate.nyc.gov/pdf/Risky_Care_for_Foster_Kids.pdf)

<sup>122</sup> “Long-term Follow-up of Young Children Placed in Foster Care,” by Landsverk, Litrownik, and Newton, 2000.

<sup>123</sup> People United for Children.

preventive services cost \$6,900 per family (which on average includes three children), per year. Providing foster care, on the other hand, costs considerably more: anywhere between \$17,000 and \$54,000 per child, per year.<sup>124</sup>

Some preventive services are available to help families remain together despite difficult situations. These services include counseling, and help finding work or housing. But these services are under-funded and overcrowded. In addition, many families fear requesting any help because this could put them at risk of having their children removed.

The Administration for Children's Services (ACS) in New York City is proud of its recent efforts to improve support for families before problems reach the point where children must be removed. The number of children served in Preventive Service programs (33,537 in 2002) has recently bypassed the figure of those served in foster care (27,094). This is a significant accomplishment showing that the system is making a greater effort to intervene with families to prevent children's removal from their parents. But this is only a step in the right direction; the program budget for ACS does not mirror this priority and continues to be driven by crisis intervention. A mere 5% of the Administration for Children's Services \$2 billion budget is dedicated to programs that aim to keep families intact. That leaves 95% of the budget dedicated to removal of children and out-of-home care.<sup>125</sup>

A recent report by Fostering Results, a foster-care research and education non-profit based in Chicago, highlights the way the national government funds foster care, which makes states choose between receiving an amount of funding adequate to meet their state's needs or having the flexibility to fund services that help families stay together. "The report finds that Washington is asking states to choose between flexibility financing and adequate financing when they need both."<sup>126</sup>

Critical analysis of the marriage between the child welfare system and foster-care agencies must be carried out. There is an enormous financial incentive to keep children within the system. If foster care agencies work quickly to reunite families, they lose out on a significant amount of money from ACS. One wonders, who is left to look out for the interests of parents?

#### **D. Efforts being made by parents living in poverty and organizations that support them**

*"The heart of a new system-wide approach [...] is re-thinking the role of parents around the primary themes of enhanced respect, engagement and partnership. [...] One measure of the system's effort to better engage parents is its willingness to hear from parents in roles other than that of a recipient of services. [...] On a daily basis, we expect case workers to build relationships even with those parents whose experiences with public systems, including the child welfare system, have left them angry, hurt or distrustful. Similarly, we think the real challenge to ACS is in building relationships even with those parents who have significant complaints regarding the child welfare system."*

- Special New York City Child Welfare Advisory Panel, Final Report, December 2000

More needs to be done to assess overall parent involvement. "ACS and most foster care agencies are virtually unaccountable to the very families that are supposed to benefit from the child welfare system. Advocates for parents and children say that once a child is in foster care, the caseworkers who are supposed to arrange for services are often slow to work toward reunifying the family, even though that is their mandate in more than

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<sup>124</sup> Office of the Public Advocate for the City of New York, "Cuts Cost: A Historical and Trend Analysis of the Effects of Proposed Preventive Service Budget Cuts on the Increase in Foster Care Placements." 19 May 2003

<sup>125</sup> Office of the Public Advocate for the City of New York, "Families at risk: A report on New York City's child welfare services." 9 December 2002.

<sup>126</sup> "U.S. Laws Said to Impede States' Moves in Foster Care," by Leslie Kaufman, The New York Times, 11 March 2004.

half of all cases. And caseworkers frequently fail to involve parents—a violation of state law.”<sup>127</sup>

Thanks to the relentless advocacy work of the Child Welfare Organizing Project, in recent years, two changes have been made in New York City in order to increase dialogue between parents and policy makers:

- Foster care agencies may send three parents and one coordinator to the Administration of Children’s Services (ACS) Parent Advocate Consortium. These meetings take place four times each year and include senior ACS staff and the city commissioner responsible for ACS. They meet to discuss different themes related to parenting and to child welfare.
- One CWOP Parent Organizer has been named to participate in the Advisory Committee of ACS, which is made up mainly of foster care agency and legal service organization executives who work under contract for the city. Mr. Arsham calls this a positive development, while cautioning that it is hard for a lone parent to be able to influence the broad process of foster care policy. This parent, Ms. Timmons, says:

*“I have a purpose: to make them realize that parents are human beings. They say I ‘get personal’—but it’s business. I don’t want other parents to go through what I did. [They have to understand] that you can’t treat parents like that. They need to listen to everyone. [...] ACS is a system, but it’s also made up of people. Some case workers can be on your side. It’s hard to find them. You have to be a step ahead of them. At the ACS Parent Advocate Consortium, a lady asked me, ‘How can we help people in the system when we also have people walking in off the street asking for help?’ The point is to help everyone. I have to be in that room and hear what they say about other parents, about me, and I’m appalled. They need parents to make the system better. I take what I do seriously.”*

*While CWOP had requested these changes for many years, politicians consistently refused. “We were pariahs in those years,” says Mr. Arsham, noting that CWOP’s challenging stance cost it funding. Change began with the 2001 mayoral election of Mr. Michael Bloomberg, who named Mr. William Bell to be Commissioner of ACS. Mr. Arsham credits Mr. Bell with a new openness to dialogue with parents. Although Mr. Arsham is hopeful about this dialogue, he remains wary: “We need to be on guard against tokenism. Are any of the participants in these meetings really empowered?”*

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Mr. Arsham sums up his criticism of the existing system: “The human rights issue here is that when the city puts a child in foster care, there is no onus on the city to prove that the outcome for the child is better.”

### III. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen a myriad of efforts made by parents to fulfill their responsibilities toward their children. We have also heard from a number of social workers, like Mr. Arsham, and other professionals who are investing their energies into improving the outcome for children and families. In New York City, the number of children in foster care has declined significantly in recent years.<sup>128</sup>

Despite their accomplishments, more remains to be done. Professor Brenda McGowan, of the Columbia University School of Social Work asks whether society is “more concerned with the prosecution of parents or the protection of children? [...] But what do children need to thrive? [...] Today’s child welfare system is a [...] network of ‘last ditch’ service programs. [...] What seems [...] surprising is that anyone would think child welfare reform could succeed without simultaneous reform of the public policies that contribute to child

<sup>127</sup> Child Welfare Watch, Summer 1999, Number 5.

<sup>128</sup> “There are about 23,000 children in foster care, down from about 40,000 in the late 1990s, and ACS has made extensive pledges (some realized more successfully than others) to work more cooperatively with families,” according to *City Limits*, April 2004.

poverty.”<sup>129</sup>

Advocates of parents and children living in poverty have a number of recommendations for improving existing services. We will cite several here:

- Child Welfare Watch advocates that more child welfare contracts be given to small, local agencies, established by people of color: “Too often, potential strengths, such as a mother’s reliance on her extended family for support, are ignored. [...] ‘Cultural competence’ is a phrase commonly used in social work to describe skills that enable professionals to provide specific social services and devise good social policy for specific communities. Leaders and workers in the child welfare system must not only know details of their clients’ cultural worldview—they must be able to act on that knowledge in a supportive and culturally appropriate way, experts say. This comes most easily, they add, to those who are steeped in the life of the community they serve. [...] They also know how to gain residents’ trust more easily than outsiders with no local connections. This means they can more effectively help children and their parents.”<sup>130</sup>

After decades as a social worker in the child welfare field, and five years at the head of CWOP, Mr. Arsham’s policy wish list reflects a clear vision:

- That ACS’s budget reflect the importance of preventive services that can help maintain family unity. “ACS is proud of having improved access to its preventive services, but a huge imbalance remains with most funding used for investigating and prosecuting parents, and for terminating their parental rights.”
- That the lawyers who represent indigent parents in Family Court become part of an institutional system of representation that is independent of ACS and that provides greater training and support to its lawyers.
- That there be a greater degree of parental and child involvement in child welfare policy and practice. Fewer than one third of children in child welfare custody visit their parents as often as mandated. And although children 10 and older are allowed to be part of review meetings concerning their custody, fewer than one third of them are brought to these reviews. “When a few people demand better services, programs improve. This is very rare in the child welfare field because of the race and social class of those affected. It’s very rare to see families with money in the child welfare system. There are ways for them to evade the system. By supporting parents to have a voice in the system, we want to create more partnership and respect of the client.”

As crucial as it is for parents whose children have been in the child welfare system to have a voice in the dialogue shaping policy, it is equally important that the parents have tools to shape their message together. Twice in New York City, the person named as the Commissioner responsible for child welfare happened to have been removed from his parents’ custody as a child. From their personal experience, one of them took a feeling that no children should ever be removed from their parents; the other was convinced that distancing children from their family roots was essential.<sup>131</sup> Neither extreme was constructive. Some children are abused by their parents and desperately need protection by child welfare services; other children are endangered by being taken unjustly from loving parents.

The creativity of CWOP’s approach is to offer parents going through the anguish of having lost custody of their children a weekly group meeting where they learn from and support one another. For those parents who then attend meetings that set ACS policy or

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<sup>129</sup> “Child Welfare: The Context for Reform,” by Brenda G. McGowan.

<sup>130</sup> Spring/Summer 1998.

<sup>131</sup> This Commissioner, Nicholas Scopetta, is described by Nina Bernstein as follows: “[His] own childhood in an orphanage made this job his calling. Scopetta’s ambitious reform plan, unveiled in December 1996, all but equated child protection with child removal. [...] The following years] brought a surge in removals, a defensive kind of casework that swept many children needlessly into an already chaotic and crowded system in which they were anything but safe. And an overwhelmed system typically saw a rise, rather than a reduction, in the number of children known to the child protection agency who died of abuse.” *The Lost Children of Wilder*, page 437.

speak publicly about parents' experiences, group meetings—and the training CWOP provides Parent Leaders—can be a tool to shape their own analysis of child welfare policy. Their articulateness then grows, synthesizing both the depth of their own experience and a broader cross-section of other parents' situations and thinking.

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Ms. Schorr, the supervisor of Bronx Legal Services, focuses on the “malady of hopelessness” afflicting the parents she represents:

*“The bureaucracies and social institutions they deal with, and the market economy they function in, often rebuff their efforts to change their lives. [...] Policies which drive the child welfare system can have the effect of diminishing the humanity of the parents who enter that system, most of whom are low-income. [...] As a legal services lawyer, I see one of the most important tasks I face as that of reinfusing a sense of hope, optimism, and possibility in the lives of the clients. [...] For a low-income client who is experiencing degradation in many facets of their lives, the process of fighting for justice, as part of a team with a lawyer who believes in them and supports them, can be an extremely affirming experience, and can help reconnect that individual to a sense of possibility in changing their own lives, and in working with others to change conditions of poverty. Lawyers representing low-income clients need to help them overcome the feelings of humiliation that many walk in with. [...] As I see it, the lawyer’s job is to create a sense of community with their client. Through my years of doing this work, I have had the opportunity to meet, and work with, many parents whose children are placed in foster care. I have come to know people with enormous strength, fortitude and determination. They face enormous obstacles; they fight through their pain; they struggle with their self-esteem; they sometimes give up; they sometimes go on to achieve their goals. [...] To create a society where people do not live in conditions that foster [child abuse and neglect], how can we help to marshal the political will [needed...] to invest social capital in improving conditions in the communities where most children in foster care come from, and [empowering] institutions in those communities. [...] Child welfare advocates need to think of themselves as anti-poverty advocates, and to think of radical reforms to the system.”*

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## CHAPTER SIX:

# The United Kingdom



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## **Introduction: Is adoption a fair way to ensure child protection and welfare for families facing persistent and severe poverty?**

The story of Helen and Sarah's family:

*"Social Services said I was unable to look after Helen and Sarah because I had been in care when I was a child and I have learning difficulties; so do my girls.<sup>132</sup> They were taken away when they were six and four. We had no idea that there was anything happening; they were taken from the school and the child minder's. A note was put through my door. Later on, I found out from the children that the social worker had already told them, a 4-year-old and a 6-year-old, that they were going up for adoption—and it hadn't gone to court yet. They had already decided on adoption before it got to court. That is not a fair hearing.*

*"Now Helen is going to be 11 and little Sarah is 8 and they've only just found adopters, but no papers will be signed for another year. It has taken social services four years to find someone for them. Because social services decided they were going to be adopted, to make it easier to fit into their new family, they stopped contact with cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents. They were only allowed to see me, their mum, once every three months before—now it is twice a year. Those children are in limbo between two families for four years, denied access to their own family and not adopted either.*

*"I got no support from social services after the children were taken. I get no reports on how the girls are getting on, how they're doing with their activities. I only get one photo, and that's a school photo, year after year. I write to them but they're not allowed to write back. I have got no say in anything. These new people will have them for a year. If they get on with them in that year it will go back to court and then they will be officially adopted. But if not, they go back to the foster parents and I will only have been able to see them twice in that year.*

*"Sarah has gone back into her baby stage because she doesn't like them. She wants to go back to the foster parents because they were with them for four years. So every weekend they go and stay with them, but if they are allowed to stay with the foster parents, why not with me?"<sup>133</sup>*

This story is representative of the experience of many birth families whose children have been adopted by others and with whom ATD Fourth World works in the United Kingdom.

