

TAKING URGENT ACTION TO ERADICATE POVERTY LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND WHILE ADDRESSING THE CLIMATE CRISIS

CLIMATE CHANGE, POVERTY ERADICATION, AND HUMAN RIGHTS

POLICY BRIEF FROM THE INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENT ATD FOURTH WORLD FOR COP26 – NOVEMBER 2021

- **People and communities living in extreme poverty around the world are the first hit, most hit, and hardest hit by the effects of climate change, yet they are the least responsible for its causes and have the least means to protect themselves from it.** Climate change exacerbates the harm done to people living in poverty. The recent extreme climate events including droughts, fires, floods, hurricanes, and heat waves, have already hit people in poverty by depriving them of their crops, their land, their homes, their livelihood, and their lives.
- **The Covid-19 pandemic has increased poverty all around the world despite hundreds of billions of dollars spent in recovery plans.** An estimated 1 in 6 children — or 356 million globally — lived in extreme poverty before the pandemic, and this is set to worsen significantly according to a 2020 analysis by World Bank Group–UNICEF. The emergence of the coronavirus that has been wreaking havoc on the world has resulted in more than 235 million cases of infection and 4.8 million lives lost, and has exposed blatant social and economic injustices in all countries.
- Philip Alston, then UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, warned in 2019 before the pandemic, "**Climate change [...] risks undoing the last 50 years of progress in development, global health, and poverty reduction**". In October 2020, the current UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Olivier De Schutter, examined "**how the fight against poverty can be combined with the search for a development model that mitigates climate change and halts the erosion of biodiversity**".
- **Our societies treat their poorest members as they treat the planet.** People living in poverty have been exploited for generations and too often abandoned when their ability to work is exhausted. A vast majority of people living in extreme poverty inhabit areas with limited access to clean water and sanitation owing to cost, lack of infrastructure, or denial of services. To earn their living, they work in dangerous conditions, are exposed to health damaging pollutants, and suffer accidents. They have to settle for cheap food lacking in nutrition and full of chemical ingredients.

The poorest people are least responsible for environmental degradation caused by climate change and yet are most affected by its violence

According to the [UN Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021](#), "**In 2020, the global extreme poverty rate rose for the first time in over 20 years. Hundreds of millions of people were pushed back into extreme poverty and chronic hunger.**" Because climate change increases the occurrence of natural disasters and the destruction of crops and cultures, it **affects millions of poor families and communities who rely mostly on local ecosystems for their subsistence livelihoods.** According to the World Bank, **climate change could push more than 120 million additional people into poverty by 2030** if effective actions are not taken immediately.

Climate change constitutes a new violence against people living in poverty. Their situation, wherever they are in the world, is the result of a process of economic and political domination. Social exclusion and the violence resulting from ill-designed policies have violated the political, economic, social, and

cultural rights of people living in poverty, whose lack of political power and agency perpetuate the cycle of disempowerment.

The poorest communities also bear the heaviest brunt of global warming. At the time of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 in the United States, people with resources left the area in advance of the approaching hurricane, while those without resources (largely people in poverty, African Americans, the elderly, and people without private cars) remained trapped as the floodwaters rose. The victims of the hurricane were disproportionately Black. In certain areas of New Orleans, the mortality rate for Black adults was up to four times higher than the mortality rate for white adults.

The poorest people were also left out in post-disaster reconstruction and recovery. Years after Hurricane Katrina, thousands of low-income families in New Orleans still cannot find adequate housing.

Houses refurbished by investors, and apartments and public housing rebuilt into units for rent or sale, are unaffordable to them. While the affluent and tourist areas of the city have been rebuilt, the traditionally under-resourced neighbourhoods remain damaged. In these areas, shops and public services have virtually disappeared, making life even more challenging. **More than fifteen years after the disaster, a generation of young people forcibly displaced has a low level of formal education as a consequence, which maintains them in persistent poverty.**

Clean-energy programmes that are badly designed have adverse consequences on people and communities living in poverty. In many countries, the construction of large-scale hydroelectric dams has entailed forced eviction and

Supporting people living in poverty as actors of change in the preservation of their ecosystems and communities

States have multiple human rights obligations towards their citizens, notably the obligation to ensure adequate responses to the climate crisis. Such responses, through policies and actions, must **recognize and prioritize the poorest people as drivers of change.** One of the key approaches is to seek with the poorest people how to learn from their local, ancestral, and Indigenous knowledge to better build their agency in today's world.

