

# **BUILDING A FUTURE WITHOUT POVERTY FOR CHILDREN: PARENTS AND SOCIETY TOGETHER**



« The fundamental deprivation of human rights is manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes options significant and actions effective. » *Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism*

« Poor people do not give up easily, especially where children are concerned [...] To recognise their struggle would amount to a form of forgiveness, but who recognises such heroic efforts? » *Joseph Wresinski, founder of ATD Fourth World Movement*



# SUMMARY

**"What are we doing wrong? Despite all our efforts, our children are experiencing the same poverty as we are."** It was with indignation, frustration, and incomprehension that, in 2019, parents of all ages living in poverty contacted ATD Fourth World. Their challenge became the common thread of an action-research project. This report puts forward the results of the participatory research entitled "Family Advocacy Project", presented on 20 November 2023.

In Belgium, France, the Netherlands<sup>1</sup>, Poland, Spain<sup>2</sup>, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, young parents living in poverty formed groups in the framework of ATD Fourth World to take up the challenge. From the outset, academics from a variety of disciplines joined in the research to combine their knowledge with that of the parents and to explore further together.

The participatory action-research evolved over the course of the process. It drew on the parents' reflections and led them to think more deeply to answer the question presented on 20 November: **"What do we need to build a future without poverty for children?"** The parents spoke of what it cost them to participate in this research that stirred up their pain and trauma and that evoked the desire for change in the lives of their children, in their own family life, and in that of other parents and children. The work led to proposals for concrete change in the field of child protection, presented at the beginning of this document. Also in the report are details of the method used.

Throughout the action-research project, cross-cutting aspects enriched the participants' thinking and served as the basis for the proposals. These included the long-term disruption in the family caused by placement and the failure of child-protection services to respect the fundamental rights of parents and children and to seek their participation in decisions affecting them. It is a question of democracy.

For parents, the first change is the need to make poverty visible by highlighting the consequences of it being made invisible; for example, unrecognised institutional and social maltreatment and the suffering of people living in unsafe conditions. Proposals included changing the name of the child-protection service and overhauling training by including people living in extreme poverty as instructors. If change is to be effective, training must target not only social workers but also judges, lawyers, mediators, and parents. Parents need to learn from one another about their rights and gain confidence in their abilities. This approach to training would provide non-intrusive help and encourage the development of each individual's potential.

The second change concerns the legal area of child protection. Current laws and institutions tend to weaken the essential bonds between children and their parents and family life. The parents are calling for changes in the way the system operates, including adversarial debate on equal terms at court hearings, participation in the drafting of social reports, and restructuring visiting rights to preserve family ties. These profound cultural shifts would facilitate the return of children to the home.

<sup>1</sup> The Netherlands group did not take part in the whole process because they were working on a book on the right to protection of the family, *Recht op bescherming van het gezin : Schrijvende armoede en uithuisplaatsing van kinderen*. (The Right to Family Protection: Extreme poverty and child placement)

<sup>2</sup> Since 2023, the group in Spain has been conducting research using the Merging of Knowledge approach and has continued this work independently. They presented it on 14 March 2023.



# CONTENTS

<b>SUMMARY</b> .....	3
<b>1- INTRODUCTION</b> .....	6
<b>2- CHANGING CHILD PROTECTION IN EUROPE</b> .....	10
Proposals put forward by participants in the Family Advocacy Project	
<b>1- Taking the struggle to overcome poverty into account in the field of child protection.</b> .....	11
Contributions from Tammy Mayes, Cécile Lavergne, and Joana Jaquemet	
Proposals for Change: - Training together - Help and support that empowers people to take action - Transforming child-protection institutions	
Guests' and participants' reactions to the proposals	
<b>2- Child-protection law</b> .....	29
Contributions from Anne-Catherine Rasson, Catherine Le Pecheur, and Carine Baiwir	
Proposals for Change: - Review child-protection files - Ensure that placements are temporary - A fairer adversarial hearing	
Guests' and participants' reactions to the proposals	
<b>Diagram of the proposals for change</b> .....	43
<b>3- METHODOLOGY</b> .....	44
<b>HOW DID WE ARRIVE AT THE PROPOSALS FOR CHANGE?</b>	
1- The Family Advocacy Project research programme from 2019 to 2023	
<b>Diagram of the research process</b> .....	51
2- The methodology based on the narratives and their analysis	
3- Extracts from the analysis of the narratives using the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty framework	
Hidden Dimensions of Poverty diagram	
4- A look at the methodology for building pathways for change	
5- Extracts from discussions about the underlying causes of the invisibilisation of poverty	
6- Extracts from discussions on the consequences of the removal of children from the care of the parents	
<b>4- VIEWPOINT</b> .....	60
<b>OF THE FAMILY ADVOCACY PROJECT COORDINATING TEAM:</b>	
cross-cutting issues that emerged	
1- Passing on a family history in the context of child protection	
2- Lack of democracy in child protection: one of the sources of institutional maltreatment	
3- The role of fathers in child protection	
<b>5- CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES</b> by Bruno Dabout .....	68
<b>ANNEXES</b> .....	74
Creative expressions by two participants in the Family Advocacy Project	
Participants in the Family Advocacy Project	
Bibliography	
Acknowledgements	

# 1- INTRODUCTION



This research project was launched in response to the concerns of parents living in extreme poverty, who have asked:

**"What are we doing wrong? Despite all our efforts, our children are experiencing the same poverty as we are."**

**"Will our children inherit the fruits of our efforts, or will they live in the same poverty as we do?"**

What are parents doing to ensure that their children do not live in poverty as they themselves do?

Why are their efforts to overcome extreme poverty not enough to ensure that their children have a future without poverty?

These questions have been central to ATD Fourth World from the beginning. They have to be raised regularly to challenge society with the new generation of people experiencing poverty as we work with them to overcome it.

Today, groups of young parents in some European countries are taking up this challenge. From the outset, they have said: "We're willing to talk about what we're doing for our children's future, but it's a difficult subject because it's painful — we face so many obstacles, we experience so many failures and, above all, humiliation. If we participate, it's so that things can change, not just for us but for all the other parents, for all the children."

This aspiration raised a new question to be addressed by our research:

**What changes are** needed to ensure that parents' efforts succeed?

This question gave us a goal, a challenge to take up: to meet expectations for a future without poverty for children. **World Children's Day, 20 November 2023**, was selected as the occasion to disseminate the results of this three-year research project.

This document presents the researchers' proposals for change that were put forward on that day. It explains the method used over the course of the project, and it reports on the coordinating team's observations as the work progressed.

On several occasions, the coordinating team asked participants what the title of the research project should be. From among the many issues and elements suggested, they opted for **Family Advocacy Project** to represent a continuing activity with parents committed to advocating for others who have difficult lives.

The research was carried out in different countries with different laws and institutions. The participants did not speak the same language, and parents who live in extreme poverty have a very tight schedule keeping many obligatory appointments that leave them little time for activism or participation in civil society. The project had to work within all these parameters. Each meeting led to new discussions, forcing the facilitators to be flexible in planning subsequent meetings right up to the development of the proposals for change.

### **Looking at poverty through the eyes of parents**

This research is, first and foremost, the work of parents experiencing poverty. There were just over fifty of them from seven countries, joined by eight academics from different disciplines (see page 77). The academics agreed to intersect their knowledge with the parents' knowledge so together they could find the right words to express issues that have never been explicitly addressed, gain a better understanding of what poverty entails, dare to envision change, and dare to talk about a future without poverty for children.

These parents are rarely heard, especially individually, but together they led the discussions to develop proposals for policies that would ensure the rights to housing, work, health, and education. They examined these issues through the lens of their own lives, through aspects that are invisible to others, and through their **daily struggle** to exercise these basic rights and obtain their basic needs.

They also led the research to include **child-protection policy**, which is not usually associated with anti-poverty policies. For the parents in all the countries participating in this project, child-protection measures play a major role in their lives and in their history, often over several generations. For example, when they are in a difficult situation, they rarely ask for help because they fear they will be judged and misunderstood, and that the situation will be used against them and their children placed in care.

Being deprived of the opportunity to bring up one's children because of child-protection measures is a trauma suffered not only by individuals, but also by an entire community. It runs deeper than most people know and is a source of exclusion and entrapment in the vicious cycle of poverty.

The parents often said, "They don't understand us", "They don't listen to us", "They don't see everything we do", and "When we say something it backfires, so we keep quiet". Poverty is rarely seen and heard as people experience it, through the way it has shaped their identity and their daily efforts to cope with life and survive. At the end of the research, this was referred to as **the invisibilisation of poverty**.

### **Making the hidden aspects of poverty visible**

To make these aspects of poverty visible, we used as a framework the research entitled "**The Hidden Dimensions of Poverty**".<sup>3</sup> an international participatory study conducted by ATD Fourth World and Oxford University. It enabled us to identify the resistance of families, their suffering, and their disempowerment. The parents described not only the material deprivation but also the social and institutional maltreatment they had suffered. The research on the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty made it possible to understand not only poverty in a broad sense, but also the specific lived experience of people in poverty.