In many industrialized countries, families living in persistent poverty experience the removal of their children by social services, at a disproportionate rate compared to families with higher incomes.<sup>134</sup> In the UK, a growing number of these children are subsequently adopted against the will of their parents.

One of the main recent changes in the British child protection system regarding accommodation of children owes much to the principle of *permanence*, which aims to achieve stability in the child's life through securing a placement that is either very short or long term (over a year). This trend towards permanence has promoted adoption since the 1980s, accompanied by a concern to maintain a child's links with his or her origins (access to birth records, and "interface" services to link the adoptee, adopters and biological families). In this new approach on adoption, a radical distinction is sometimes drawn between the child's interests and the parents' interests, even when abuse of the child has never been an issue, as in Helen and Sarah's case.

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<sup>132</sup> "In care" is the British term for children in the care of a social service agency, whether they are placed with a foster family or in an institution.

<sup>133</sup> ATD Fourth World-UK, Focus sheet "adoption," London, Summer 2001, written contribution to the national debate preparing the Adoption and Children Act.

<sup>134</sup> Thoburn et al's (2000) study found that 98% of families whose children were seen by social workers as being at risk of suffering emotional maltreatment or neglect were characterised by the extreme poverty of their material environment.

This chapter will explore how adoption, and more broadly the child protection system, affects children in poverty, their well being and their ties with their birth families. The discussion is based on ongoing work by ATD Fourth World that brings together people currently living in poverty, and others who work alongside them, to have a voice on issues of importance to them.

ATD Fourth World has been working in the UK since 1963, mainly with individuals and families from London and the South East of England. ATD Fourth World maintains headquarters in Camberwell, South London and manages Frimhurst Family House, a large house in Frimley Green, Surrey, where families living in poverty can experience respite, parents who have children in the care of local authorities can have contact visits with their children, and parents and children can take part in workshops that develop new skills and explore their artistic talents. ATD Fourth World-UK also works in partnership with the Glasgow-Braendamm Link, an organization working closely to favor the participation of very excluded Scottish families in policy making, and Braendamm Family House, which offers respite stays to similarly marginalized families from the Glasgow area.

## I. Adoption

### A. Fully open adoptions

The story of Helen and Sarah at the beginning of this chapter is representative of the experience of many families. Birth parents are at the mercy of the individual adoptive parents concerning contact with their children. One couple involved in ATD Fourth World-UK projects has five children, three of whom were adopted into three different families. They hear no news of their eldest child who has not even been told that he was adopted. He is supposed to have contact with his other brothers and sisters but does not. Her youngest son gets to see his sisters (who live with the birth family) but not his parents. The middle son is developing a good relationship with his birth parents: they phone and write to each other regularly and go out together. About the middle son's situation, the parents say:

*"The adoptive parents don't mind because they are more like us really. They're down to earth. They are not snobby. They're not rich, far from it. They live on an estate.<sup>135</sup> We are very lucky that they are pushing for us to see him. They felt that it was in his best interest so that there is no confusion when he is 18."*

Although the birth parents are considered fit to raise their daughters, and to have regular contact with their middle son, their relationship with two of their sons has been completely cut off.

Once adoption has been deemed the best option for a child, the bonds with the birth family are loosened. To prepare the looked-after child for adoption, social services reduces the length of access visits and eventually ceases contact between the child and the birth family. The level of support to the birth family is also reduced once social workers have decided that adoption is the plan for the child. The current procedures for maintaining contacts between adopted children and their birth families must be reconsidered. During an All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty in February 2001, a Member of Parliament who was asked about "open adoptions"<sup>136</sup> said, "Some countries like Australia practice 'open adoption' but the number of adoptive parents coming forward dropped considerably. In the whole of Australia last year, only 500 people came forward for adoption, because the prospective families are not comfortable with the arrangement." This statement reinforces the view expressed by birth parents, that open adoption is resisted exclusively to meet the interest of adoptive parents. One parent member of ATD Fourth World comments:

*"If prospective adopters are resistant to any information or contact that*

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<sup>135</sup> Estate is the British term for a housing project.

<sup>136</sup> Adoptions where the adopted child knows who his or her birth parents are and is allowed to maintain contact with them.

*would benefit the child, then they are adopting for themselves because they want the love of that child exclusively, rather than adopting in the child's best interests... Adoption should be considered only if it is truly in the best interest of each individual child, not to meet the interest of prospective adopters nor targets set by the government."*

Birth parents also say they "are forgotten" and left on their own following separation. There is a need to regard placement intervention as support that helps parents find, or re-discover, their roles as parents and as citizens. Interventions that separate children from their parents for reasons other than abuse are misguided unless they allow a process of parental "re-qualification," by giving parents the space and guidance they need to find and fulfill their roles.

One of the hardest things parents live with is the loss of an active role in the daily life and future of their children who are in care or adopted, especially when they have no contact. One mother spoke of her struggle:

*"It's the not knowing. Is she well, does she know I love her, is she even alive?"*

As hard as this is for parents, little is understood about the effect of such decisions on the wider family. A child's family includes siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. A child removed into care can become lost to all of these people, and they can become lost to that child. A father who was raised in care said:

*"Your family is your history. Knowing where you come from helps you to decide where you are and where you want to get to in life."*

Research shows that maintaining contact with birth families can contribute to the stability of placements: children can maintain attachments to a number of adult/parental figures; security and a positive sense of identity for children in long-term care do not necessarily lie in severing connections and placement through adoption.<sup>137</sup> Thus, ATD Fourth World-UK backs the idea of "fully open adoptions,"<sup>138</sup> as opposed to "open" adoptions, to help counter the trauma by supporting children in understanding their lives in a way that is respectful and non-judgmental of their background and heritage. Children should not be ashamed of their backgrounds or be denied the right to contact their birth families and establish positive relationships with them. Contact should not just be with birth parents but siblings, grandparents, extended family and people of significance to the child, in accordance with the child's changing wishes.

## **B. Consent and legal representation: cause for concern**

In the experience of parents living in persistent poverty, adoption is often decided without either the parents' knowledge or consent. Moreover, parents often experience that the adoption goal is determined long before any court hearing. Before an adoption case even goes to court, social workers who previously attempted to support the family may then find themselves in an adversarial role. Birth parents experience this as betrayal by the local authority and individual social workers.<sup>139</sup> Without consultation or support, parents are left feeling powerless and isolated as they watch their relationship with their child progressively be cut off. In cases where the process separates siblings, their confusion and distress add to the parents' emotional turmoil. Understandably, parents feel angry and hurt. Equally understandably, these strong emotions are often aimed at the social worker in charge of removing their child. In many cases, these emotions are then cited as evidence against the birth parents during the adoption proceedings.

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<sup>137</sup> "Working with children and 'lost' parents: putting partnership into practice," by J. Masson, 1997, York Publishing.

<sup>138</sup> 'Fully open' adoption should entail access visits and days out (unsupervised by social services but supported by other agencies where necessary), unlimited correspondence (including gifts) by direct mail or through a National Contact Agency where appropriate, regular telephone contact, and exchange of photographs.

<sup>139</sup> Also reported by Parents Without Children, a non-governmental organization.

Hunt and Freeman<sup>140</sup> looked at parents affected by child protection judicial proceedings and concluded that parents often have a negative experience of the justice system: the lawyers are not trained in this field; the parents are not taken into consideration, they are given no preparation, are not involved in the decision-making process, and are given no support after the proceedings are over.

Birth parents are asked to sign consent forms for the adoption of their child, which state that consent is given freely and unconditionally. Many parents living in persistent poverty report feeling pressured to sign or feeling that their lack of literacy skills is exploited. One pregnant mother was told by her social worker that the forms she was given to sign would guarantee extra support for her eldest child (the details of which were explained in a cover letter). It was only in asking a neighbor to help her to understand the forms that she discovered that they were in fact adoption papers for her unborn baby.

Some parents report being threatened that if they do not sign the forms, their children will be permanently kept in care and never returned home. Others speak about being told that if they do not allow their child the chance to live with wealthier adoptive parents, it is proof that they do not love their child. Even when parents resist the pressure to sign in determination to fight for their child, when they get to court they find that the adoption is going ahead anyway. They are told that they are “unreasonable” not to consent to the adoption and their consent is dispensed with, as provided for in the Adoption and Children Act (2002).<sup>141</sup>

### **C. The story of Anne: Adoption is not always the answer**

One of the reasons for the adoption law is the justified concern about cases of abuse of children in care homes. Sadly, this kind of abuse can take place in adoptive families too.

Anne<sup>142</sup> desperately needed support and someone to talk to but she found herself in a child protection investigation. Two of Anne’s daughters were taken away: Sallie within days of her birth, Emma within hours. They were both subsequently adopted without Anne’s consent. The distress and pain of losing their children caused Anne’s marriage with George to break up.

*“I never ever thought I’d see them again. I used to think about them every day. ‘Who’s bringing up my children?’ I did try to do myself in a few times because I felt I had nothing to live for. Then I thought, ‘I’m going to fight it because I do not believe that any child should not be able to see their parents, not know who their parents are.’”*

For years Anne kept up contact with social services, notifying them of every change of address. Recently, Sallie and Emma both traced Anne. At the moment Emma is too shy to meet Anne and tell her about her life, but Sallie has been very open with her mother about her life in her adoptive family. Anne was shocked to discover the traumas her daughter has gone through:

*“It is very hard, because you’ve got all those years you lost with your child and you’re really like strangers. So when they’re coming out and telling you everything, you can’t believe it and you don’t know what to say. They are supposed to be safer in care or adopted but that is not always the case. I was devastated to discover that Sallie was violently raped over a number of years by one of the adoptive family’s sons, and the adoptive mother did not believe her. She was an alcoholic at the age of 14 and sliced her arms because she was depressed by what was happening to her, and no one was protecting her. If she had stayed with me, none of that would have happened to her.”*

Such tragic experiences are not unique. They demonstrate the most extreme

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<sup>140</sup> Freeman and Hunt, “Parental perspectives on care proceedings,” 1998, in “The children act now: messages from research,” studies in evaluating the Children Act 1989, Department of Health, 2001, The stationery office, London.

<sup>141</sup> Parents etc. consent, Chapter 3, paragraph 52 (1b) of the Adoption and Children Act (2002).

<sup>142</sup> A parent known by ATD Fourth World.

consequences of parents losing knowledge and control over their children's lives. It must be recognized that, even when their skills are inadequate, most birth parents still deeply love their children. Parents can change and improve their parenting skills. Correspondingly, agencies and support workers should continue to work with birth families post-adoption to improve parenting skills for the benefit of both their adopted children during contact visits and future children born into the birth family. It would also mean that, in the event of a breakdown in the adoption, the birth family could be reassessed with a view to return their child to them rather than to foster care.

Once children have been removed into care, little effort is made to support the birth parents in meeting the concerns raised by the courts to enable the children to return to the family. Another parent known by ATD Fourth World says:

*"When children go to a family that provides more for them in terms of material things it makes it harder to meet or go back to the birth parents. It also makes it difficult to maintain contact and come to terms with their birth heritage."<sup>143</sup>*

The parents' loss is largely ignored by society, compounding the isolation, stigma, and humiliation of being called an "unfit" parent. Such unresolved grief can lead to or exacerbate depression, anxiety, relationship difficulties, attachment difficulties with subsequent children, drug and alcohol dependency, violence, unemployment, homelessness, or suicide attempts. One father said of his wife: "She has survived three attempts at suicide. What do they expect when you have your children taken away?"