For instance, inhabitants of the Cusco region of Peru, both in the Andean and Amazon areas, have **used their ancestral knowledge to adapt** to the rugged geography and climate variability by developing a wide range of practices that have allowed them to grow crops successfully despite the changing environment. For example, they select crops and varieties resistant to extreme climatic events; they diversify production; they plant in different altitudinal floors; they use tillage systems consistent with soil quality and land geography; they fertilize with natural products; and they transform products, preserving food for times of shortage.

In Madagascar, ecological disaster is happening repeatedly for 12,000 people living in informal

insufficient compensation, sometimes accompanied by corruption and discrimination, which always affects the poorest people the most harshly. This raises serious human rights concerns with respect to local people's loss of land and means of livelihood, and to the severance of cultural connections that are particularly important to Indigenous communities.

Climate actions pursuing the prospect of a green economy sometimes fail to take account of their social impacts on vulnerable populations. For example, a community of seventy families in the Mekong Delta used to earn their living by picking waste and recycling materials. A new waste-processing plant has eliminated their livelihood while hiring only 15 of the 150 adults for odd jobs and having no plans to provide skills training for the others.

settlements in a flood-prone area. In extreme conditions of survival, they seek to **take care of one another, and they manage to make life possible.** This also involves taking care of their environment with often derisory means, like recycling plastic bottles and the few other recoverable materials they take from a nearby landfill. *"Every year, we dig channels; we put down boards to walk on, so that at least children can go to school without risking their lives. But the water comes back constantly and our houses, built of dry earth bricks, disintegrate in the water. It never ends. We live in the water; we sleep in the water."* Young people in the neighbourhood raised the boards so people can circulate even when there is water. Knowing that the same thing would have to be done every year, they looked for more durable solutions. Young Malagasy engineers showed them how to turn the collected plastic waste into building blocks. They have now paved the first 150 metres of a passage that runs through the area.

It is essential not to leave them on their own; it is essential to learn from their struggles and expertise.

Creating spaces for participation and empowerment of the most vulnerable communities

At its core, the International Movement **ATD Fourth World encourages the direct participation of people living in poverty** by creating safe spaces where communities with the experience of poverty, discrimination, and violence can express their knowledge without fear or stigma.

One such transformative action led by ATD Fourth World worldwide is the *People's University*. One of the themes

discussed in People's University sessions in France was the climate crisis. Even though the climate is temperate in France and the standard of living is high, the poorest people there are already suffering from inadequate living conditions and lack of access to affordable, clean energy. These are aggravated by the effects of climate change, including the heat waves that have recently hit Europe.

"I live in a rented house. It is very badly insulated. Moisture comes in; it takes off the paint. If we do not get covered, we get sick (with asthma or osteoarthritis, for example). But at the same time, the first environmentalists — I think it's poor people. Because it is they who collect everything that can be recycled including copper, aluminium, and scrap metal. And so, we are the first recyclers. It goes back far."

ATD Fourth World activists with a direct experience of poverty expressed their strong political conscience: "Ecology also means taking care of people, not putting them aside. How many times have we been made guilty while those who live in excess deprive poor people of what is necessary. We must involve the

poorest people in all human projects, as is being done in the [Zero long-term unemployment zones](#). Protecting the environment must also be a struggle for people and against violence, stigmatization, and having to live in the cold in rotten housing. We must put an end to this discrepancy."

Hearing these voices in the global discussion is crucial to tackling climate change in an effort to eradicate poverty. It allows **local communities to participate in designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating adaptation and mitigation strategies that affect their lives.**

Recommendations for inclusive climate action

Policies and mechanisms put in place should follow a human-rights-based-approach. **Human rights and poverty eradication must be explicitly mentioned in the different documents produced under the Paris Agreement.** This would allow adaptation and mitigation strategies, as well as mechanisms to remedy loss and damages, to be based on the UN Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights.