### **If we really want things to change, we have to tackle the causes**

The fact that not all aspects of the experience of poverty are taken into

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Bray, Robert Walker, Marianne De Laat, Xavier Godinot, Alberto Ugarte, International Movement ATD-Quart Monde. The Hidden Dimensions of Poverty (International participatory research conducted by ATD Fourth World and Oxford University, 2019)

account has been identified as a major cause of poverty being locked in from one generation to the next. Throughout the research, the parents said: "We are not just users or beneficiaries, we are people and — for the rest of our lives — parents; we carry our children inside us, we experience emotions, we have family relationships, social relationships, values, life experience, knowledge, and hopes for our children."

Another major cause of children being trapped in poverty from one generation to the next is the law governing child protection. We cannot ignore the fact that certain child-protection laws, such as adoption without consent in the United Kingdom, are inhumane, as if from another time when people were of little importance. We should also mention general guardianship in Switzerland, which deprives parents of their freedom to raise their children. But even without going that far, child-protection measures in other countries do not guarantee children a future without poverty.

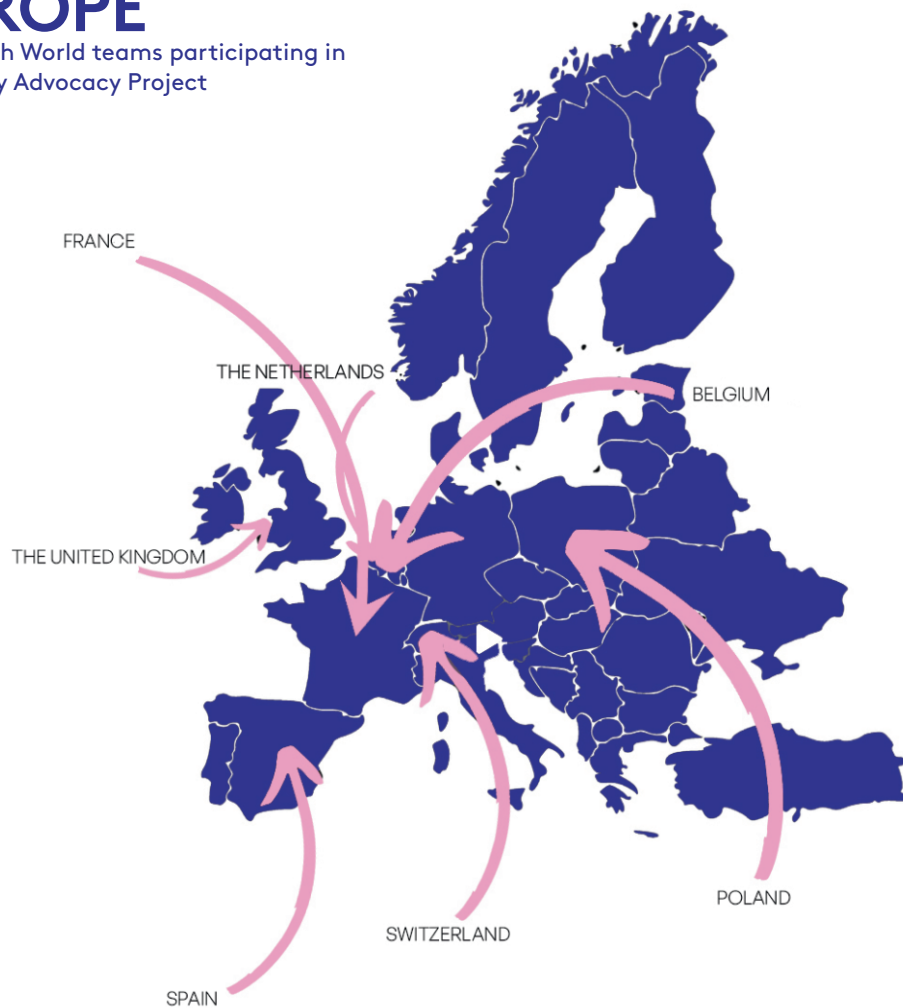
### Developing proposals for change

It was in these two areas — the invisibilisation of poverty and child-protection law — that the participants worked to develop proposals for change.

For the proposals to be carried out, everyone's help and expertise is needed.

## EUROPE

ATD Fourth World teams participating in the Family Advocacy Project



2-

# CHANGING CHILD PROTECTION IN EUROPE

Proposals put forward by  
participants in the Family  
Advocacy Project

As the research progressed, the participants gradually identified two major areas where change is needed in the field of child protection. The first is the invisibilisation of poverty: not only must parents' struggles to overcome poverty be taken into account, but so must national and European policies that are not directly linked with child protection. The second is the law, which must be changed to ensure that parents living in poverty can actually exercise their fundamental rights and that laws are enforced.

To go as far as possible in developing proposals for change in these areas, the participants split each area into three workshops. Regarding the invisibilisation of poverty, they worked on training, assistance, and institutions. Regarding the law, they worked on child-protection files, temporary placements, and court hearings. While it was more efficient to work this way, it should be emphasised that the workshops were interdependent, and the participants in each workshop referred to the work of the others. For example, assistance cannot possibly empower parents and professionals unless changes are made in how child-protection professionals are trained and how the institutions are organised. For placements to be truly temporary, the child-protection file must be constituted differently and accessible to all stakeholders. The hearing before the judge should be more balanced, with both parties allowed to tell their side of the story. As a result of this collaboration, **the proposals form a coherent whole.**

The proposals were made public on 20 November 2023, and some public reactions appear at the end of each of the two sections of this part of the report.

The proposals begin with a statement by the parents about what their lives are really like. They use the word "we", which includes many other parents living in poverty. The proposals were written by all the participants — parents, academics, allies, and facilitators from the local teams, using the methodology explained in section 3 (starting on page 44).

## 1- TAKING THE STRUGGLE TO OVERCOME POVERTY INTO ACCOUNT IN THE FIELD OF CHILD PROTECTION

When we analysed parents' accounts of their struggles using the framework of the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty research (see page 54), a number of dimensions came to the fore: suffering, disempowerment, resistance, institutional and social maltreatment, and unrecognised contributions. These were seen **as obstacles that trap** people in poverty.

Because **society does not see these dimensions**, there is no real understanding of the problems people living in extreme poverty face on a daily basis. They are not recognised as being mistreated, and their **suffering** is not acknowledged. **Their efforts and resistance** also go unrecognised or are underestimated. Because their suffering and resistance are not recognised, they are not taken into account by child-protection personnel. The parents explained that this denial or ignorance increased their suffering. And the more you suffer, the less you feel able to do something about it. **It's a vicious cycle.** Dimensions that are hidden or invisible cannot be taken into consideration in the struggle against poverty and, consequently, in building a future without poverty.

Three presentations, the first by a Fourth World activist from the United Kingdom, the second by a French academic and philosopher, and the third by a Swiss member of the ATD Fourth World Volunteer Corps, revisit and expand on the lines of thought that have run through the research and have made it possible to get to the heart of the issue.

## Poverty is not neglect

Tammy Mayes, *Fourth World activist, United Kingdom*

I would like to share three things with you:

First, **poverty is not a choice**. Nobody chooses poverty.

Second, while some people believe poverty is neglect, it is not. Most parents would rather go without so their children have everything.

Third, while a lack of resources may result in neglect by a very small proportion of people living in poverty, does that make them bad parents? No. **But living in poverty makes it more difficult to be a parent.**

Do you need money to love?

Do you need money to be a parent?

Do children need to have a day out every weekend and public holiday? No, it's society that thinks so.

There's nothing wrong with spending time with your family at home; you can do arts and crafts, spend the weekend in pyjamas watching films and eating sweets and popcorn just like at the cinema, but it's cheaper than going to the cinema! Society thinks that people living in poverty should not own a television, not because it's bad, but because television is not considered a necessity.

People don't choose to live in poverty; we don't choose for our children to be disabled. We don't choose to struggle every day just for the fun of it. No, but we face up to it each day. No one cares about us, but we are all people! We are all human! We are important, not just to our families but also to society. We are not a number, and we are definitely not people who deserve the discrimination that we receive.

**Just because we live in poverty doesn't mean we don't have human rights or aspirations.**

When you are in poverty, you are invisible, you are isolated, you are discriminated against. Not just in society in general but in health treatment as well. You are judged for everything, including using a food bank. You are judged if you buy presents for birthdays and Christmas when you don't have enough money to heat your home. But children need presents, even if it is little ones. People in poverty budget everything to try to do all the things society thinks we should not do.