#### **D. Targets and debate**

In December 2000, following lobbying by prospective adopters and in reaction to reports on cases of abuse of children in "care homes,"<sup>144</sup> the Government produced its White Paper on Adoption. The law on adoption had not been reformed in 25 years, during which time the circumstances leading to adoption had changed significantly. In recent years, the majority of children adopted are children being "looked after" by local authorities due to child protection proceedings brought by social services. By the Government's own admission, the care system is seriously failing children. One answer, according to the Government, is to promote adoption as a permanent solution for looked after children. At the launch of the White Paper, the then Health Secretary and Member of Parliament Alan Milburn said, "Adoption must become a first-choice option for looked-after children who can't return home."

Following the release of this White Paper, a wide national debate emerged which led to the "Adoption and Children Act" in November 2002. The new law will be fully implemented in 2004. Its key aims are to:

- encourage more people to adopt looked-after children by helping ensure that the support they need is available;
- help cut harmful delays in the adoption process by establishing a statutory register, which will suggest links between children and approved adopters and through measures that require courts to draw up timetables for adoption;
- introduce a new "Special Guardianship" order to provide permanence for children who cannot return to their birth families, but for whom adoption is not the most suitable option.

The government therefore aimed to support ways of increasing the number of adoptions: "By 2004/05 increase by 40% the number of looked-after children who are adopted, and aim to exceed this by achieving, if possible, a 50% increase by 2006, up from 2,700 in 1999/00."<sup>145</sup> Between 1976 and 1999, the total number of adoptions in

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<sup>143</sup> Family member cited in ATD Fourth World's response to the Adoption and Children Bill, 2002

<sup>144</sup> Group homes run by child welfare agencies.

<sup>145</sup> Objectives in "Priorities and Planning Framework 2003-2006" (bands 4 and 5 of the Personal Social Services Performance Framework indicator C23).

England decreased from 16,000 to less than 5,000 adoptions per year. Since then, the figure has increased slightly again following the new direction of child protection policy. In 2001/2002, out of the 5,100 recorded adoptions, 3,400 adoptions were the result of action by the child protection services.<sup>146</sup> The annual government report also indicates that most of the other adoptions were by grandparents or within the extended family of the children concerned. While the UK, like most European Union countries, has experienced a decline in the number of newborn babies available for adoption, efforts to boost adoption for children taken into care by local child protection services have provoked fierce debate and led to distressing experiences for families.

There has been a marked shift in social service practice, away from preventative family support to crisis-driven child protection services. This shift actually creates conditions that can lead to the removal of children from their parents by making vulnerable parents afraid to ask for help. Many different organizations that have commented on these changes note the risk that local authorities will put government targets before the needs of the children in care.<sup>147</sup>

As part of ATD Fourth World-UK's ongoing policy and participation efforts, parents, caregivers, children and young people have made several official contributions to the debate in the last three years, including: consultations with the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty (APPG), Victoria Climbié Inquiry, "Measuring child poverty" consultation, and Inquiry into Child Poverty by the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee. ATD Fourth World-UK further added to the debate on adoption by publishing two position papers<sup>148</sup> which stressed the fact that families living in poverty deserve preventative support and made the following general recommendations:

- Adoption should be seen as a last resort only—not as a solution to the failings of the care system and the inadequacies of support services to families living in persistent poverty.
- Before dispensing with parental consent, judges must ensure that social services have met all obligations in respect of family support, that all other options to adoption have been thoroughly investigated (including kinship care), that the child's views and interests have been accurately represented, and that adoption is truly in the best long-term interest of the individual child.
- The principle of the Children Act should continue to apply throughout adoption proceedings, in particular the principle that the state cannot intervene in family life unless the court is satisfied that the child concerned is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm. Children in public care should not be adopted without this having been demonstrated.
- At present, many Local Authority Social Service departments looking after children also act as adoption agencies. This creates a conflict of interest both financially and ethically; alternative local and national arrangements should be made to tackle this problem.
- Adoption support is necessary and should be statutory for children (adopted and non-adopted), birth parents, extended birth family (especially grandparents and siblings), prospective adopters and adoptive parents. Post-adoptive support for birth parents and non-adopted siblings must not be given less priority than services for adopted children and adoptive parents. This support must be adequately funded to ensure free of charge access and delivery to all birth families nationally.

ATD Fourth World also proposed a range of specific recommendations on the following topics: promoting contact between birth parents and adopted children, respecting the child's right to an identity that includes their origins, listening to the views of birth families and their children, and having access to fair legal proceedings.

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> "Sacrificed for Targets," by Anna Gupta.

<sup>148</sup> "Focus sheet on adoption," 2001.

## II. Child protection and child poverty

### A. Children in the care of social services are mainly from poor backgrounds

*"My name is Mo. I have three children, the youngest of whom is now 17 years old. I have been involved with social services, especially children and family services, for many years. At one point the high level of intervention that I was given almost drove me to suicide.*

*"I have been a member of ATD Fourth World-UK for 12 years now and it has been my lifeline. Through their cultural and artistic activities, I have gained confidence and rebuilt my self-esteem. Through an ongoing public debate project, I have acquired the skills and knowledge that enable me to be here today. When I speak about families, I include my own. Any expertise I can bring here comes from the many years of support I have had and the sharing of the collective experiences of the families I have the privilege to represent today.*

*"When we talk about subjects like parenting and poverty, we may believe that we are all speaking about the same thing, but I very much doubt that we are. For example, ways of parenting differ greatly from one culture or generation to another. What my mother considered to be justifiable discipline would be considered a child protection issue these days. My neighbor, who is Nigerian, has very different views on how to encourage children to learn than I have. It's not that one way is better than another is, just that they are different.*

*"Families who come to ATD Fourth World are people who have usually known poverty since birth, who come from generations of people whose legacy has been poverty, illiteracy, exclusion and separation. Almost all have spent part or all of their childhood in care. Most have children in care or have spent years fighting to keep their children with them. To them, poverty is not just about lack of money.*

*"Of course they would say that shortage of money is their main problem, whether they are working or not, but that is not what defines their poverty. That is made clear when they describe how poverty feels."<sup>149</sup>*

Throughout Europe, social and child protection policies have been unable to compensate for poverty in the worst-off segments of the population. Most high-risk children belong to lower-class, single-parent families, the most vulnerable type of household.<sup>150</sup> Among families in poverty, those affected by child protection measures are statistically quite a small group.<sup>151</sup> For these families, however, family life is further weakened and disrupted, harming fundamental aspects of the child's development.

In the United Kingdom, where there is a strong tradition of evaluation and analysis, several studies have looked at the link between poverty and placement in care. One widely cited report dramatically illustrated links between poverty and children affected by child protection measures. Children from poor backgrounds were shown to be 700 times more likely to be placed in care than children from other backgrounds.<sup>152</sup>

A government report, "A better education for children in care,"<sup>153</sup> recognized that nearly one in two children in care leave school without any qualifications, and that "children in care are some of the most vulnerable children in the country." Yet the report made no mention of poverty among the factors leading to placement. "Most children, around 80%, are placed in care due to negligence or maltreatment, or for other family

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<sup>149</sup> Excerpts from "Parenting and Poverty," a statement made at a recent public conference in the UK.

<sup>150</sup> ATD Fourth World-Europe, "Valuing Children, Valuing Parents: a European working paper," January 2004 ([www.atd-fourthworld.org/europe/valuingchildren/index\\_vcvp.htm](http://www.atd-fourthworld.org/europe/valuingchildren/index_vcvp.htm)).

<sup>151</sup> National UK census figures.

<sup>152</sup> Bebbington and Miles, "The background of children who enter local authority care," 1989, British Journal of Social Work, 19, no 9.

<sup>153</sup> "A better education for children in care," a Social Exclusion Unit Report, Sept 2003, [www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk](http://www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk)

reasons. Less than 10% are placed in care due to their own behavior.”<sup>154</sup>

The government’s green paper on the future of children’s services, “Every child matters” acknowledged that “the protection of children cannot be separated from policies which aim to improve the lives of children overall.”<sup>155</sup> The measures recommended by the green paper correspond with the government’s efforts to reduce child poverty.

Living in a family that faces poverty every day has huge implications for children. The most serious of these is the high number of children from families suffering from poverty and social exclusion who are taken into local authority care because of concerns around neglect, when parents are deemed unable to meet the physical and emotional needs of their children. Poverty remains the key indicator associated with children becoming “looked after” by local authorities. This is especially true of children of mixed ethnic heritage, single-parent families, or parents who themselves were raised in care.

Research findings also show that although most “looked after” children (70%) will eventually return home, removals from the family damage the outcomes and life chances for children. The deeper the poverty and social exclusion suffered by the parents, the harder it is for them to meet the criteria to have their children returned home and the longer their children stay in care.

Literature shows that many initiatives and measures taken to protect children tend to devalue the family and to weaken its ties with already vulnerable children. This in turn develops the children’s feelings of guilt and a lack of control over their own lives, often causing them to fail in school. A report by the Who Cares? Trust and the Social Exclusion Unit exposed in detail the inequalities of access to education that affect children taken into care by child protection services.<sup>156</sup>

The role of poverty must therefore be discussed when developing measures and policies for child protection and welfare. Lack of consistent and in-depth statistics is part of the problem in formulating and assessing the link between anti-poverty strategies and child protection measures. One indicator of the success of the Government’s measures to eradicate child poverty and prevent social exclusion should be a reduction in the number of children taken into care due to circumstances aggravated by the poverty of the whole family. Such an indicator has been missing from the government’s National Action Plan on Social Inclusion.

The “Children Act” of 1989 established working in partnership with parents as a priority, but the implementation of this goal proved difficult. Cleaver and Freeman<sup>157</sup> show that the most frequent outcome of intervention (or of investigation in cases of suspected maltreatment) was the further weakening of families who were already vulnerable, thereby leaving the parents deeply worried, with a sense of powerlessness and loss of self-esteem.

## **B. Some relevant issues regarding child protection and poverty**

Parents living in poverty describe their situation in these words:

- *Needing help, but being too scared of being judged an unfit mother to ask for it.*
- *Living where no one wants to know you.*
- *Praying, “No more God, please, no more.”*
- *Being just one crisis away from collapsing – every day.*
- *Being treated like nothing, less than nothing, and accepting it.*
- *Knowing that nobody cares what happens to me, because I have nobody.*

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<sup>154</sup> “A better education for children in care: Summary.”

<sup>155</sup> “Every child matters – Summary,” Green paper summary, Sept 2003, p. 6. The whole report is available at [www.dfes.gov.uk/everychildmatters](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/everychildmatters)

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Cleaver and Freeman, “Parental perspectives in cases of suspected child abuse,” 1995, Her Majesty’s Stationary Office (HMSO), London.

- *Having not one person to talk to who isn't paid to listen.*
- *Trying to go home but not fitting in there any more.*
- *Dying alone and lying there for weeks, I'm scared of that.*
- *Having no education, no skills, no job, and no value.*
- *Wanting to be able to do better, but never being able to.*
- *Waiting for the day the children are old enough to leave care and find me.*
- *Not being able to help the kids with their homework because I never had any education.*
- *Being told that I have nothing to offer my own child, and believing it - then.<sup>158</sup>*

In the context of poverty, the design and assessment of measures to safeguard children must include both children and parents. This requires finding ways to harmonize the challenges faced by the family to meet material needs that result from social exclusion, with the wish of the parents to protect the children from danger and to live as a family. With this approach in mind, child protection measures could cease to be seen as threatening (especially when they involve care orders) and become tools which permit all the stakeholders to work together in partnership.

- **Ideal family support services**

ATD Fourth World-UK discussed with parents living in poverty the governmental "Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families."<sup>159</sup> At first it seemed that use of this framework would have guaranteed nearly all of the families access to much-needed support services. Then one woman pointed out that all the indicators of need were exactly the same indicators that had been used to persuade the court that her children should be in care. Many others had similar experiences, sensing that their poverty was held against them in child custody cases.

Many of the indicators point to issues over which families have no choice, such as location and condition of housing, low levels of income or benefits, poor education, and lack of job skills. Such assessment should mean that they receive extra support, but that is not what families are experiencing. ATD Fourth World has been particularly concerned about this shift in social service provision away from family support to crisis-led intervention. The framework model is intended for use in an assessment of need, not risk; these are very different concepts.