- **Recommendation No. 1: Particular attention to be paid to the poorest 20 percent to ensure that no one is left behind**

To work towards a sustainable future that is respectful of the planet and leaves no one behind, it is crucial to fully implement the Paris Agreement and all the states' obligations including proper loss and damage compensation. **As eradication of poverty is clearly quoted in the agreement, it should be an opportunity to integrate actions to eradicate poverty in most of the measures.**

Parties must strive to design policies and programmes that accelerate the eradication of poverty. Thus, it is imperative that all measures taken under the nationally determined contributions (NDCs) and National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPAs) developed by Parties to the Paris Agreement take into account the improvement of quality of life of the most vulnerable communities, particularly those living in poverty.

The **first global stocktaking that will be published in 2023 must include** for each country **the emissions of the different categories of population** (for example, the poorest 20 percent and the richest 20 percent), the measures that **improve the quality of life of people living in extreme poverty** and the measures that have the opposite effects, and the **measures taken to ensure participation of people living in extreme poverty.**

- **Recommendation No. 2: Tackle climate change in partnership with people in poverty**

Governments must reach out to the people and communities who are most and first affected by climate change events and involve them as stakeholders and partners to ensure that actions taken to address climate change are inclusive.

Governments must support the poorest people in their daily resistance and their own actions against climate change, **promote local knowledge** gathered by these communities, and **create spaces for participation and empowerment.**

Parties must devote more efforts to soliciting public support in favour of climate action.

- **Recommendation No. 3: Ensure that funds reach the most vulnerable**

Even though this has been clearly required by the Paris Agreement, poverty eradication is poorly implemented by the Parties. It must be systematically included in climate change measures and actions. **The hundreds of billions that will be spent to implement the Paris Agreement must be an opportunity to accelerate poverty eradication and access to basic human rights.**

In the area of financing, an accountability mechanism is needed that allows affected people to **obtain remedy for the damage caused by different projects** implemented all around the world and not only those related to climate. It is equally crucial to consider the non-economic impact of the projects, such as disruption of support networks, loss of livelihood, and destruction of culturally important sites. **OECD environmental and social rules must be reinforced to contribute to poverty eradication.**

- **Recommendation No. 4: Establish social protection floors in all countries**

Stronger social protection, designed with the contribution of the people most affected by climate change, should be implemented in all countries, as encouraged by ILO Recommendation No. 202 on establishing social protection floors. The holistic knowledge gained through participatory actions and research should feed into the design of social protection systems that protect both the economic and social rights of the poorest people, so their capacity to face climate disruption is strengthened. These should be guided by the principles of dignity, equal treatment, inclusion (leaving no one behind), solidarity, and participation.

- **Recommendation No. 5: Ensure that people in poverty are able to benefit from training and job creation in the context of a just transition to a green economy**

The economy must be more respectful of people and the earth. According to the [ILO's World Employment and Social Outlook 2018](#), a green economy could create 24 million new jobs annually.

Nationally determined contributions (NDCs) must include provisions and budgets focusing on the most vulnerable communities, particularly those living in poverty, ensuring that they benefit from training and job creation programmes in the context of transitioning to a green economy.

Parties must ensure that people living in poverty have access to technological and scientific developments and products that can improve the quality of their housing, including its energy efficiency.

"IT'S TIME TO ACT

to avoid a 'climate apartheid' scenario where the wealthy pay to escape overheating, hunger, and conflict while the rest of the world is left to suffer" (Philip Alston, June 2019)

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The International Movement ATD (All Together in Dignity) Fourth World is a movement of solidarity among and in collaboration with the most excluded families around the world. Founded in 1957 by Joseph Wresinski in France, ATD Fourth World, active in 34 countries, brings together people from different cultures and social classes. With the goal of leaving no one behind, all our projects are designed and planned with people living in persistent poverty and aim to bring their voices to all decision-making spheres, including at the global level.

ATD Fourth World has had general consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council since 1991 and

associate status with UNESCO since 1970. It has permanent delegations at the European Union and the Council of Europe.

It is also recognized by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF).

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