Another question is: Do you need money to teach your children right from wrong? No, but you need money to live, and it's not the parents' fault that they live in poverty. What you don't see is us trying to better ourselves; you don't see our tears at night. (See Tammy Mayes's poem on page 75)

## Political Philosophy: **Knowledge-related injustices and in particular, injustice of transmission**

*Cécile Lavergne, philosopher, lecturer at the University of Lille, Department of Social and Political Philosophy*

People experiencing poverty suffer from the fact that their contributions are not recognised. Their knowledge in terms of education, in particular, is often rendered invisible. This causes them harm, produces suffering and can give rise to a feeling of discouragement and powerlessness. In social and political philosophy, a British philosopher has put a name to these wrongs. Miranda Fricker calls them "epistemic injustices" or "knowledge-related injustices". What is denied to people living in poverty when they suffer these injustices is the recognition that they are the bearers and producers of knowledge.

We have just published the work of a social philosophy seminar conducted with a participatory approach by ATD Fourth World. One part of this publication addresses the question of knowledge-related injustices. Chapter IV addresses the injustice of transmission, a concept that emerged from an analysis by Fourth World activists, particularly in relation to our discussions on child placement.

"We call *injustice of transmission* a form of knowledge-related injustice when it concerns intergenerational transmission, that is, the impossibility of transmitting one's knowledge to younger people in one's family, community, occupation, or environment. **This particular form of injustice affects the ability of people living in poverty to pass on their history, to build an identity, and to become part of a shared history.**"<sup>4</sup>

The accounts given during the Family Advocacy Project (see section 3, starting page 45) are full of injustices of transmission. Parents always have to prove that they are good parents, that they are doing the right thing. They are constantly reminded of what they should and shouldn't do. Under constant scrutiny, they can't pass on what they know to their children, what's important to them: their values and also how to grow up. They are also often prevented from expressing their feelings of love, affection, and attention. This can lead to what we might call **a form of emotional sterilisation**: "We no longer feel entitled to express our feelings about our children, or in our relationships with different institutions. We hide our feelings, because we're afraid they will be used against us." This injustice is therefore deeply rooted in affectivity, in the sphere of feelings. As we wrote in the book on social philosophy, this inability to express feelings lies deep in many placements in France, as reported by activists. It widens the gap between parents and children. As well as making all the parents' educational knowledge and know-how invisible, "this disconnect deprives parents of a major reason for their daily efforts." (p 177), Injustice of transmission also deprives children of an understanding of the struggle waged by their parents, an understanding on which the children could have built, taken pride in, and found resources to change their lives and work to overcome poverty.

Identifying and combating this injustice means working to restore real opportunities for families to transmit their heritage and build their own history through family ties.

<sup>4</sup> François Jomini, David Jousset, Fred Poché, and Bruno Tardieu, *Pour une nouvelle philosophie sociale. Transformer la société à partir des plus pauvres* (Le Bord de l'eau, 2023)

## The power of a group to make visible what has been rendered invisible

Joana Jaquemet, *member of the Volunteer Corps, ATD Fourth World Switzerland*

We invited young parents with experience of poverty to take part in the Family Advocacy Project. They formed a group, and I discovered **how the strength of a group can make visible what has been invisible.**

First I saw how, for parents with experience of poverty, getting together as peers gives them a place where they feel confident and free to express their feelings, where they can put their suffering into words, where they can be themselves. This allows them to see themselves in other parents and feel less alone in what they are going through. And it gives them strength in the struggles and resistance they share. The parents listen to one another, understand one another, sometimes offering advice or strategies; they help one another. And not just at our meetings at ATD Fourth World: they have built real friendships and have often expressed how the Family Advocacy Project was good for them and gave them strength in their daily struggles.

It takes strength to face up to so many injustices as parents, and I've seen the parents in our group gain the confidence to speak out, to take charge not only of their own struggles but also those of other parents. They have grown as activists in a way that has really amazed me, and they have worked with academics and professionals as well. **An initiative like the Family Advocacy Project is a real university which should be recognised and valued.**

**Together, the parents bring invisible knowledge to light.** They allow us to go ever further in our understanding of what living in poverty is really like, of their suffering but also their resistance. They force us to weigh each word and look closely at each word to determine what it really means. For example, the term "vicious cycle" is used very often. At a meeting in Switzerland in September, a young father in our group used this term, putting at the centre of his concerns the urgent need to "break the vicious cycle of poverty". But in saying this, he isolated the word "vicious", saying, "It's vicious, the system is vicious." And at the same time, he told us: "There's no point in saying words if you don't know what they mean." So he came back with a definition of the word "vicious": "It means 'with bad intentions'," he said, adding, "The system doesn't work for the good of the people, it undermines people." That gave us a completely different understanding of the term 'vicious cycle', which we use all the time today, sometimes without knowing what it really means.

It is the strength of a group such as the Family Advocacy Project that makes visible what has been invisible: emotions, suffering, struggle, individual and collective resistance, and the knowledge of people who have experienced poverty.



# PROPOSALS FOR CHANGE

To ensure that child-protection services take into account the challenges faced by people living in poverty and how they struggle to overcome poverty, the parents participating in the Family Advocacy Project put forward proposals for change in three areas: (1) training not just for professionals but for everyone concerned; (2) help and support that empowers people; and (3) transforming child-protection institutions.

## TRAINING TOGETHER

### *What the parents say*

*Far too often, professionals make rapid decisions that can lead to placing our children in care. These decisions are made when they don't understand how we live, how we act or react, or how we behave. We have to hide our emotions. We live in fear, and feel judged and diminished because social workers too often blame us for what we do poorly and fail to encourage us for what we do well. All too often, we perceive professionals' comments as threats. They don't understand why it's important for us to be accompanied by people we can trust when we deal with professionals.*

### *Proposals for change in the area of training*

1) Given these observations, it is necessary to introduce a module into **initial and ongoing training of child-protection professionals that would include people who have lived experience of poverty**. The training would aim to improve the understanding of persistent poverty and its consequences while improving interactions between parents and professionals. It would target all professionals involved in child protection (judges, social workers, foster families, adoptive families, and lawyers) and, more widely, all professionals involved with children's futures. It is important for children to see more peaceful, positive, and constructive relationships between their parents and professionals. Professionals need to understand that they must take time with

parents to build trust and forge a partnership.

This training would help parents feel respected, heard, recognised, and supported in getting the help they want.

To achieve greater knowledge-related justice, the training must transform the relationship between families and professionals at different levels so that it becomes one of listening and cooperation, and of considering families as bearers of knowledge and resources.

It should also help parents — and professionals as well — to feel less afraid, and ultimately help the children and help the families feel supported so they can stay together. The institution must be adapted to meet this need for training.

2) Parents living in poverty need to learn **about their rights** so that they can defend themselves, speak out, and remain empowered.

3) Finally, parents suffer from the negative way in which they are viewed by society, which has unconscious and age-old prejudices about the experience of poverty. It is therefore important to **train the media too**, because the media can bring about change.

But talking to the media takes preparation. In the United Kingdom, activists are learning how to speak with journalists in a way that doesn't get too personal but still gets a message across. The media play an important role in how people experiencing poverty are perceived by others. That perception leads to policies and practices that affect the lives of people who are experiencing poverty.

#### Examples of good practice

— In Belgium, the Agora group (see page 33), provides a place where social workers in youth welfare and activists from anti-poverty organisations can talk and work together. When new laws or regulations are passed or issued, they review them together to see if they are going in the right direction. It's not a training centre as such, but what the parents contribute helps the social workers move forward. After that, they have to encourage their agencies to move forward, which is not always easy.

— In the United Kingdom, activists with lived experience of poverty have been training social work students for a number of years. They draw lessons from their experience: "The majority of social workers do harm, but if you say that outright, there will be no dialogue. We used to confront them and lecture them, but that simply didn't work. What we're trying to do now is work with the social workers, engage with them, and learn together. We start by asking them what they think poverty is, and what purpose they think social work serves, so that we can have a conversation together. We also share good practices showing where social workers develop positive relationships with parents and where, on both sides, we respect that we are all working for the children's best interests. We have also talked about education. It's broader than just training."

## HELP AND SUPPORT THAT EMPOWERS PEOPLE TO TAKE ACTION

To build a future without poverty for children, the assistance provided must recognise parents' skills and empower them.

Children's rights are often ignored. In particular, the right to protection of family life for children living in poverty is not respected. Parents say, "Our families' quality of life is not taken into account. We are not seen as families who need help or support, but as parents who have failed." This perception distorts relationships between parents and professionals and becomes a pretext for continuing to give institutions power over parents.

All the hidden dimensions of poverty must be considered, because often the people who make decisions don't know what poverty is and families don't get the help they need.

Parents face situations where they are monitored and controlled. Can help be considered help when it's tightly controlled? Or, when people ask for help and that help is used against them — is that really help? What kind of help do parents need to be supported?