*"When all the boxes are ticked off, they just see how bad things are and they stop talking about our needs and start to talk about the kids being at risk."*

Families are thus caught in a trap; if they seek help by disclosing their concerns, they risk the removal of their children. Given the prior history of care of most of these parents, it is unsurprising that they feel particularly vulnerable and are reluctant to emphasize any child protection issue, even when it is justified.

*"It's like a life sentence, always there to be held against you. You were raised in care so you can never be a good parent; that's what they think."*

Bad press, bad practice and word of mouth, have created in some parents a deep fear of social services that prevents them from asking for help at an early stage. This leaves these very vulnerable families in a fragile state, needing support but afraid of being identified as having children who are "at risk." Those who do ask for help are often assessed as having needs, but not offered services, due to a lack of resources. Other times, families are refused services when they request them, because the children are not seen as sufficiently "at risk." In many cases, no formal needs assessment was made and parents were not confident enough to challenge this or file a complaint.

<sup>158</sup> Excerpts from a workshop run by ATD Fourth World in Frimhurst Family Centre, Surrey, 2001.

<sup>159</sup> Department of Health (2000a) *The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families*. London, The Stationery Office.

*"One young mother told ATD Fourth World that she was unwilling to become involved in a local service as they were 'spies from social services.' [...] This is untrue [...] but it shows the deep-rooted fear of families experiencing poverty of having their children taken into local authority care"<sup>160</sup>.*

Action (that often leads to children being removed) is taken only after the situation breaks down or a professional such as a teacher makes a referral. Parents express fear of revealing how impoverished, isolated or depressed they are, because they feel it will be held against them rather than being seen as an indicator of the need for support services. We should not underestimate the fear held by very poor families of approaching services available to them. Many feel that even using voluntary services will make them known to the system and increase the risk of losing their children.

Participants in ATD Fourth World policy forums have also expressed deep concern at the fact that support services are promised to enable parents to meet Social Service's criteria but are often not in place before court proceedings.

*"If they don't meet their commitments they just say it is a lack of resources and that's it. If we can't meet the deadlines as a result of getting no help then they say it's our fault and we lose the child. How can that be fair?"*

All services must be provided, and adequate time allowed for them to be effective, before a decision is made to remove a child.

### **C. The Victoria Climbié Inquiry (2001-2003)**

On 25 February 2000, 6-yr-old Victoria Climbié, born in the Ivory Coast, died as a result of months of appalling ill-treatment at the hands of two adults who were supposed to be caring for her. Between March 1999 when Victoria arrived in England and January 2000, the girl came into contact with four social service departments, three housing departments, two specialist child protection teams of the Metropolitan Police, two hospitals and a family center.

In response to these events, the British government conducted an investigation known as the Victoria Climbié Inquiry.<sup>161</sup> A number of administrative, managerial, and professional failures were catalogued. The report<sup>162</sup> outlines a number of occasions where the most minor and basic interventions could have prevented the eventual outcome. Many of the concerns identified in Victoria's case exist elsewhere in the country. The report recommends that there be three recommendations:

- a fundamental change in the mindset of managers in key public services who must begin seeing their role in terms of the quality of services delivered at the front door;
- a clear and unambiguous line of managerial accountability both within and across public services;
- a new National Agency for children and families that would replace the current arrangements of Area Child Protection Committees. This agency should have powers to ensure that key service providers (such as providers of health care, housing, and law enforcement) carry out their duties toward children and families in an efficient and effective way.

ATD Fourth World-UK contributed to the Inquiry in 2002, stressing that current trends and events were leading to an emphasis on child protection, thus putting the poorest families directly into conflict situations at the first point of contact and possibly preventing the building of partnership-based practice. There is a real need for a balanced

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<sup>160</sup> ATD Fourth World family member at the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty with Secretary of State, Andrew Smith.

<sup>161</sup> On 20 April 2001, Lord Laming was appointed by the Secretary of State for Health and the Home Secretary to conduct three statutory Inquiries using powers under the Children Act 1989, NHS Act 1977 and Police Act 1996. Together they would be known as The Victoria Climbié Inquiry.

<sup>162</sup> The Victoria Climbié Inquiry. Chairman: Lord Laming. The Stationery Office, 2003.

approach to investigations of abuse or neglect. Information needs to be acted upon quickly, but with sensitivity. Families have spoken of the fear, humiliation and distress caused by some interventions.

*"After they had put us through all that, they decided there was no problem. Not one of them ever apologized, not even to my kids."*

This adversarial system creates mistrust and disrespect on both sides of the client/social worker relationship. This problem could be redressed by the provision of advocacy services, enabling families to fully participate in the child protection process. Parents have said what a huge difference it has made to have "someone there to help me understand and speak, not just me alone with all of them."

ATD Fourth World-UK felt it was important that the Victoria Climbié Inquiry go back to the 1995 governmental report "Child Protection: Messages from Research."<sup>163</sup> This study of twenty child protection cases concluded that too little was being done to support families and that there was too much emphasis on abuse investigation. The report states:

*"At the time the research was undertaken, the balance between services was unsatisfactory. The stress on child protection investigations rather than enquiries, and the failure to follow through interventions with much-needed family support, prevented professionals from meeting the needs of children and families."*

### **III. "End Child Poverty": Will this new UK commitment be a real opportunity for the poorest families?**

Over the last 15 years, child poverty has become an issue of great significance in many European countries and especially in the United Kingdom, which has one of the highest rates of child poverty among EU member states.<sup>164</sup> "Child poverty is a major concern in most of the OECD<sup>165</sup> countries because poor children experience a disproportionate share of deprivation, disadvantage, and bad health and school outcomes, and because the consequences of poverty are especially dire for young children."<sup>166</sup> In the current climate, the likelihood of families, and therefore children, being affected by poverty has risen over the last few decades in Europe, although it seems to have steadied since the end of the 1990s.

A variety of explanations have been suggested: high rates of unemployment and a growing, unstable labor market based on temporary and low-paid jobs; a growing diversity of family structures with an increasing number of single parents; in many countries, a social system which no longer provides adequate support for parents in difficult economic circumstances. In 1996, 21% of children under 18 years old in the European Union were living in low-income households (compared to 16% of adults).<sup>167</sup> However, the national levels of children living in relative economic poverty have stabilized between 5% in the Nordic countries and 25% in the United Kingdom.

This situation is leading most countries to develop approaches that tackle poverty and exclusion from the child's perspective. Among the Member States of the European Union, the United Kingdom is most openly committed to this kind of approach. The UK has one of the highest rates of child poverty among industrialized countries, and in 1999 Prime Minister Tony Blair committed his government and country to eradicating child poverty within a generation (20 years), followed by the Treasury stating goals to cutting it by half

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<sup>163</sup> Darlington Research Unit, Child Protection: Messages from Research, HMSO, 1995.

<sup>164</sup> 24% at risk of poverty compared to the EU average of 19%, Eurostat, European Community Household Panel, UDB version November 2003. [Eurostat defines "at risk of poverty" as having income below 60% of the median, after subtracting housing costs.]

<sup>165</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

<sup>166</sup> Brooks-Gunn, Kamerman, Neuman and Waldfogel, "Social policies, family types and child outcomes in selected OECD countries," May 2003.

<sup>167</sup> This was based on 13 Member States – source: European Community Household Panel (third wave excluding Finland and Sweden).

within 10 years.<sup>168</sup> A number of authors have commented on the determination of the Treasury (ministry of finances) regarding these goals.<sup>169</sup> Political responses to child poverty are evident in many different government policies in the UK.

- **Children: Forces for change**

This commitment to fighting child poverty gives new impetus to social research, policies and projects. Within this context, it is necessary to develop an understanding of how poverty affects children, in partnership with the children concerned and their parents. This poses ethical and methodological issues. The child's role as a key partner in eradicating poverty and social exclusion needs to be recognized and supported, as does that of his/her family and the immediate environment.

Children can be a force for change and empowerment, both for their families and in their wider circle. In the UK, then, there is a challenge for researchers and policy-makers to engage with children and the adults in their lives in order to appreciate the opportunities for empowerment and overcoming exclusion that children create within their families and communities. Often because of their children, parents become re-engaged in overcoming obstacles. Parents who are regarded by some as lost causes are still trusted by their children; this gives them a tremendous boost. For their children's sake, parents who have previously been distrusting of outsiders go and see the authorities, stand up for themselves, and talk to the doctor and health visitor.<sup>170</sup> As the child gets older, parents establish ties with teachers. When they can summon up courage to go and talk to these people, it is because their child's present and future are at stake.

Research on child poverty leads us to highlight three main dimensions: the importance of family life; the challenge of transforming schools into places for children to develop and experience success<sup>171</sup>; and the need for an environment in which children can participate "in the world of children" and create friendships and support networks both for themselves and their families.

Children regard family as a fundamental part of their lives. They play an active role in the family, and often help their parents. Children's future depends on their parents' future and the bonds between them and with others. The children who attended ATD Fourth World's gathering in Geneva to mark 10 years of the Convention on the Rights of the Child on 20 November 1999 voiced this opinion: "For us, the family is the most important thing. Without families, we can't live, we can't grow up. But families can't live in homes or in communities without friendship. Without friendship, there is no life."<sup>172</sup>

To echo this call by children, we ask: will the new commitment by the UK to end child poverty be a real opportunity for the poorest families?

#### **IV. Family life, parenting and family support**

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<sup>168</sup> This is the second of the Department for Work and Pensions' four priority objectives. ([www.dwp.gov.uk/aboutus/index.asp](http://www.dwp.gov.uk/aboutus/index.asp)).

<sup>169</sup> Mickelwright writes: "The importance of this task among the government's priorities is illustrated by the major role played by chancellor Gordon Brown, who has said that child poverty is 'a scar on the nation's soul'."

<sup>170</sup> A visiting nurse.

<sup>171</sup> In "Education: missed opportunities," ATD Fourth World-UK interviewed 122 adults, teenagers and children from 39 families on the topic of their experiences of the education system, and how much they thought poverty affected the children's school life. The survey confirms that the children who have the most to gain from school, are too often the ones who fail in it. The parents and children talk about bullying, behavioral expectations which are often unrealistic for those living in poverty, the hidden costs of school, and the importance of good parent-teacher relations for a child's achievement at school. (ATD Fourth World-UK, "Education: opportunities lost – the education system as experienced by families living in poverty," 2000, London.)

<sup>172</sup> Appeal by the Tapori Children's Network to Mary Robinson, then the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva, 20 November 1999.

Parents describe persistent poverty in a variety of ways:

- *Having to be better with my kids than everyone else, because someone is watching me.*
- *Saying no to my kids every day of their lives.*
- *Walking everywhere all the time, in all weathers, all the time.*
- *Dreading every Christmas and birthday because of the disappointment in the children's eyes.*
- *Never feeling good enough.*
- *Keeping secrets, telling lies, and putting on a front.*
- *Wondering what I ever did to deserve this life.*
- *Making one big mistake and then paying for it forever by losing every baby before I can prove that I have changed.*<sup>173</sup>

Parents in poverty must of course honor the same responsibilities as any other parents. They share the joys, hopes and fears common to most parents, but in much more challenging circumstances. The unending crises inherent to living in deep poverty strain families and expose their weaknesses, while better-off parents can more often overcome hardship by drawing on networks of support, both economic and personal.

The government target to eradicate child poverty within 20 years does not cite the direct link between parenting issues, family support, work by social services on child protection, and poverty eradication. The families who are part of ATD Fourth World-UK do make these connections. They define poverty as being about lack of respect, being judged, and risking the loss of your children into care. Such a complex challenge cannot be overcome without many stakeholders collaborating.

It goes without saying that intervention or care concerning children should involve their parents. The fight against child poverty takes into account the parents' circumstances, responsibilities and rights. A paper by two non-profit organizations states: "Generally speaking, child poverty is inseparable from the poverty of their family or guardian."<sup>174</sup>

Lupton and Nixon<sup>175</sup> state that despite government exhortations<sup>176</sup> and general progress, evidence suggests that the extent of families' participation in social work decisions remains extremely limited. In their view, the organizational systems and the professional culture in social intervention are contributing factors to this relative failure.