### 1 ) Good support is based on a good relationship between the professional and the parents

#### *What the parents say*

*Help works if there is a relationship of trust and respect rather than a relationship of surveillance. If we are not trusted, how can we trust ourselves?*

*We feel confident when we can communicate with the professional and when the professional takes us into consideration.*

*It takes time to build trust because we have the trauma of placement (sometimes there have been placements for three generations), and on top of that, we are made to feel, or we are even told, that because we were placed, we won't be able to look after our child. The professionals frighten us; they're people like us but they position themselves as superior. We may end up pretending to do certain things just to satisfy them.*

*Help works if your needs are understood and you receive effective support.*

*Our needs can be very concrete, such as learning how to set limits for our children, how to organise the house properly, and how to cook.*

*Help has to be tailored to each family, and that takes time, especially when you have a disabled child.*

*We're afraid to ask for help because it can backfire.*

*We have negative experiences, such as when we are the last to know about something that concerns our children. For example, if something happens at school, the school will call the foster family, and the foster family will call the supervisory agency, because the foster family cannot call the parents directly. Ultimately, the parents will be the last to be informed.*

*We also have positive experiences when we are with professionals who listen to us and who understand that there are parents behind the child. Parents tell us that some professionals might ask, "Do you mind if I postpone the visit because the children have a show to put on?" They ask us first. We can even tell them if they're making a mistake. If they make a mistake, they apologise to us. It's about working well together so that the children come back home. They say, "My role is to help you pave the way so the children can grow up with you." When someone says that to you, you immediately feel confident.*

*In some countries, we have the right to be accompanied when we meet with social workers. The support is meant to help us understand the conversation, on the spot or afterwards, and to give us confidence. It's an opportunity to understand our situation better, feel more confident, and assert our autonomy. One mother said: "If ATD Fourth World isn't behind me, I lose my self-confidence and can't attend the meeting. Sometimes I don't dare ask to be accompanied because I don't know what the professional's reaction will be. It could backfire."*

*Sometimes we are accompanied by a person of our choice whom we trust, and this has been used against us. We're criticised for it, told we're weak, that we lack autonomy, except that autonomy is precisely about making choices like deciding whether or not to be accompanied. We are asked to be autonomous to do what we are told, but we are denied the autonomy to make our own choices.*

### **Proposals for change in the area of help and support**

- Parents take the lead, and social workers support them.
- Professionals must recognise the parents as people with parenting skills, and parents must be able to express their expectations and needs.
- Professionals ask the parents' opinion before doing things that affect the children's daily lives and their relationship with their family.
- Everyone who comes to help a family takes the time to look at the situation as a whole and really listen to what the family has to say. They should focus on the child's best interests, seeing the child as part of the family and thinking about the family as a whole.

## **2 ) Real help requires professionals who understand poverty and how it affects family life**

### **What the parents say**

*The professionals don't always understand what it's like to live in poverty, how difficult it is to see our children when they have been placed outside the family, and the demands made on us.*

*Sometimes we need financial support to visit our children when they are placed far from home. We need consistent support, such as a monthly transport pass; otherwise, we sometimes have to cheat and not pay the fare. One mother had to choose between eating and visiting her daughter. If there's a transport strike and we don't turn up, we're labelled as not wanting to see our child.*

*One mother states, "I was asked to get treatment and psychological help, so I did. I've been stable for five years, but my children haven't returned. I think it's*

*important that the judge realises what he's requiring of us. I've been asked to find accommodation, but I've been refused social housing four times."*

*People often forget that we need time to adapt when our living conditions change or when we have to meet requirements before or after a placement. One couple told us, "We were moved all over the place; we were used to living in one room. And then, when we got a place to live, we only lived in one room, even though we had plenty of space, but we couldn't adjust to it. When you've been on the streets for ten years and you end up in a house, it takes time to get used to it. It takes time to take charge of your life and the life of your child."*

*It also takes time to get used to a placement and to rethink your life. As one father put it, "I found myself waking up at night because I could hear my children crying. In fact, they were gone!"*

### **Proposals for change in the area of help and support**

Professionals must receive ongoing training in what it is really like to live in extreme poverty and how it affects family life.

We have to bear in mind that a difficult life means taking time:

- time to build trusting relationships with practitioners;
- time to meet the conditions imposed to preserve the bond between parents and children or for the children to return home;
- time for parents to adapt to involuntary changes in their lives.

In an emergency however, parents may need help straight away, not after the next court hearing.

### **Examples of best practice**

#### **Support families**

*In Flanders, some organisations (Home Start and Kauwenberg Centre, for example) have been bringing families together for over 25 years.*

*There is no judicial intervention; the parents decide and agree voluntarily and for specific situations.*

*Families can send their children to support families for weekends, holidays, or more regular periods.*

*The child's parents and the parents in the support family act by mutual agreement; the support family always asks the parents' permission before doing anything with their children. The families have mutual trust and respect, and friendships are maintained even after many years.*

*The idea is that families living in poverty who do not always have a support network (family or friends) can find help in taking care of their children when things get too difficult. For this to work, parents need to have confidence in the associations that work with the families. Support families are selected by the associations and receive training based on two fundamental principles: (1) Support families do not judge the parents; (2) Support families recognise that parents are not incompetent but simply need some help.*

The "**Un temps pour nous**" (**A Time for Us**) project in Verviers, Wallonia: This is a partnership between ATD Fourth World and a local service agency. To preserve and strengthen the parent-child bond, weekends are organised with parents and their children placed outside the family home. On these weekends, there is no social service supervision. At the end of the weekend, a report is drawn up jointly with the families.

In another town, there is a residential centre with a unit where parents can look after their child in decent accommodations if they don't have any themselves.

There are also **family holidays** organised by ATD Fourth World or other organisations where families, including families with children in foster care, can spend time together in a different environment and in an organised setting. These holidays provide an opportunity to bring parents and children together, to strengthen the bond between parents and children in care, and to spend some quality time together. The holidays are planned and evaluated in consultation with each family.

There are also **peer group meetings** like those we organise at ATD. There are other organisations that defend the rights of children in care and their parents. The public authorities should support these organisations so they can organise and work together to strengthen their position when dealing with professionals. With ATD Fourth World and the Family Advocacy Project, the emphasis has been on the expertise of people experiencing poverty, which is essential.

# TRANSFORMING CHILD-PROTECTION INSTITUTIONS

## 1- Change the name for "child-protection" institutions

The institutions responsible for child protection have different names in different countries, and their names say a lot about their child-protection goals. But in every country, when you hear "child-protection", in many people's minds, it means "parents are a danger to the child; the child must be protected from its parents".

### *What the parents say*

The very words "child-protection" frighten children and parents, for whom it means placement and separation rather than support.

These words belittle us in the sense that they mean, "You're not capable; we're going to do things for you." But we are asking to be supported, not to have things done for us. Instead of being judged as incapable, we need support. Without it, we parents don't know where to turn for help in raising our children, and it's becoming harder to keep our heads above water. What we're gaining with this change in terminology is confidence in the services and in ourselves.

"Family support service" makes you feel more like working together. We'd feel more like we're being helped rather than supervised.

### *Proposal for change in the area of transforming child-protection institutions: name*

Name the service "Family Support Service"; that is, for parents and children.

## 2- Institute guidelines for changes in professional practices

### *What the parents say*

- Whatever we say, whatever we do, we're always wrong.
- People look down on us.
- Professionals are the people who know, whereas we know nothing. They don't live in the same situation as we do, yet they always want to make the decisions. For example, when we've chosen an activity for our child, they decide on something else.

### *Proposals for change in the area of transforming child-protection institutions*

#### **Institutions and professionals must work with parents to develop a co-education project for their children**

In order to build the child's future together, the professional's and the institution's practices must evolve towards:

- a caring, non-judgmental relationship;
- a relationship that is open and transparent;
- a relationship in which the professional seeks

### Example of best practice

In France, the *Projet pour l'Enfant* (plan for children's future) developed jointly by parents, children, and professionals has, when implemented and applied (which is not always the case), enabled parents to gain self-confidence as parents, confidence in talking with professionals, and a more balanced relationship. It has also enabled parents and professionals to move forward together for the child, taking into account the family environment and coordinating with all the people involved in the child's care.

to understand what the families' daily lives are like:

- a more balanced relationship between professionals and parents, by accepting that parents be accompanied, if they choose, to all meetings by a person they trust;
- a more stable relationship, without too many changes of professionals;
- regular updates on staff changes, working hours, rights, etc.;
- ensuring that coordination between professionals takes place in the presence of the parents to avoid contradictory messages.

For this collaboration among parents, professionals, and children to succeed, institutions need the following resources:

- training for professionals in listening and interpersonal skills and understanding of people living in unsafe conditions;
- professionals who are less overworked;
- funding.

### 3- When dealing with institutions, there must be a counterbalance

#### *What the parents say*

The institutions have a lot of power over our lives, and we have no power over them. What's more, in many situations, professionals are backed up by their supervisors, but parents and children have no one to back them up.

The institutions don't take into account the effect they have on us. They have a lot of power. They stress us out, frighten us, and we lose our ability to cope. As a result, they don't see us for who we are.

The institutions do not consider our suffering and our emotions or those of our children. They don't take into account who we really are today. They stay in the past. The weight of the past is still very strong, whereas we think of our children and want what's best for them. They don't take into account what our lives are like. They don't take into account the knowledge we have of our children and the knowledge our children have of us.

The institutions themselves can commit violence — physical, psychological and emotional maltreatment. Our children are taken away from us to "protect" them, but we are not sure that they are really protected. Their lives can be much worse in institutions than with us.

Parents involved with the child-protection system are not respected. And it has to be said that parents living in poverty are not considered or listened to, whereas wealthy parents are. They have good lawyers. This is a truth that needs to be told. When you live in poverty, you're at the bottom, you're not listened to, you're judged. We don't want to put up with that anymore.



## Four proposals to counterbalance institutional power

1. In the event of relationship problems, disagreements, or disrespect, **a mediation service is needed between parents and institutions**. This service must be purpose-specific, neutral (beyond the confines of the institution), independent, including financially, and well trained in poverty issues. For instance, parents should feel comfortable going to it to request a change of professional when their relationship is strained.

This mediation service should also bring parents closer to the institution, but above all the institution must get closer to the parents. Professionals and parents have different languages and different lifestyles. They live in two different worlds, so they need to be brought closer together.

2. We need to set up **a support group of parents who share the same experiences so that** they can help one another through their difficulties, support one another, and be stronger together. The parents in this support group need to be well trained, so organisations need to be set up to provide this training.

3. In the event of missteps on the part of professionals, institutions, or foster families, there must be **independent bodies where parents** can lodge complaints and receive help (ombudsmen, good-conduct committees, etc.). These independent bodies must be trained and have sufficient resources, otherwise they will not work.

4. **Access to courts** must also be **made easier** so that complaints can be lodged when necessary. Professionals in the justice system need to be provided with expert training about poverty and related issues and be given more resources.

### The benefits:

- More power for parents and therefore more equality between parents and institutions;
- Better protection for children;
- Fewer placements;
- Less maltreatment and institutional violence (physical, psychological, and emotional);
- More listening to parents;
- Economic and, above all, human gains.

## Guests' and participants' reactions to the proposals

During each workshop, participants in the Family Advocacy Project presented their proposals publicly, prompting comments and discussion among everyone present. Because the proposals are interconnected and form a coherent whole, this section presents the themes common to all the workshops rather than detailing the reactions workshop by workshop.

### On the invisibilisation of poverty

We need to be able to recognise the link between poverty and placement. In some regions, like Flanders in Belgium, this has been done, but the organisations that support these families do not all recognise that there is a connection. Simply making the connection between placement and poverty is not enough. (Ides Nicaise, academic, Belgium)

It's difficult for individual people to get poverty recognised, so you have to create groups. In Belgium, in Wallonia, there is a group, Agora, that meets with the support of the youth aid services. People have challenged politicians, and a unit has been set up to continuously assess the situation. This unit comprises people in poverty and professionals who can talk freely about their concerns. (Françoise de Boe, ATD Fourth World national team, Belgium)

In the judicial system, there is no awareness that placements are made because of poverty or lack of support. For example, if a child does not go to school, there is no connection made to poverty or living conditions that can make access to school difficult. (Jacques Fierens, lawyer, Belgium)

Poverty alone cannot be a reason for placement, but at the same time, when we look at the situation, we see that most of the families whose children are placed by child-protection services are families in poverty, and that raises questions for us. There are two explanations: situations of poverty weaken families so much that the children are placed in foster care; and/or in well-off families the problems are hidden and the parents find other solutions. It's all very complex and both explanations are valid. But the important thing is to ask questions about the causes. (Anne Devreesse, President of the Conseil national de la protection de l'enfance (National Council on Child Protection), France)

### On help that really helps

If I were asked to do what we demand of families, would I be able to do it? In the chaos of life, the bond between siblings can help. We've managed to keep siblings together. (Caroline Salingros, Educational Director, Clos du Chemin Vert, Belgium)

In legal terms (in Belgium), lawyers distinguish between general aid, i.e. minimum income, housing, health, and schooling; and specialised aid, i.e. measures for children, including placement, which is presented as aid for the child.

The law should require reasons to be given for a finding that general assistance has been provided to the family, and the judge should be obliged to explain why general assistance has not been enough.

The conditions for the return to the family should be coupled with support. For example, if you are told, "We'll give you your child back if you get a two-bedroom flat," the judge needs to specify how the family will be helped to obtain such accommodation and how that help will be given in practice. (Jacques Fierens, lawyer, Belgium)

Family conferences are another good practice. Family conferences revolve around the children and their parents. Each person says who is important to them. Those people will be there during working sessions when we look at the problem, take the time to look at the child's environment, and find solutions. (Céline Truong, ATD Fourth World Volunteer Corps member, France)

We need to be able to identify parents' strengths when they want to create a family and to understand what kind of support they need. France's 1,000 First Days programme recognises that all parents need support when a child arrives, whether they are poor or not. Just because babies don't talk doesn't mean they don't say things. We know more and more about babies. (Anne Devreese, President of the Conseil national de la protection de l'enfance (National Council on Child Protection), France)

### On training

Anti-poverty training is needed. (Anna Gupta, academic, United Kingdom)

An understanding of the hidden dimensions of poverty and their consequences is a useful foundation for training. (Rémy Cavalin, Coordinator, Research and Experimentation Laboratory, Sauvegarde de l'enfance, France, "Responsive" project)

In Bulgaria, child protection is still in its infancy and professionals are not trained. We're up against a wall of prejudice. (Evgeniya Toneva, researcher, Bulgaria)

In Belgium, we talk about a two-fold mandate because if the parents do not receive support, there is a risk that the child will not be allowed to return to the family. Lawyers call this the right to "beneficial services". (Anne-Catherine Rasson, lecturer at the Faculty of Law at the University of Namur and at the University of Saint Louis Brussels, Belgium)

In Flanders, we have "experience experts", which is a very important thing. It gives people living in poverty their role in society, and it gives services more experience. (Saskia, Fourth World activist, Belgium)

Agora is a place where you learn more than during your training years. (Caroline Salingros, Educational Director, Clos du Chemin Vert, Belgium)

## On changing the names of child-protection institutions

Changing the name would mean a change in mentality; it would force professionals to think systemically. (Isabelle Owzaruck, Korale association, Poland)

Calling child protection **“Cooperation for the Children”** would take us in a different direction. (Pierre Klein, Regional Director, ATD Fourth World Europe)

The symbolic function of the institution is important. Changing the name would be a good start, but practices need to change. (Anna Rurka, lecturer at the University of Paris Nanterre, Department of Psychological Sciences and Educational Sciences, France, “Responsive” project)

Let's stop talking about child protection and start talking about family protection. The name will change only if the institutions agree to look at themselves, to seriously evaluate their work. (Martine Le Corre, Fourth World activist, France)

## On counterbalancing the institutions' power

Only when all points of view are taken into account can a more complete view of reality be built. (Chloé Riban, lecturer at the University of Paris-Nanterre, doctorate in education sciences, France, “Responsive” project)

Note that it is recommended not to use the word "placement" anymore, as it makes people think of children as objects that are being moved around. Instead, we should use words that clearly describe what this measure actually involves; for example, "children taken from the family home", or "accommodation outside the home". (Anne-Catherine Rasson, lecturer at the Faculty of Law at the University of Namur and at the University of Saint Louis Brussels, Belgium)

The issue of counterbalances refers to the participation of families, in building projects with them. Counterbalancing does not necessarily mean working against, but advising, contributing. We need to convince the public authorities to establish groups like Agora. (Anna Rurka, lecturer at the University of Paris Nanterre, Department of Psychological Sciences and Educational Sciences, France, "Responsive" project)

## The political context

All these observations, that maltreatment, and that power — it's all true; it's a fact. I'm only speaking for myself, but I'd like to ask for forgiveness for all that. (Caroline Salingros, Educational Director, Clos du Chemin Vert, Belgium)

In 2013, a federal councillor in Switzerland asked for forgiveness from the victims of the coercive social measures that had been used there until 1981 so that this would never happen again. (Report of the Pauvreté Identité Société (Poverty, Identity, Society) project, Switzerland)

There are politicians who say, "We need to understand less and hold [people] responsible more." (Jane Tunstill, academic, United Kingdom)

Social workers are the armed wing of a policy that blames poverty on people rather than on the environment. (Rémy Cavalin, Coordinator, Research and Experimentation Laboratory, Sauvegarde de l'enfance, France, "Responsive" project)

Social workers are caught up in a spiral of efficiency. They can no longer take the time to stop and think: "What is the real danger?" (Caroline Salingros, Educational Director, Clos du Chemin Vert, Belgium)

The child-protection system is in trouble; the schools for social workers are empty. How can we work together with parents to breathe new life into this system? (Anna Rurka, Senior Lecturer, University of Paris Nanterre, Department of Psychological Sciences and Educational Sciences, France, "Responsive" project)



## 2- CHILD-PROTECTION LAW

In the course of the research, the parents identified child-protection measures as a major cause of poverty continuing from one generation to the next. They focused on the application of the fundamental rights of both children and parents, and on the rights governing child protection in each country.