## **SUPPORTING POOR FAMILIES: A BRIEFING PAPER**

**By the End Child Poverty Coalition**<sup>177</sup>

### **Child or family poverty?**

Children are not usually poor independently of their families or carers. Parents, especially mothers, on low incomes sometimes go without adequate meals or other basic necessities to ensure that children are provided for.<sup>178</sup> Children's well-being is largely, though not wholly, dependent on parents' well being.

### **What is family support?**

Families are diverse. Each has its own strengths, resilience and challenges. Identifying the

<sup>173</sup> From a workshop run by ATD Fourth World in Frimhurst Family Center, Surrey, 2001.

<sup>174</sup> End Child Poverty Coalition and the National Family and Parenting Institute, "Supporting Poor Families: A Briefing Paper," 2003, available at [www.ecpc.org.uk](http://www.ecpc.org.uk). This briefing paper initiated debate and action to address the challenge of child poverty eradication in the UK.

<sup>175</sup> Lupton and Nixon, page 50.

<sup>176</sup> Department of Health, "The challenge of partnership," HMSO, London, 1995c.

<sup>177</sup> A coalition of organisations from the voluntary, private and public sectors campaigning to ensure that the goal of eradicating child poverty becomes a reality.

<sup>178</sup> Middleston S, Ashworth K & Braithwaite I, *Small Fortunes: spending on children, childhood poverty and parental sacrifice*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1987.

problems that put families under strain – disability, poverty, separation, bereavement, domestic violence, poor housing, racist harassment, alcohol misuse – does not indicate which family will need help. This makes planning and delivering family support difficult. A raft of support mechanisms and networks need to be in place that families can use when they need help, with easy access to more specialist provision.

Family support can encompass family finances (benefits, back-to-work initiatives, in-work tax credits), family services (advice and information services, parent/child leisure activities, childcare provision, parenting support), and universal services (education, transport, health care, housing, community regeneration, work-life balance initiatives).

### **Why is poverty hard on relationships?**

Parenting is harder if you are poor. There are practical barriers – poor housing, sparse and inadequate local public transport, poor nutrition due to lack of finances, coupled with personal barriers – lack of self-esteem, low educational attainment leading to low aspirations and expectations for both parents and children.<sup>179</sup>

As a result more poor children have emotional and behavioral difficulties, poor health and achieve less at school and in work than those from better-off families. A large body of research testifies to the link between economic disadvantage and impoverished living conditions to the chances that children will fail to thrive.<sup>180</sup> Parents in poor environments are resourceful. Disadvantaged parents are good parents; their children do grow, develop and achieve, in spite of financial and environmental factors. But the fact that people do survive adversity is not a reason to leave things as they are. A considerable proportion of poor families do not do well and they and their children suffer.

### **Whose services, service users or service providers?**

Parents only use services if they need them. Developing services that are target-led from the provider's or Government's agenda creates a danger of alienating the service users by losing sight of the real needs of poor families and undervaluing or failing to use informal social support systems that many parents rely on, for example supporting grandparents in their role as childcare providers.<sup>181</sup> How parents feel about the support they receive is critical. There is also evidence to suggest that poverty-related issues, such as a need for childcare, are not registering as priorities in service providers' assessments.<sup>182</sup> Lack of clarity over whether family support is aimed at addressing the root causes of poverty, or simply alleviating some of the direct consequences of living on an inadequate income creates frustration in families.

### **Family support – what is needed?**

Families need better information about services. This is essential to normalize services and encourage uptake. Research suggests that services assumed to be universal—prenatal classes and health visiting (key components of many new policy initiatives like Sure Start)—are not known about or not available to many parents in poor environments. Yet parents who get emotional support, information and practical action parent better.<sup>183</sup> Services need to be evaluated and consolidated to avoid further fragmentation. Despite an increase in provision, most services are not available to all families. Services designed

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<sup>179</sup> Eisenstadt Naomi, Presentation on Sure Start at End Child Poverty/National Family & Parenting Institute seminar: Supporting Poor Families, London, July 2002.

<sup>180</sup> Utting D, *Family and parenthood: supporting families, preventing breakdown*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation Findings, 1995 - Jefferis B, Power C & Hertzman C, "Birth weight, childhood socio-economic environment, and cognitive development in the 1958 British birth cohort study," *British Medical Journal*, 10th August 2002 - Ermisch J, Francesconi M & Pevalin D J, "Outcomes for children of poverty," Department for Work and Pensions Report n°158, 2001.

<sup>181</sup> Henricson C (ed), Cragg A, Dickens S, Taylor C & Keep G, *Reaching parents: producing and delivering parent information resources. A qualitative research study and practice*, NFPI 2002 - Gbate D & Hazel N, *Parenting in Poor Environments: Stress, Support and Coping*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers for Policy Research Bureau, 2002 - Henricson C (ed), Moorman A & Ball M, *Understanding parents' needs – a review of parents' surveys*, NFPI 2001.

<sup>182</sup> National Council for One-Parent Families, *One-parent Families Today – The Facts*, 1999.

<sup>183</sup> Barlow J & Stewart-Brown S, "Understanding parenting programs: the benefits for parents of a home-school linked parenting program," Health Services Research Unit – University of Oxford 2000.

to help families before they reach crisis point are in particularly short supply – child and adolescent mental health services, couple and family relationship services, services for families affected by drug and alcohol misuse and domestic violence, and parenting programs for parents whose children display emotional or behavioral problems. There is also an identified lack of help for minority ethnic families and for fathers.

### **Support for high-need families**

High-need families are more likely to access formal social services than other sorts of support. They are more likely to have many difficulties – to live in poor accommodation, to have a disabled child, to be a lone parent, to have mental health difficulties, to have a child with problem behavior, to be a family where there is concern about risk to the children. They are less likely to be part of the informal social support networks based on mutual support, or more community based services.<sup>184</sup>

Yet anecdotal evidence suggests that staff are leaving formal services to work in the more innovative local initiatives where morale is high and support and training more available. This is creating an acute problem in social service provision. Family stress can lead to children being at risk; but providing appropriate and timely support can significantly reduce these risks. Statutory support is critical in safeguarding families with greatest need. Community-based services and social services fulfill different but complementary functions and provide different levels of intervention. Without them more children will end up in care, needing protection, homeless, misusing drugs and alcohol and unable to parent their own children well. It is absolutely imperative that resources for the formal sector should not be squeezed out in the drive to increase community-based support services.

### **Looking forward**

The over-riding message for policy and practice is that how parents feel about support is critical. Parents and children need to be listened to, surveyed on how they experience the support that is currently available and strategies put in place to ensure that parents feel in control of the support they receive and how it is delivered. External support that appears to undermine parents' autonomy can end up being experienced as 'interference,' which adds to stress rather than relieves it. Measures that help build social capital and promote the resilience of poor families are likely to be more effective if families are able to move out of poverty at the same time. Yet evidence shows that family support makes a difference to the quality of family relationships, parenting and the long-term outcomes for children.

- **Supporting poor families: The example of "Sure Start" and other possibilities**

Supporting families who live in poverty is not a forgotten issue. "Sure Start," the ambitious national program set up by the British government, is a cornerstone of its drive to tackle child poverty and social exclusion. This program aims to significantly improve the lives of children under age 4 from poor backgrounds. Launched in 1999, the program focuses on four objectives: improving children's social and emotional development; improving health; improving children's ability to learn; and strengthening families and communities. In order to avoid stigmatizing certain children and families, Sure Start aims to develop on a community basis, in the most disadvantaged communities. Often, local residents are first invited to talk about their needs. While objectives are fixed at a national level, local initiatives are planned and implemented by people with local knowledge. Although each local program is therefore unique, many of them include home visits by outreach teams, increased support for children and adults, collective play activities, and support for communities to access primary health care. Sure Start's early recognition that it has difficulty reaching the most excluded, and consequently the most needy families, is an important move. This program, inspired by Head Start in the United States, bears

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<sup>184</sup> Ghate & Hazel, "Parenting in poor environments: stress, support and coping," Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2002.

watching over the coming years, as its findings may be useful beyond the national context.

In any similar program, professionals, parents and activists face some key questions: What is the most appropriate kind of support for the families in the most difficulty? What conditions are required to reach these families and to implement this support? What innovations are needed so that they can access existing support services and fully benefit from them?

ATD Fourth World-UK has chosen to continue to invest in local and national projects that bring together parents from disadvantaged families with all other relevant stakeholders in order to gain a deeper understanding of the conditions required for excluded families to access and benefit from support services. The ATD-London team is also currently setting up a joint project with a local Sure Start group in South London, specifically designed to meet the families in greatest need.

Ghate and Hazel of the Policy Research Bureau in 2002 examined the question “What do parents in poverty want from family and parental support?” by surveying over 1,700 parents and conducting in-depth interviews with nearly 40 of them living in poverty in the UK.<sup>185</sup> They analyzed parents’ evaluation of existing support. Although some of the changes to the system that parents would like are classic and can be costly, such as improved accessibility and expansion of services, other proposals for change could harness innovation for the delivery of family support, such as:

- expanding the social profile of service users, so that a group is less stigmatized simply for seeking access to a particular service;
- training staff to be more understanding;
- enabling parents to feel that they are in control of a situation;
- assessing needs in partnership with families;
- building on the existing strengths of parents, and their networks and communities;
- avoiding “negative support”: the loss of privacy associated with some services significantly inhibits their use.

Many schemes other than support services aimed at parents and families can be very effective in terms of primary prevention, and can avoid the need for parents to request external assistance.

## V. Ways forward

We have collected some examples of initiatives and practices, always bearing in mind one essential issue: what kinds of interventions recognize the dreams of individual family members, and enable parents to remain the principal actors in their children’s future?

In cases of poverty and exclusion, over which child protection professionals have little control, we must examine the quality of interactions between service providers and parents, exploring how professionals can help them deal with their primary concern: moving out of poverty. This motivates ATD Fourth World’s call for closer links between child protection policy and policy aimed at combating poverty.

Additionally, thinking about children in terms of the family group may also lead to new approaches and perspectives. The family constitutes the fundamental base for attachment, hands down values over generations, and is the system that most determines individual and collective behavior. The family needs to be supported by focusing on the skills and values of each family member and the wider family network. This can be achieved by learning to work with families who are in great difficulty, seeing them as key players, and shaping solutions that take into account the parents’ and children’s aspirations and skills. This requires new types of training for all who are involved.

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

## **A. Setting up constructive dialogue: Talk with us, not at us**

"Talk with us, not at us"<sup>186</sup> presents the findings from ATD Fourth World's policy forums in the mid-1990s.<sup>187</sup> These forums bring together parents living in poverty and other key players in order to formulate policies to combat exclusion. One purpose of this two-year collaboration between very vulnerable families and professionals was to identify how disadvantaged families overcome obstacles in order to contribute to the life of the community they live in and to feel confident with professionals. Another purpose was for service providers to explore how to better understand the experiences and efforts of very poor people. The process generated many valuable lessons, including:

- *Don't judge by crisis behavior alone.* Families are often assessed only on the basis of one incident or through just one or two social work visits during a period of family crisis.
- *Keep families involved.* Parents aspire to be taken seriously.
- *Create and build on trust.* It takes time to build trust.
- *Keep families informed.* It is vital to families to receive information regarding decisions about their children, especially for those who are not living with them. Many parents feel forgotten once their children have been removed.

At a consultation on child poverty held by the Department of Work and Pensions in Liverpool and attended by ATD Fourth World, one participant commented on the absence of children in the hall. "Consulting with the parents does not necessarily mean that you hear the experiences, voice or views of their children."

A 16-year-old, discussing the government's aims to end child poverty said, "They say what they think child poverty is and how to measure it, then they come to consult us. They should come to us first. We are the ones who have lived it."

National initiatives such as "Quality Protects" put a lot of emphasis on listening to children in care, which is a welcome development. Parents and children involved with social services say again and again that they were not listened to and their views were not taken into account, especially in child protection cases.

*"They listen to you, but they only act on what you say if it agrees with what they want to do. Otherwise, they say you are too young or too disturbed to understand."*

It is essential to enable full participation of children and their families at all stages of care proceedings.

## **B. Toward training that involves professionals and service users**

Pierson<sup>188</sup> (2002) argues that social work training and practice within social services departments rarely regards anti-poverty work as integral to the social work task. While anti-oppressive practice has done much to address social exclusion, the discourse has primarily focused on gender, race and disability—failing to tackle the fundamental source of injustice experienced by service users: their poverty.

Social Services Departments in the UK must consult and involve service users when planning and developing services. In Europe, several pilot projects are underway that enable service users to participate in the training of service providers; this helps adjust interventions to the needs of clients rather than workers.

Family Rights Group, ATD Fourth World, and Royal Holloway, University of London are working to improve the training of social workers who work with families to help them expand their understanding of poverty and social exclusion by developing a training program that brings together people living in poverty (who have experience being

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<sup>186</sup> ATD Fourth World-UK, *Talk with us, not at us: how to develop a partnership between families in poverty and professionals*, London, 1996.

<sup>187</sup> ATD Fourth World-UK, *Participation works: Involving people in poverty in policy-making*, London, 2000.

<sup>188</sup> Pierson, J. (2002) *Tackling Social Exclusion*. London, Routledge.

consumers of social services) with academics and social work practitioners, in order to expand workers' awareness of how poverty issues and diversity impact families and children. Retelling one's experience can be powerful as well as painful; consideration must be given as to how families can prepare to share their personal experience in the training setting without reliving the pain.

### C. Family Group Conferences

The Family Group Conference (FGC) approach is currently being developed in many European countries, notably Ireland, the Netherlands, the UK and the Scandinavian countries.<sup>189</sup> By focusing on the family network (close and extended family, as well as professionals), family group conferencing empowers families going through a difficult time to make decisions that will resolve crisis situations. The aim is to support the plans made by the family network, by listening first and foremost to the views of those directly concerned: the parents and children.

In the UK, both ATD Fourth World and the Family Rights Group have advocated the use of family group conferences to look for possible care arrangements within the family before seeking foster care or adoption. There are many benefits to finding solutions within the family. There are thousands of successful kinship care placements, which form an integral part of the formal and informal childcare system and support the child's ability to cope with being separated from their birth parents.

In New Zealand, where the practice originated, family group conferences are recognized as the key decision-making process for families with children in need of care or protection. The introduction of FGC led to a reduction in the number of children and young persons placed as a result of child welfare measures and led to a decrease in the number of juvenile delinquents going to prison.

Though it has acquired varied characteristics in the different settings, the original New Zealand model is characterized by a five-stage intervention process, which begins as soon as a problem is identified: preparation with the family network (which can take several weeks or months); information giving; private family time; agreeing on the plan proposed by the family; and monitoring and review. A wide definition of family applies. It includes extended family as well as close, concerned friends and neighbors. An independent coordinator prepares the conference by identifying and gathering together the family network, then he/she facilitates exchange and refrains from offering preconceived ideas of the outcome. In the course of the conference, the family, after hearing information about the case, is left alone to arrive at their own plan for the future of the child or young person. Resources may be procured to help implement the plan. Professionals and family members monitor the plan's progress and often follow-up meetings are held. The approach has been very successful.

Robert Tapsfield, former Director of the "Family Rights Group" NGO in the UK, is an enthusiastic campaigner for developing this tool in the UK. He writes: "Family group conferences build on the strengths of families and communities and enable families to take responsibility for leading decision making in situations where otherwise the state would take over this responsibility. They recognize the right and responsibility of families and communities to make decisions about their children and provide a framework for families to exercise this responsibility and for the state and families to work together to safeguard and promote children's welfare. At a family group conference, it is the family who make a plan for a child or young person. The state's role is to support the family plan, unless it would not keep the child safe, in which case the state would take over responsibility for decision making."<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> "Building a Global Alliance for Restorative Practices and Family Empowerment" Veldhoven, 28-30 August 2003, organized by IIRP (International institute for restorative practices). See [www.iirp.org](http://www.iirp.org)

<sup>190</sup> Extract from a briefing paper by the Family Rights Group in January 2003, in response to consultation with the British Government in preparation for a green paper on children at risk entitled "Every Child Matters" (published in September 2003).

## VI. Conclusion and recommendations: Getting support right for families living in poverty

*“The personal social services are large scale experiments in ways of helping those in need. It is both wasteful and irresponsible to set experiments in motion and omit to record and analyze what happens. It makes no sense in terms of efficiency and however little intended, indicates a careless attitude towards human welfare.”*

- Seebohm, Report of the Committee on Local Authority and Allied Personal Social Services, 1968

Is it extreme poverty that separates parents and children or is it our inadequate answers to complex issues that does it? It may be the current attempt at a solution that creates the problem.

Meeting the needs of parents and children living in poverty is not only a question of doing more, but doing things differently. The systemic approach of family therapists shows that it is a matter of organization, training and the spirit in which it is done. It involves learning to work on common projects with families, regarding them as key players with full participation, and, as early as possible, getting to know the parents' and children's plans so that solutions can be found which are based on their aspirations and skills. That requires looking at the family group as a whole before implementing a host of measures.

What kind of action will help us to move from interventions characterized by distrust and control to a spirit of trust and recognition of parents' skills? The question relates to broad strategies, but also to their implementation at the practical level. The people charged with intervention should ask: who will put these measures into practice? What kind of environment will they work in? To what extent will they have the freedom to innovate, experiment, and therefore take risks? Taking into account the whole family network and building solutions with them requires developing new complex skills among professionals.

- **What do families say about social services?**

They always remember a good social worker—and not just the ones who helped them get what they want. Families, who are fed up with constantly being disbelieved, disrespected and disregarded notice immediately if a social worker is polite, respectful and listens to them. In a discussion about good practice, parents' top priorities were being listened to, being kept informed, and being included in the process.

A young person spoke at an ATD Fourth World meeting about the time (when he was in care) a new social worker attended his review. This social worker had collected the boy's mother in his car and taken her to the review because it was a long way away. On the way they had chatted and he had explained to her how the review would work. The boy said, “At the review he never talked down to my mum, he let her speak up. When she got upset he gave her time to have a breather. She said more at that review than at any other and I was proud of her.” By showing respect, this worker allowed the mother to keep her dignity in front of her son.

Yet, there is also reluctance on the part of social work professionals to believe that people can change. One woman who had lost children to care as a young mother felt that, in spite of thirty more years of life and experience, her past was still held against her when she applied to have her grandchild to stay weekends to give her son some respite.

The UK Human Rights Act guarantees the right to privacy and respect for family life, yet many parents living in poverty find that their whole lives are open to the judgment of others and to outside intervention. One of the guiding principles introduced in the UK Children Act 1989 is “parents with children in need should be helped to bring up their children themselves” and that “this should be provided in partnership with their parents.” (DoH Guidelines).

Contrary to the spirit of both these acts there has been a marked shift in social service practice, away from preventative family support to crisis-driven child protection services. This shift creates conditions that can lead to the removal of children from their parents by making already vulnerable parents afraid to ask for help. Preventative family support services are especially important to families experiencing long-term poverty. Many local authorities simply do not have enough resources to put in place a comprehensive system of support—in some cases 25% of posts are unfilled—and there is often a very high staff turnover rate.

One mother described her history of care as a “life sentence” that is raised for discussion every time she asks for help. A father told us how the attitude of social workers would change when they realized he had been in care as a child, “I went from being a parent with problems to being a problem parent.” This cannot be allowed to continue into another generation as it destroys families and perpetuates poverty.

Parents from very poor backgrounds, often facing social exclusion, want a form of child protection which is founded on a principle of family continuity, which some call a right to family life. This principle of family continuity brings a life-long perspective to thinking about the family, by strengthening the child’s network of family and friends so that they do not lose contact with their origins.

Within this context, periods when children are cared for outside the family unit can be very beneficial and have a very different effect. It is a matter of “normalizing” placements, to use the words of Jean Bédard, a Quebec social worker who has worked for over twenty years in the child protection services and wrote a guide to intervention, *Families in Distress*. In his view, placements remain “a very risky operation. And you should only contemplate a risky intervention after first having done everything to avoid it, such is the risk.” An approach based on “family continuity,” which values parents and acts against poverty, allows the family in difficulty to “understand that all parents need help caring for their children at some point. Placement could be like a financial grant, helping the family to look after their children so that solutions can be found to their problems. This kind of intervention strengthens the ties between the child and the parents.”<sup>191</sup>

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According to families<sup>192</sup> who live in persistent and often intergenerational poverty in the United Kingdom, poverty is:

- *Having people think I was in care because I was a bad kid, or had a bad mother.*
- *Seeing foster-parents get so much money to buy my children the things I could never afford to buy them.*
- *Having all the same dreams for the future that everyone else has, but no way on earth to make them come true.*
- *Wanting to be normal but not knowing how.*
- *Knowing that it is never going to get any better, this is it.*
- *Having no choice of where we live, what school the kids go to or what kind of jobs we get.*
- *Wanting to die but being too scared to get on with it.*
- *Everyone thinking that they have the right to have an opinion about me, just because I ask for a bit of help.*
- *Having no hope left in me at all.*

These are just some of the views on poverty families have expressed. Above all else, they talk about having no choice in many aspects of their lives by: having to accept poor quality housing in areas they don’t know anybody; being told which school their children

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<sup>191</sup> Excerpts from Jean Bédard, “De l’estime de soi – entretien avec Xavier Verzat,” in *Revue Quart Monde*, “enfants placés,” n° 178, May 2001, pages 51 to 55, translated from original in French.

<sup>192</sup> Excerpts from a workshop at ATD Fourth World Frimhurst Family Centre, Surrey, 2001.

can go to; being forced to buy things second hand; accepting any job—however awful—because of their lack of literacy or work skills; or being able to see their own child only when someone else authorizes it.

Supporting families to keep their children at home is a visionary long-term initiative that will not only reduce child poverty now, but in the future too. It is a cost effective measure, given the figures showing that adults who went through the care system as children are more likely to have limited education, poor general health, mental health problems, become homeless, be imprisoned, bear children at a young age, and have their children taken into care.

## **Recommendations**

These recommendations are excerpted from "Valuing Children, Valuing Parents," a working paper prepared by ATD Fourth World within the framework of "Phase 1" of the "Trans-national Exchange Programme," supported by the European Commission. They should be debated in the next steps of a European exchange program with all key partners, including various non-governmental organizations, and particularly parents living in poverty.

- **Involve children and their families in the research and evaluation of policies to combat child poverty**

Support projects and research which have qualitative and participatory dimensions for work with children and their parents. Develop, in partnership with the families concerned, new indicators which can be used in the fight against poverty and social exclusion, and which relate specifically to children. These indicators must take into account the importance for a child's development of family ties, respect and positive recognition for the parents. They must also measure the factors in the local community and in the child's and family's environment that allow children and families to develop their skills and potential.

- **Integrate child protection policy with anti-poverty strategies to fight poverty and exclusion**

Encourage the development of positive synergies which respond to the aspirations of the children and parents concerned. Promote research to identify: the number of children and families affected by child protection systems; the reasons and methods for placing children under care orders; the children's family situation, with particular focus on socio-economic aspects. Conduct long-term studies on the experiences of children and families, particularly those living in poverty and exclusion, who are affected by care orders from child protection services. This research should lead to an assessment of positive and negative effects on the children and parents concerned. It is also important to develop forms of educational intervention and child protection which can benefit all those involved: children, parents, and the family group as it pursues its family projects. Evaluate the way in which child protection practices can hinder access to support and fundamental rights for some parents in poverty and exclusion. Research must help establish the impact of parents' fears of getting caught up in support procedures which will result in the removal of their children.

- **Support professionals in order to help implement changes in working practices**

- Increase the evaluation of practices in line with objective 4.b of the strategy agreed on at the European Union Summit in Nice (December 2000): "Adapting administrative and social services to the needs of people." This involves gaining a better understanding of how National Action Plans for Social Inclusion in each country are implemented and perceived, not only by the professionals, but also by the families meant to benefit from them.

- Help bring about a new mindset in educational and social intervention by working in partnership with families in difficulty, seeing them as key players, and as soon as possible, finding out the plans of parents and children in order to adapt solutions to their aspirations and their abilities.
- Explore ways for parents affected by child protection measures, particularly the poorest of these, to participate in the training of professionals working in social and educational support.
- Allow professionals engaged in educational and social intervention to take into account the whole family network, and to create, in partnership with the family network, and with the help of training, new forms of support and supervision.
- Encourage budgetary decisions which ensure a stimulating environment for professionals, with an allowance made for innovation, experimentation and research into types of intervention which build a common cause with the beneficiaries.