Child protection is a system that is little known to the general public and is seen as a safeguard against child abuse and ill-treatment. Mostly it is heard of through dramatic news stories. But for parents living in poverty, child protection is a pervasive force that profoundly affects their lives, their children, and their families.

The laws and institutions governing child protection, although different in each country, came up in this research as points to consider because they weaken the ties that bind children to their roots — to their families and communities — instead of reinforcing positive ties. Parents also said that it was very difficult for them to be heard and to exercise their fundamental rights when dealing with the child-protection system.

By proposing changes to the law, parents are committing us to making profound cultural changes, which are necessary if specific concrete changes are to be made to ensure a future without poverty.

Following are three presentations. The first, by a legal expert, outlines relationships between fundamental rights and national legislation. In the second, an ATD Fourth World Volunteer Corps member speaks of rights that are not applied in child protection, as well as rights that are diverted from their purpose and turned against people. In the third, a Fourth World activist shares her experience of improving the law through continuous evaluation.

## The respect for rights

Anne-Catherine Rasson, lecturer at the Faculty of Law at the University of Namur and the University of Saint Louis Brussels, Belgium

Respect for rights is paramount in the Family Advocacy Project research we are discussing.

Everyone, including parents and children, has fundamental rights – important rights – which must protect them. These rights must give strength and power. They give individuals the important status of citizens who must be respected. In legal language, we say that the individual is a rights holder. It is not an issue of kindness or charity but of respect for rights.

Fundamental rights have been recognised in international and European treaties and certain national legislation. Two of these treaties are very important: the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the European Convention on Human Rights. Countries have agreed to comply with them and when they do not comply, or do not comply well, they can be brought before an international court or monitoring committee and found guilty of noncompliance.

It is important to point out here that most professionals who deal with your files, whether social workers or judges, are not very familiar with these treaties, if at all. They do not apply them properly. So, there is a gap between your fundamental rights according to the law and your actual experience. That has to change.

With regard to the rights related to the measures taken in some families, such as placement, these national and international judges and committees have explained how the rights should be applied. So what I am going to present to you is not my opinion or that of academic experts, but that of European and national judges or committees that protect rights around the world:

When we talk about measures taken regarding families and children, two rights are important: the right to protection of the child, who must be protected from abuse, violence, and ill-treatment; the rights of parents and children to family life must be protected. Living together is a fundamental element of the right to family life. And so, **when a decision has to be made about a child, these two rights have to be weighed against each other: protection of the child and respect for family life.** The authorities must take the decision that best respects both, in the best interests of the child. This does not mean that the parents' interests do not count, but that the child's interests weigh more heavily in the balance.

When these judges and international committees criticise the misapplication or misinterpretation of treaties, it is often because **decisions that are taken in favour of the child's interests do not consider all the rights of the child and the child's parents.** Decisions are taken without balancing the child's right to protection against the protection of family life in the specific situation. Decisions are taken on the basis of what the social worker or court considers to be the best interests of the child, from the perspective of charity rather than rights.

**But the best interests of the children are first and foremost respect for their rights, which must be tied to the rights of parents and siblings.** So I think it's wise to use the language of "rights" rather than "interest", or at least to explain clearly what the child's interest means.

- When a measure is taken concerning a child, an attempt must be made to keep



the child with the family as far as possible. **The primary responsibility for bringing up children lies with the parents, who must be helped. Placement should be exceptional, "as a last resort", and for as short a time as possible.** For example, the European Court of Human Rights has found Portugal guilty of violating fundamental rights for placing children in foster care and putting some up for adoption when they should first have helped the parents, who were living in extreme poverty, were not abusive, and had a great deal of love and affection for their children. The mere fact of living in poverty never justifies placement.

- Sometimes placement is necessary to ensure respect for the rights of both the child and the parents. It **should be noted that the current recommendation is to no longer use the word "placement"**, which makes children seem like objects being moved around. Instead, we should use words that clearly describe what this measure actually involves, for example, "children taken from the family home", or "accommodation outside the home".

It should also be noted that international courts and supervisory bodies recognise that **the aim of placement is to return children to their families and reunite them.** To achieve this objective, two rights must be respected:

First, **the right to assistance and support for families in the event of placement** (this is the "two-fold mandate" in Belgium), because if parents are not supported, there is a risk that the children will not be allowed to return to their families. Lawyers call this the right to "beneficial services".

Second, **the right to maintain family ties and relations during placement.** The authorities must preserve, strengthen, and increase the bonds between parents and children so that a return can be organised as quickly as possible. There must therefore be regular contact between parents and their children, as well as between siblings (who should be placed together if placement is necessary for each of them). If visits are to be supervised, the reasons for supervision must be given and the parents' and children's rights must be respected. If contact is denied, there must be very strong reasons for doing so. Denying contact with the family must be in the child's best interests and therefore respect his or her rights.

**And when the time comes to return home, the return must be carefully prepared and supported.**

- In some cases, the decision will be taken to break up the family for good. This is a very severe measure, which seriously infringes on the rights of families. It breaks the bond between parents and children and cuts children off from their roots. Such a measure must be taken only very exceptionally, for parents who have done really bad things. In any case, the European Court of Human Rights has clearly stated that "the fact that a child may be accommodated in a setting more conducive to his or her upbringing cannot in itself justify forcibly removing him or her from the care of the biological parents".

- Lastly, the courts and the bodies that monitor countries' respect for rights point out that proceedings must respect rights. For example, information must be given in appropriate and understandable language, people must be listened to, and families (parents and children) and lawyers must be able to participate in the proceedings.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate what the judges of fundamental rights say repeatedly: We do not need abstract, theoretical rights, but concrete, effective rights that are respected in real life.

## Poorly applied rights work against people

Catherine Le Pecheur, *ATD Fourth World Volunteer Corps member, Normandy (France)*

**In France, the Code of Social Assistance and Families (Action sociale et des familles) provides that anyone who asks for or receives child-assistance benefits has the right to be accompanied by a person of their choice when dealing with the child-assistance agency or its representatives.**

When someone exercises this right, they are clearly making a choice, because it is difficult to appear alone before a social worker when the emotional burden of fear and apprehension is too heavy to bear.

The right to be accompanied makes the people who use it feel stronger because the person accompanying them knows them well and has prepared for this meeting or interview with them. Thanks to this supportive presence, they can interact with the professional in front of them and thus create a collaborative relationship.

**Unfortunately, all too often, this right is not respected.** In many situations, people are told, "This right does not apply here." They then have to choose either to submit to an interview in which they are powerless because the relationship is not equal, or to refuse to attend without the support person and risk sanctions on the pretext that they are refusing to cooperate with the agency.

**Sometimes, this right literally works against the person and prevents the exercise of another right: that of the child's return to the family.**

We were recently criticised for accompanying a mother to appointments with the child-assistance agency. We asked for a meeting with the head of the agency to clarify our role. We were not heard, and instead received threats: "As long as you continue to accompany her, I will notify the judge that the mother is too unsure of herself to get her child back. Because as long as you accompany her to these appointments, I will consider her not autonomous." These situations are deeply unfair and unacceptable.

In addition, **the courts fail to recognise and uphold some rights.** In judgments involving temporary placements, courts specify in the ruling that sibling visits must be organised by the caretaker services, and we have seen how, despite the parents repeated requests, visits were not scheduled for over a year.

**Rights must give people power over their lives and their future. For people living in poverty, getting their rights respected is a constant struggle.**

## **Agora, a place where people are paying close attention to ensure that rights advance the struggle to overcome poverty**

*Carine Baiwir, Fourth World activist, Belgium*

Agora is a project in Wallonia and Brussels, Belgium.

It is a place for dialogue between youth assistance and youth protection professionals,<sup>5</sup> anti-poverty organisations, and parents experiencing poverty who are members of these organisations.

**In our discussions, we talk about the regulations that apply (they are like laws in Wallonia and Brussels). They contain some rights beneficial for families, but those rights are not respected.**

In our discussions, we all try to understand why the law is not applied and what needs to be changed. We listen to each other. Sometimes we reach a consensus and can make proposals to the minister or the administration. But we don't always have to agree. That doesn't matter. The most important thing is that there is dialogue.

At Agora, I participate in these discussions with professionals, but I don't speak for myself. I represent other families collectively. Before each Agora meeting, we prepare with a group of parents.