- **Focus on the family as a network of skills and social / emotional ties**

The family group is a basic network that can be a springboard for individual and collective action. Encouraging exchange of experiences between projects that strengthen family dynamics can inspire the future development of strategies to combat poverty and exclusion, particularly in relation to children.

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# Conclusion and Recommendations



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2001



Life in poverty is harsh. No one wants children to suffer in hunger, makeshift housing and unrelenting insecurity. This can drive some parents to entrust their children to an orphanage or to domestic service, or it can lead some social workers to pluck children out of a home mainly because it is poor. There are times when these are the best options available: the children will be better fed; and the parents may have the time to overcome a crisis and build a more stable home. Outcomes are far worse when children leave of their own accord and end up on their own in the streets. But even in the best of circumstances, what the children themselves have told us time and again is that they are aware that something irreplaceable has been lost when they must leave their family and their community. And children in the custody of private institutions or of the government find themselves in a system with scant resources or with little accountability to the families they serve. Far too much anguish remains, and we owe it to these children to innovate better solutions together.

Poverty is not the only factor separating parents and children. The phenomena explored in this study, from children living in the streets, to children in foster care, are complex and will not be resolved by any single measure. Parents themselves can show unstinting resilience and courage on behalf of their children. But the enormous efforts necessary to keep a family together in the face of poverty also sap people's energies and hopes in ways that can delay and even sabotage their efforts to escape poverty.

### **The six countries profiled**

- Among the Guatemalan families profiled in this study, support from the community was lacking, and many of their children ended up in the streets, and some dying by violence. Some found themselves in situations where children had access to drugs and became addicted. Other children who were in formal structures found themselves marginalized by their extreme poverty, as when school administrators humiliated them for having lice and worn clothing. When Doña Elena Cifuentes' child ran away from an institution, she put all her energy into searching for him, only to be disregarded by a second institution where she found him. Still other parents lived with the fear of their children being removed by an agency or orphanage. The fear was so great that it led Doña Rosario Cardona to avoid any pre-natal care.
- In Haiti, it is important to look at all aspects of the situation of children in domestic service. While the ideal situation would be for the children's families to have sufficient means to raise them at home, until that goal can be achieved, it is important to distinguish between varying situations of domestic service. While some are highly exploitative of the child, in others a child is simply helping out the neighbors who have the means to welcome her or him until the child's family has more food or the means to send the child to school. The network of three Family Schools in Fond-des-Nègres offers a practical model for shaping a school in such a way as to ensure the education of some of the poorest children, both those in domestic service and those at risk of going into domestic service.
- The children living in city streets in Burkina Faso have often been going in circles, suffering from the rootlessness inherent in their lives, as well as all the risks to their health and well-being in fending for themselves. Institutions designed for their benefit may have helped to protect some, but they have also left many of these children disoriented, not knowing how they can grow up to be part of a community. Here, the work of the Courtyard of 100 Trades is an innovative model demonstrating how it is possible to reintegrate these children into the lives of their families and communities, which are mostly rural.
- The chapters on the Philippines, the United States and the United Kingdom are complementary in the varied views they give of parents whose children are in the custody of social workers. Life and economic realities are very different on these three continents, and the parents profiled in the Philippines were more likely to voluntarily entrust their children to orphanages in hopes that the children would thrive. Although the institutional and legal frameworks vary in these countries, it is striking to see the

similarities among the parents who are given a series of obstacles to overcome, and who too often share a common desperation. A child in the United States blames her parents for not having been able to protect her from the child welfare system; a child in the Philippines runs away from an orphanage to find her parents; these are symptoms of institutions gone awry. And yet, there are ways in which these institutions benefit children and families. The Child Welfare Organizing Project proposes an approach enabling parents to examine issues together and then to contribute to the analysis and planning of the child welfare system.

## **Recommendations**

### **for a human rights-based programming approach to family separation**

#### **a) Transparency and accountability**

The hallmark of any human rights-based program, this accountability must begin by reporting back to the families living in the worst forms of poverty. If a constructive dialogue can be built with them to regularly evaluate a program's success, the program will be more likely to ensure that no child slips through the cracks. It will also be more likely to benefit an entire community, rather than only its most dynamic members.

Given the fragility of these families, their lack of time, the stigma they face in their neighborhoods, and their lack of education, it is not effective to report back to them simply by mailing out a newsletter or even inviting them to a meeting. Building more personal relationships through informal conversations is essential. As trust is built over time, it will become possible to include them in meetings where their voice can be heard as well.

Professionals working with very poor families need support in terms of time and training in order to learn how a more informal, personal approach can best work to involve these families in an active and transparent partnership.

Policy accountability is also dependent on indicators. New indicators should be developed, in partnership with the families concerned, to measure the importance for a child's development of family ties and of respect and recognition for the parents. Indicators are needed to measure factors in the community environment of the family that allow children and families to develop their skills and potential. Wherever children are in the custody of a social service agency or a non-profit organization, data should be collected over the long term, so that it will be possible to assess the outcomes for the children and parents concerned.

#### **b) Policy development can benefit from looking outside national boundaries**

There are specificities to every region, country and neighborhood, which this study has highlighted. And yet many of the situations are common to different places. Children in the streets in Burkina Faso and in institutions in the United States face a similar disorientation at being part of an artificial community. Parents in the Philippines and in the United Kingdom whose children have been adopted by others share a similar longing to be sure that their children will be loved and will thrive, and to one day renew ties to their children. Although policies should never be designed far from the communities they will serve, nor imposed without regular evaluation with these communities, we hope that some of the experiences shared in this study can help others to learn from mistakes that have already been made, and to spark ideas that may be adaptable to similar situations.

Given that we live in a world where the ideas and expertise emanating from industrialized countries have too often been imposed on developing countries, we also hope that this study helps show what a wealth of innovation exists in developing

countries. Most industrialized countries are still riddled with social inequality and poverty, and have no monopoly on finding solutions to overcome poverty.

### c) Empowering people through a long-term investment in capacity building

Although “capacity building” is a common term in development projects, it is almost always used to mean building the capacities of the underprivileged by instructing them: in micro-credit and business skills; in vocational or academic learning; in parenting or anger-management classes. We also want to stress the importance of:

- Building the capacities of those who work with the poor, whether in development projects or as social workers, as educators or lawyers. These people, including professionals and volunteers, may have little or insufficient knowledge about families from backgrounds different from their own. This can put them at risk of making preconceived judgments about these families, or of seeing them as individuals in isolation from one another rather than understanding their family ties. Professionals and volunteers can benefit from learning directly from people living in poverty what their hopes and experiences are, and about their family and community relationships. This process should be on-going and reciprocal, so that they let very poor people get to know them as well.
- Finding creative ways to invest in capacity building with people living in poverty. Requiring the poor to be instructed in classes is not always effective, given both the lack of time available for people struggling to survive, and the humiliations they face daily, which undermine their ability to benefit from any class. An important tool used by Fourth World Volunteer Corps members is that of living in poor communities and building relationships of mutual trust through daily life. Another method is recognizing the importance of an individual's family ties, and beginning with positive, creative projects. For instance, in Burkina Faso, it was important to initiate discussions about a homeless child's return to his family while including a joyful component of storytelling, involving family and community members of all ages. Group discussions that give value to the contribution of each participant are also invaluable for enabling people to put their personal experiences into a wider context and to shape a collective vision of how to improve the situation in the future. These discussions can then go beyond enlarging an individual's choices and can actually help reshape programs.

### d) Parents and children as active participants

All members of a family should have the opportunity to express themselves and to play an active role in shaping their destiny. They depend for their well-being on one another and on their communities, and the rights of one member of the family cannot be effectively protected without the protection of the rights of the others.

- **Children's voices matter.** As soon as they are old enough, they should be encouraged to speak of their feelings and opinions. Many children living in poverty play an active role in helping their families survive and in fighting exclusion in their communities. They deserve as much support as possible to ensure that this role does not hinder their health and their access to quality education. Children living in institutions deserve protection from the risks of shaping their identity within an artificial community and losing the support of their family and their original neighborhood community. Children who are not living in a community, such as children living in the streets, should nevertheless be considered both as individuals and as members of the family and community they came from. Referring to them as “street children” or “restavèks” is counter-productive, as it hurts both their self-image and their possibility of rebuilding links with their families and communities.
- **Siblings must be considered.** When one child is living in an institution, while the child's siblings are living with the parents, it is important to take into account their

relationship to one another. For instance, when the children in Burkina Faso received new clothing while living in an institution, there was a risk of creating inequality that might encourage their siblings to run away from home in hopes of doing better materially.

- **Both mothers and fathers should be enabled to assume their family and community responsibilities.** It is important to try to understand why some parents entrust their children to others. Often viewed by others as abandonment, it can be meant as a way to protect one's child from hunger. The same is true of other choices parents make. Something that can look like a bad choice to an outsider may actually have been one of the better choices among the parents' limited options. Open-mindedness will help uncover all sides of a situation. It is most effective to put aside issues of blame and guilt, particularly in front of a parent's children. For programs addressing child welfare, it is important to include in the budget an investment in getting to know the child's family, even if they have already been separated for several years, as in the case of children living in the streets. These parents should be considered partners, particularly in elaborating solutions to a crisis, and in the educational plan made for the child, preferably in a way that allows the parents to contribute directly to educating him or her.
- **The unintended consequences of giving priority to women.** As seen in the chapter on the Philippines, programs designed to help women, and to ensure that families benefit from the proven trustworthiness of women, can have unintended consequences. These programs could be improved by designing and evaluating them together with those women, like Mrs. Roda, who had to default on their micro-credit loans. Understanding what led her to default, and how her husband's exclusion from the program had negative consequences for her whole family, could lead to new improvements in the lives of women, men and their families.
- **Extended family.** The title of this study speaks only of parents and children, mainly because the scope of inquiry had to be finite. And yet extended family members play vital roles. Grandparents, aunts and uncles can be invaluable resources to help hold a family together in times of crisis. The experience in Burkina Faso shows how the steady erosion of the extended family is driving more children to leave home at younger ages. Contributions made by extended family members to raising children in the face of poverty must be valued and reinforced. For example, they should have a clear legal status with respect to the child and a role in planning the child's education.
- **Respecting and involving communities.** It is also vital for project coordinators to show children respect for their communities and cultures, particularly in places where rural communities do not feel valued. Geographic regions that have seen particularly large numbers of children leaving home should be targeted for economic, environmental and cultural investments strengthening the traditional, local economy.
- **Not overshadowing the role of neighbors.** For family and community members to be active participants, rather than beneficiaries, some restraint is needed on the part of project directors. When all goods and services are provided by an outside organization, existing efforts of solidarity among neighbors living in poverty can pale in comparison, robbing the community of a source of pride.

#### e) Making a personal commitment to building partnership

*"Being a project leader is hard work. It means rolling up your sleeves to show people we all have an equal value. If you wear a tie, you make some people feel inferior. You can have more education, but you can't build your relationship with people based on that. You need to trust people. They need to feel that you are a brother, that together we form a community, and that each person's participation is needed. Each person should have a turn to speak. We should all disprove the saying, 'The educated man is not seen with the illiterate.' It's the project leader's*

*responsibility to forge a solid community. To build trust, you have to share what you know with humility."*

- Aurisma Brutus, La Vallée de Jacmel, Haiti

Believing in each person and following through on that belief with a long-term commitment to support people's efforts is vital to overcoming poverty. Because it is unquantifiable, this is rarely mentioned in the context of programs, whether their goals involve poverty eradication or child welfare. And yet this is one of the most common issues addressed by both parents and children living in poverty: the weight of humiliation, the feeling of being mistrusted by the community; the constant lack of self-esteem. All of these factors can drive people deeper into unemployment, addiction and homelessness, contributing to the break-up of a family. Seeking out and highlighting the unseen efforts made by people who are among the least respected is a way to reinforce these efforts and improve their chance of success.

This commitment requires courage and preparation as well. Mr. Hubert Roger, of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, says that even people who are from a very simple background and who ask to visit a shantytown are often so shocked by the conditions that they make a donation and flee, instead of following through on their original hope of offering long-term support. Training and support can help people get past the shock of extreme destitution and join in a long-term partnership.

People with enough financial security may often volunteer their time to anti-poverty projects. There are also many people who cannot afford to volunteer their time, but who agree to work in such projects for very low wages in order to support them.

## **f) Creativity**

*"Our approach of meeting families gradually, with no goal other than to support the reunion of family members in way that would serve both the children and their families, has shaped our way of seeing things. New children come to live in the streets every day, and what they say is opportunistic. If they are offered shelter, they describe themselves as homeless. If they are offered food, they say they are starving. If they are offered training, they say they are ignorant. If they are offered orphanages, they say they have no family. We see so many programs based on urgency that in fact do not have lasting effects on these children. It is the same with their parents. As long as the world reflects their lack of means, they feel incapable. These families are more than their poverty. The children are more than the life they lead in the streets. This is exactly what they tell us, if we make the effort to listen."*

- Patricia and Claude Heyberger, Burkina Faso

Families living in extreme poverty around the world are diverse and no single solution will work for all families, or even for all families in a given community. It is important to envision many different paths to a successful outcome. They may include time for a child outside her or his family. They should include support for all members of the family in ways that enable them to improve their situation, and hopefully to reunite. They may include preparing a child to go to university, or teaching a child a traditional, rural trade. Enabling these families to be involved directly in the planning and evaluation of programs will lead to more creative solutions.

Families in crisis may need to ask for support from non-profit organizations or from government child welfare services. The fear people living in poverty face of losing custody of their children deters them from seeking preventative support that could avert a crisis altogether. Creative alternatives to orphanages or to foster care should be explored, and funding invested in preventative services. New forms of educational intervention and child protection should be developed which will benefit the children and the whole family.

The gradual nature of the approach the Heybergers mention is important. In Haiti as well, poor communities have seen many organizations created – and closed down again relatively quickly. Great hopes greet each new initiative; when a project then ends without a measurable outcome, disappointment is enormous and can compromise people's willingness to invest in the next project created. Fighting poverty is urgent, and we want to make continual headway. But any program intending to reach people in extreme poverty must plan to invest over many years. Initial plans should leave ample room for these people to become partners, contributing their experiences and ideas. It is in the context of this long-term framework that originality can evolve and succeed.

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This study has been a step toward showing what ATD Fourth World has learned from its grassroots actions, and from those of other NGOs. We learned that poverty does separate parents and children, and that this weakens the efforts of families to fight poverty. We learned more about families' lives while working in partnership with them on cultural and educational projects to benefit their children. From our accomplishments, from our mistakes, and from reflecting together with these families, we learned what works best to support families' efforts to remain together.

The next step ahead of us is to further our dialogue with the relevant policy makers to see how these lessons from grassroots actions can help improve policies affecting children and families in poverty.

As long as extreme poverty persists, there will be parents who feel they must entrust their children to others, children who end up in the streets, and child welfare systems that distrust these parents' abilities to raise their children. We must continue to invest in fighting poverty, in ensuring access to quality education for every child, and in creating social justice for all.

## **Appendix: Frequently asked questions**

### **What is the Fourth World Volunteer Corps?**

Some 350 people of many nationalities join this corps for a minimum of two years. Most remain more than ten years. They are united in their common drive to end poverty by building partnerships with people living in extreme poverty and with the rest of society. They live in very poor communities or near centers that welcome people for training. Whatever their responsibilities or seniority, they live on a stipend equivalent to the minimum wage or basic standard of living in the countries to which they are assigned. Some come from a variety of religious traditions; others have no religious affiliation. Their on-going training focuses on learning from people in extreme poverty.

### **What do members of ATD Fourth World do?**

In addition to the Volunteer Corps, there are approximately 100,000 members. Some have experience fighting extreme poverty in their daily lives, and supporting neighbors in difficulty. Others do not live in poverty, but choose to volunteer their time as “allies” who build links between their communities or professions and people in extreme poverty. All these members contribute to shaping ATD Fourth World’s policies and projects.

Together, members run grassroots projects promoting human rights-based development like some of those profiled in this study: The Courtyard of 100 Trades (Burkina Faso), Policy Forums (United Kingdom) and the Street Library program (Haiti, Guatemala, Philippines, United States). They also support and make known work by other non-governmental organizations, such as the Family School in Fond-des-Nègres (Haiti), or the Child Welfare Organizing Project (United States). Other projects may focus on access to decent housing, on links between health and education, or on building a dialogue between educators and parents living in poverty.

Research such as that presented in this report is an on-going part of all of ATD Fourth World’s projects. It is used to raise public awareness of the conditions needed for anti-poverty programs to succeed, and to collaborate with policy-making institutions in ways that give people living in extreme poverty a voice in the decisions that affect their lives.

Other countries where ATD Fourth World is present are: Australia, Belgium, Bolivia, Canada, the Central African Republic, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Kenya, Luxemburg, Madagascar, Mauritius, the Netherlands, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Senegal, Spain, Switzerland, Tanzania and Thailand.

In some countries, the physical infrastructure of ATD Fourth World is as simple as small, communal living quarters for a team of two to six Volunteer Corps members. In other countries, Fourth World Houses exist, offering simple meeting rooms for activities with parents and children, as well as office space for correspondence, research and writing.

ATD Fourth World has an international center in France, where it was founded. A small group of Volunteer Corps members based here full-time welcomes many visitors. At any given time, this center may hold up to 150 people, some involved in research and political representation on behalf of people in extreme poverty, others involved in evaluation and training of grassroots projects. Members of ATD Fourth World, as well as people interested in learning about it, travel here from around the world to research the history of the organization, or to contribute to a variety of projects. Some come as an act of homage to bear witness to the lives of people in extreme poverty.

## **How does a typical project of ATD Fourth World work?**

The Street Library program, which exists in twenty countries on five continents, varies from neighborhood to neighborhood because it is shaped by the children and parents who participate. All Street Libraries provide outdoor reading and cultural activities for children. They may take place: near a garbage dump where children work; in a cemetery where families are living clandestinely; or on the sidewalk in an inner-city area. They are held outdoors on a neutral territory, closest to where the children live or work, in order to make it possible for the most excluded children to participate. Whenever possible, all activities are planned and organized with the children's parents, extended family, or other young people from the community. A typical Street Library takes place at a regular time in a given spot, and begins with children being invited to hear stories and look at books together. Later on, an activity may be introduced involving art, music, science, or perhaps correspondence with children in a Street Library on the other side of the world. By locating the Street Library outdoors, it is also possible to change its location in order to adapt to the situation of the very poorest families. When families are evicted, or displaced by natural disasters, as is all too common, the Street Library may move along with them. Although the Street Library is designed from the bottom up, it is not in fact a "community-based" program, as it follows families and individuals whose place of residence is fluid. Children met through these Street Libraries helped call attention to the need for this study.<sup>193</sup>

## **How did ATD Fourth World start?**

Joseph Wresinski was born in an internment camp in France during World War I. His Polish-Spanish family was extremely poor, and he left school at the age of 13 to help support them. In later years, he received a scholarship to return to school where he studied to become a Catholic priest. When he was assigned to the parish of an emergency housing camp outside Paris in 1956, with the families he met there he founded an organization that later became the International Movement ATD Fourth World. His childhood had showed him that many efforts intended to assist his mother because of her poverty in fact ended up embarrassing her, or worsening her situation. For this reason, he felt the key element for ending poverty was having a Volunteer Corps make a long-term commitment to believe in people in extreme poverty, and to build partnership with them through a variety of projects, such as the Street Libraries. He also felt, despite his personal devotion to his religion, that fighting poverty required a universal campaign, including people of any belief or philosophy.

## **What does "ATD" stand for, and what is the "Fourth World"?**

When Fr. Wresinski first went to register the organization he had founded, French officials turned him away because some of the very poor people on his board had police records. He turned for help to people who were respected in society who would lend their credibility to the organization. It was they who chose the first name: Aide à toute détresse, or "Aid to All Distress." Because the name did not reflect the kind of innovative partnerships Fr. Wresinski was creating, members soon looked for a new name. In exploring the history of the French Revolution, they discovered writings about people who had not been included in any part of society and who had no legal place of residence. They were called the "fourth estate," and enjoyed a brief period of political recognition before sinking back into obscurity. "Fourth World" thus became the new name of the organization, one people could be proud of having chosen themselves, and one used to mean the very poorest people in any part of the world.

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<sup>193</sup> For more information about the Street Library program, see *Unleashing Hidden Potential* in the Bibliography.

In the Philippines, members of ATD Fourth World decided several years ago that in English ATD should stand for “All Together in Dignity.”

### **How is ATD Fourth World funded?**

Its major resources are the commitment of the Volunteer Corps to live on a minimum wage and not having a paid staff.

In the United States, 85% of its income comes from individual donations, 10% from grants by foundations and 5% from sales of books and greeting cards or from fundraising events.

In Burkina Faso, 25% of its annual budget is covered by a grant from UNICEF. The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs provides 8%. About 2% is raised in the country from individual donations or sales of publications. The balance comes from individual donations or grants made in Europe.

In the Philippines, 40% of its income is from donations or grants from within the country. The rest comes from donations made in Europe, with 8.5% being from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

### **Does ATD Fourth World provide emergency aid?**

No. Programs are designed to address long-term issues, like education, training, family reunification, art or poetry workshops, etc. Families living in extreme poverty may be invited to outings and festivals, but will often also help to organize these activities. Emergency support is offered by accompanying people to legal or administrative meetings when appropriate, or by helping people sort through the challenges of homelessness or unemployment. Ms. Hélène Rozet, who authored the chapter on Haiti for this study, writes:

*“Anyone working with people who do not have enough to survive is asked for money all the time. The question touches every person profoundly, as it goes to the right to survival of all. Such a sensitive question is also divisive. How could it be otherwise when almost all the rights of the very poorest people are violated? But I am here for a long time. If I give one person money today, I will be creating jealousy and division among other people. I will also be creating a new dependency, and inviting people to leave behind the networks for survival that they had before meeting me. As a member of ATD Fourth World, I would also be implying that our role is assistance [instead of partnership]. People in extreme poverty endure their misery with an amazing dignity and courage. But they will not stand for unfairness. So our answers must be fair and consistent, with the same answer for each person. We can offer financial help only in very specific situations, such as a health crisis, or a child over the age of 5 who cannot afford to go to school. And because money is so often stolen, it is more prudent for us to pay the fee directly to the health facility or school. It is also important for us to ask even very poor people for a financial contribution for our work, as long as the sum is small enough. It is a way to respect their ambition not to be dependent on charity.”*

### **Links between ATD Fourth World, other non-governmental organizations, and the United Nations**

When Fr. Wresinski first founded ATD Fourth World, he realized how isolated many small anti-poverty efforts are from one another. He began correspondence with organizations and individuals around the world who were also working to build partnership with people in deep poverty. Over the years, this has evolved into a network called the Permanent Forum on Extreme Poverty in the World. Members of this network, who live in

93 different countries, continue to correspond with ATD Fourth World, which publishes a tri-lingual newsletter to share and make known their accomplishments more widely. Members benefit by giving one another ideas and by gaining recognition.

Since ATD Fourth World was first accredited to attend meetings at the UN in 1974, it has involved the diverse NGOs and individuals of the Permanent Forum in many international events linked to the UN.

In 1991, the UN accorded General Consultative Status to the International Movement ATD Fourth World. This Movement also has consultative status with UNICEF, UNESCO, the International Labour Organization, the European Union and the Council of Europe. ATD Fourth World collaborates extensively with more formal networks of NGOs present in these institutions, as well as directly with these international institutions themselves.

*For more information, please see [www.atd-fourthworld.org](http://www.atd-fourthworld.org) and [www.tapori.org](http://www.tapori.org)*

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## How Poverty Separates Parents and Children: A Challenge to Human Rights

No one wants children to suffer the harshness of life in poverty. This can drive some parents to entrust their children to an orphanage or to domestic service employment. There are times when these are the best options available. Outcomes are far worse when children leave of their own accord and end up on their own in the streets. But even in the best of circumstances, children themselves say time and again that something irreplaceable has been lost when they leave their families and their communities. We owe it to these children to innovate better solutions together. Because of ATD Fourth World's grassroots projects supporting very poor families, the United Nations awarded a grant to ATD Fourth World toward a study of the situations separating poor families, and of some possible solutions.

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