For example, the parents said they needed to be able to defend themselves. But how can we defend ourselves if we don't know what's in the report that goes to the court? We need to have access to the written documents.

In the Agora group, we discussed this issue and came to an agreement which we put into a document, a sort of little booklet. With this document, the whole Agora group met the minister to ask for something concrete to be done. **Thanks to all this work, we now have the right in Belgium to access our file.**

**Agora is an important place, because when it comes to working to overcome poverty, nothing can be taken for granted, and we need places [that allow us] to keep an eye on things.**

<sup>5</sup> Youth Assistance Services (SAJ) and Youth Protection Services (SPJ) provide personalised assistance to young people in difficulty or at risk, and to their families. The SAJ intervenes either at the request of the young people concerned, or following concerns communicated to it by external persons or services. The SPJ is responsible for implementing the decisions of the Court.

# PROPOSALS FOR CHANGE

In order to improve compliance with and enforcement of both child-protection rights and fundamental rights, the participants in the Family Advocacy Project wanted to make proposals in three areas: (a) allow families to write in and access the child-protection file; (b) make placements truly temporary; and (c) make participation in court hearings more balanced.

REVIEW CHILD-PROTECTION FILES, THEIR CONTENT, ACCESSIBILITY, AND FUNCTION SO THEY PROVIDE A RECORD OF FAMILY LIFE

**1 – Parents should automatically receive the reports sent to the court by the social services**

*Proposals for change with regard to the child-protection file*

Parents should automatically receive a copy of the file at the same time they receive the letter summoning them to court.

***What the parents say***

In Belgium we have the right to ask for a copy of the file that professionals send to the court before the hearing. Many families don't know this, and even if they do, they have to ask for it in time. In Flanders, the report is often available only two hours before the hearing.

In some cases, the agencies send us the files by email; in others they ask us to come and read them. You can't choose how you receive the file — it depends on the agency.

In addition, parents should be able to be accompanied when they go to read the file, as the vocabulary can be complicated and the content can also be painful to hear.

It is very important for parents to know what is written about them, what they are accused of. If they do not, they cannot prepare or defend themselves properly.

**2 – Parents should be able to write their own account, with support if necessary**

*Proposals for change with regard to the child-protection file*

Parents should be able to write down their account and pass it on to the agency that supports them. Every time the parents are called before a new service, the service should ask the parents for permission to read the document they have written. It is very important for families to retain ownership of their history.

Along with the UK group, other participants in the Family Advocacy Project thought it very important for parents to be able to co-write the reports with professionals. The files guide the decisions social workers and courts make for families. Co-writing the files will do several things:

### ***What the parents say***

Every time we meet with an agency for the first time, the professionals ask us to tell them our story. When we have traumatic experiences in our past, having to keep talking about them is painful. We can't move forward if we constantly have to refer to our past.

- Prevent professionals from drawing hasty conclusions about the family. They should take the time to understand, with the family, to support the family more effectively.

- Ensure that false things are not written about families. At the moment, when there are errors in the files, it is difficult, if not impossible, to correct them. These errors remain in the files and negatively affect parents' interactions with the agencies.

- Professionals are often reproachful; they note only what parents are doing wrong, only negative things. Writing the file together would also make it possible to emphasise the positive, the efforts that the parents are making.

- Finally, when children are old enough to ask for a copy of their file, they will get a much fuller picture of their history as their parents will have participated in writing it. This allows the children to see and understand how hard parents struggle for children.

### **3- On forced adoption in the United Kingdom *Proposals for change with regard to forced adoption***

The United Kingdom should reconsider the use of closed adoptions and focus on providing early preventive support measures to strengthen families and communities.

In the case of adoption, parents should be given the opportunity to create a family diary, an account that social services will keep under lock and key and that will be offered to the child as soon as possible (at the child's eighteenth birthday at the latest). The current "letterbox" contact (letters between birth parents and their children who have been adopted) should be compulsory, with support for birth parents (and ideally the extended family) to write letters that can never be censored and that social services keep copies of to ensure that children receive them, whatever the attitude of the adoptive parents.

### ***What parents in the United Kingdom say***

When a parent is referred to social services, there is a high risk that their children will be removed because the system considers the parent to be a danger to their children. The institution doesn't give them a chance. In particular, it holds their past against them in order to obtain an adoption.

When children are adopted, their parents are no longer able to pass on their family history. Children who are adopted say they feel that their whole identity has been taken away from them and their human rights have been violated.

Social services should be aware that every report they write will be given to the children when they turn eighteen, which should encourage them to avoid using negative language. Parents should work with social services on these reports to ensure they are accurate and reflect both points of view.

## ENSURE THAT PLACEMENTS ARE TEMPORARY AND THAT THE AIM IS TO REUNITE THE FAMILY

In France and Belgium, placements are generally temporary: children are not placed with the aim of permanently removing them from the family.

According to international human rights treaties, the **aim of placement is not only to protect children, but also to organise their return to the family** once the danger factors that justified the separation have been removed. **Contact between family members — brothers and sisters, parents and children — is essential if this return is to take place under normal conditions.**

Placements break the children's reference points and the link between them and their family. **They considerably weaken the necessary transmission between parents and children.**

**Supervised or partially supervised visits offer a time and place where parents and children can build a relationship**, meet and get to know each other, and maintain dialogue, intimacy, and family ties. It's a special time when families can share love, values, and news of the day-to-day lives of children, parents, and siblings placed in other families or institutions. It's an eagerly awaited moment. However, at present, these visits do not create the right conditions for quality parent-child relationships.

### Proposals for change with regard to temporary placements

#### First point: Organising visits

##### *What the parents say*

The way visits are organised prevents us from taking action. More often than not, we are given a schedule of visits and we have to adapt. This prevents us from being in control of our time and our plans. If the visit is cancelled because the host family or our child is ill, or because there is a transport strike or something else, we are not offered another visit and we lose the visit with our child. This is hard when we only have one visit a month. It's as if professionals and foster carers have obligations and we don't. We too need to be able to look for work, arrange other appointments (for example medical visits or appointments for our other children) or take part in activities that are important in our lives and help us **build our future and that of our children**. We also have to take care of day-to-day needs, such as collecting a food parcel.

The schedule doesn't always take into account the best time for our children. Sometimes, if it's a weekday visit, the children miss school. When it's late afternoon, after school, they're tired and the visit doesn't always go well.

##### *Proposals for change with regard to visits*

The parents must be involved in the detailed organisation of the visits together with the institution or custodial service and the foster family.

### Benefits of these proposals

If parents are involved in organising the visits, their autonomy is respected and they can share their plans. If their requests are better taken into account and worked on with them, their children will feel that the parents are more involved. This enables the children to see what their parents are doing to ensure the situation runs smoothly and evolves. The efforts that parents make can then be passed on to their children.

If the parents draw up the schedule with the professionals, they make a joint commitment. The professionals, knowing the parents' schedule, are not put in the position of having to reschedule each time they learn the parents are unable to attend. Together, they can think about projects for the children. Parents can then participate in their children's future.

## Second point: The venue

### *What the parents say*

We understand that visits are to be in a neutral place at the beginning, as a kind of protection for the children, the parents, and the social workers. Once the professionals see that the parents have "accepted" the placement, they should agree for visits to take place at the parents' home.

When the visits take place in a neutral location, our involvement as parents is difficult.

The feeling of being watched takes over, because there are so many professionals around and other families in the same room. In a neutral place, we feel like we don't belong; there's no privacy. We can't imagine our role as parents now or in the future.

### *Proposals for change with regard to venue*

**Visits, whether supervised or not, must take place in the parents' home, as long as this location does not constitute a danger.**

### Benefits

**At home, parents regain confidence in their role as parents. Being able to welcome their children into their home makes them proud. They can pass on their know-how to their children and learn their children's habits.**

**The children also feel freer. They feel like "normal" children.**

Some parents say: "In the supervised room, the children expected us to take off their jackets, shoes, etc., whereas at home they do it themselves, they just count on us if they need to. They feel at home. They're like normal children: if they want to go to the toilet, they go; if they want to carry something heavy, they try. They know how to call for the lift; they do their own thing! We tell them the rules before they go to play and then they go and play."

**There is also a feeling of "rebalancing of power" with the professionals.** Parents can offer them a coffee when they arrive and show that they can set rules for their home. For example, the parents can ask the professionals to take off their shoes, and the professionals can ask the parents for a glass of water.

### Third point: The length and frequency of the visit

#### *Proposals for change with regard to length and frequency of visits*

*The length and frequency of visits must be agreed on with the parents as part of a plan drawn up with them and their children, and must be flexible.*

Here's how one mother would like her visit to work: four hours every week, as opposed to the two hours every two weeks she is currently entitled to. She explains the benefits for her, her child, and the professionals:

#### **What the parents say**

A little girl was placed in care at the age of three months. Over the next eighteen months, her parents saw her for a total of twelve hours. What kind of relationship can be built under these conditions?

When visits last two hours every two weeks, they are very quick and too short to make a connection. Sometimes mealtimes and kitchen cleaning (in a neutral place) are included in these two hours. Often, due to a lack of social workers, our rights are limited and visits can be shortened.

Time for communication and discussion between the family and professionals is included in the visit times, which are already considered to be too short.

"On arrival, I'd like to have a chat with the foster family who came to drop my son off, so that we can talk for ten minutes. After that, I let my son settle down and then I ask him what he wants to do. It's his day, so he decides. If he asks me for things I can't do, I'll tell him. I talk to my son so we get to know and understand each other better, so that he trusts me. Even if it's something that might hurt me, he can tell me... without lying. At the end of the visit, I'd like to have half an hour so that my son can tell me how it went. It's good to hear how he experienced it and for me to tell him how I felt. If I'm upset, if I don't agree with how the youth worker and the foster family see things, I can tell them. If I hold things in, it creates conflict. If I express myself calmly, my son will be able to express his emotions and talk to me about them, not the youth worker. If I talk about my emotions calmly to the foster family, my son may confide in me, I'll try to understand him. I'll write down what he tells me in a notebook to try and figure it out. If I've understood things properly, I'll try to find solutions for the good of my son so that things go better. For the moment, I don't

have confidence enough to know if it's good or not. My son doesn't talk to me. If things go well, it's good for everyone."

#### **Benefits**

The longer the visit, the better the **quality of what parents and children pass on to each other**. The same is true between parents and professionals, or with other members of the family. In this way, **we are building a future for our children**.

### Fourth point: Supported supervised visits or surveillance?

#### *Proposals for change with regard to visits*

The supervised visit is a time to work, rebuild, learn, and spend quality time with the children. Parents want to work with the various people involved in their children's placement. They need supportive relationships with social workers.



### **What the parents say**

The presence of social workers, who should be helping us, often gets in the way.

We have the impression that we're being watched all the time, and sometimes even that this surveillance is carried out by the children. One parent said, "We have the impression that the children themselves are watching us. We're always being judged negatively, so this intense surveillance reminds us of a prison environment."

More often than not, social workers don't help us. We don't always feel we can trust them. Many parents don't allow themselves to express their love to their children. It's too intimate. It's as if it's wrong to have emotions.

To achieve this, it is necessary to:

- Avoid changing the social workers. It should always be the same people — those who know the children.
- Build a relationship of trust and enable open communication. To build a supportive relationship, professionals should do more than merely observe; they should actively support parents in understanding their role and provide guidance in raising their children, including in practical matters. It's about collaborating in shaping children's education.
- Stop counting time spent talking to professionals as time spent visiting children.
- Visiting time must meet the need for privacy between parents and children, so that parents can pass on their love and values. The pain of separation is not recognised, forcing parents to pretend to their children that everything is fine. Keeping this suffering secret adds to the suffering.

#### **Benefits**

In this way, parents can better undertake their role as parents, and children can recognise them as such. The parents could learn things that they could pass on to their children in the future.

### **And finally, one last point: Reuniting the family**

#### **Proposals for change with regard to reuniting the family**

**At the hearing, the judge should rule that siblings must stay together.** And social services must apply this ruling. If it is not implemented, there is the possibility of appeal. The judgment must not leave decisions up to the social services or allow the court's ruling to be changed.

#### **Everything must be done to help siblings build a relationship.**

Children often ask to see their brothers and sisters. As siblings, it's important for them to create connections so that they can understand and support one another.

**Requests for family holidays must be taken into account.** There are places where parents and children can be welcomed as a family and spend time together. This creates memories and experiences that help strengthen the family bond.

### **What the parents say**

Siblings are often separated, and sometimes brothers and sisters don't even see each other during visits with their parents, which take place separately. This happens because the government's policies don't give social services enough resources. Judges should not agree to place children in care unless they can be left together. When there is a law, it must be applied.

#### **Benefits**

To grow up well, it's important for everyone to feel that they belong to a family. In life, you learn from your brothers and sisters, especially if they are older. It helps to be close-knit, both as a child and as an adult.

## A FAIRER ADVERSARIAL HEARING BEFORE THE JUDGE

### *What the parents say*

An adversarial hearing before a judge should be a balanced hearing in which each party puts forward its arguments and responds to the arguments of the others. However, this is often not the case.

**Before the hearing**, the social workers wrote a lot of negative things about us in their report. Do we know what the report says before the hearing?

- Some parents don't see the report at all before the hearing.
- Some parents can read the report, but they have to make an appointment to do so; they can't take it home with them, they have to go alone, and they don't have much time to read it. What's more, sometimes the summonses for the hearing arrive very late.
- Some professionals read the report to the parents, while others only read the conclusions.

Most of the time, we don't dare to write to the judge before the hearing, even though we have positive things to say and we could write about our daily struggle to get basic necessities.

**Before and during the hearing**, we're on edge because we have so many emotions, we're tense, stressed, and anxious. We're no longer on an equal footing; we can't express ourselves.

We are regularly reminded of things from the past, without the professionals realising that we have changed.

Often, the judge first gives the floor to the professionals who say all sorts of negative things about us. We're broken and can't talk any more.

We find ourselves alone before the judge or with a lawyer who doesn't know us well and with whom we don't have a long-term relationship.

**After the hearing**, the judge gives reasons that are not always understandable and then often leaves it up to the children's services to decide many things, which penalises us. Disabled parents are often wrongly considered incapable of bringing up their children.

### *Proposals for change with regard to a balanced court hearing*

#### **Before the hearing:**

- If the parents live together, they should be summoned together to appear before the judge.
- All the documents sent to the judge (including in Switzerland for people under general guardianship) should be sent to the parents' home so they can prepare for the hearing and have time to read and understand them, with assistance if necessary.
- The parents should have the right to be accompanied by a support person during the hearing, and this should be stated in the summons.
- Parents should have the right to have their own child-protection files disregarded as well as those of other family members.

#### **During the hearing:**

- Children should also be represented by a lawyer, if necessary a court-appointed lawyer, trained in the challenges of living in poverty.
- Children should also have the right to be accompanied by a support person when they meet the judge.
- Children should be heard prior to the hearing before the judge.
- The judge should give the floor to the parents first, because if the social services speak first, the parents will be discouraged by the criticism and will no longer be able to highlight how things have evolved.

#### **At the time of the decision:**

- When deciding on a course of action, the judge should take into account any help available from family members, the support of friends, and the support of organisations and associations.
- The judge's decision should specify how parents can exercise their parental authority in their dealings with schools, carers, etc., so as not to leave too much power to child-protection services.

## Guests' and participants' reactions to the proposals

### Regarding the child-protection file

In France, a more comprehensive and diverse software system is being implemented: a dedicated file with real-time tracking. Things from everyday life, like films and photos, can be included. New technologies offer solutions. (Rémy Cavalin, Coordinator, Research and Experimentation Laboratory, Sauvegarde de l'enfance, France, "Responsive" project)

The report(s) sent out by social services must already take into account the parents' perspective. To do this, we worked with the teams to create a form: the social worker says, "I said that and what do you think?" We have seen that this educational clinic changes the perspective. The report is less focused on the professional point of view. (Anna Rurka, Senior Lecturer, University of Paris Nanterre, Department of Psychological Sciences and Educational Sciences, France, "Responsive" project)

Parents need to know what the judge thinks of them so they can react. If the parents don't have access to the reports, I can't imagine how they can defend themselves.

Families come to us and say, "I don't understand why the child has been placed in care." We read and understand together. We also train parents to write a document for the judge. We have a guide on how to write these documents. Our general rule: the documents should be written so the judge can understand the situation and the requests in five minutes. Then, we explain why and how the situation has changed. (Isabella Owzaruck, Korale association, Poland)

### Regarding the adversarial hearing

What is paradoxical about the juvenile justice system is that it does not apply the adversarial principle: the parent must be presumed innocent. (Cécile Lavergne, philosopher, lecturer at the University of Lille, Department of Social and Political Philosophy, France)

The adversarial principle must be integrated into the whole process, not just at the hearing. There is no standard wording that magistrates must use to formalise their ruling. There is also the question of what written record of the hearing is made and kept.

(Anna Rurka, lecturer at the University of Paris Nanterre, Department of Psychological Sciences and Educational Sciences, France, "Responsive" project)

I propose a very simple rule: "The judge cannot make a decision on the basis of facts of which he is aware, and of which the parties are not aware." The judge cannot start the hearing if all the parties have not been made aware of the report beforehand and if the report has not been signed by the parents beforehand. (Jacques Fierens, lawyer, Belgium)

When you have both — families involved in politics (like Agora) and, at the same time, organisations involved in individual support for families — progress is made. (Anne Devreese, President of the CNPE Conseil national de la protection de l'enfance (National Council for Child Protection), France)

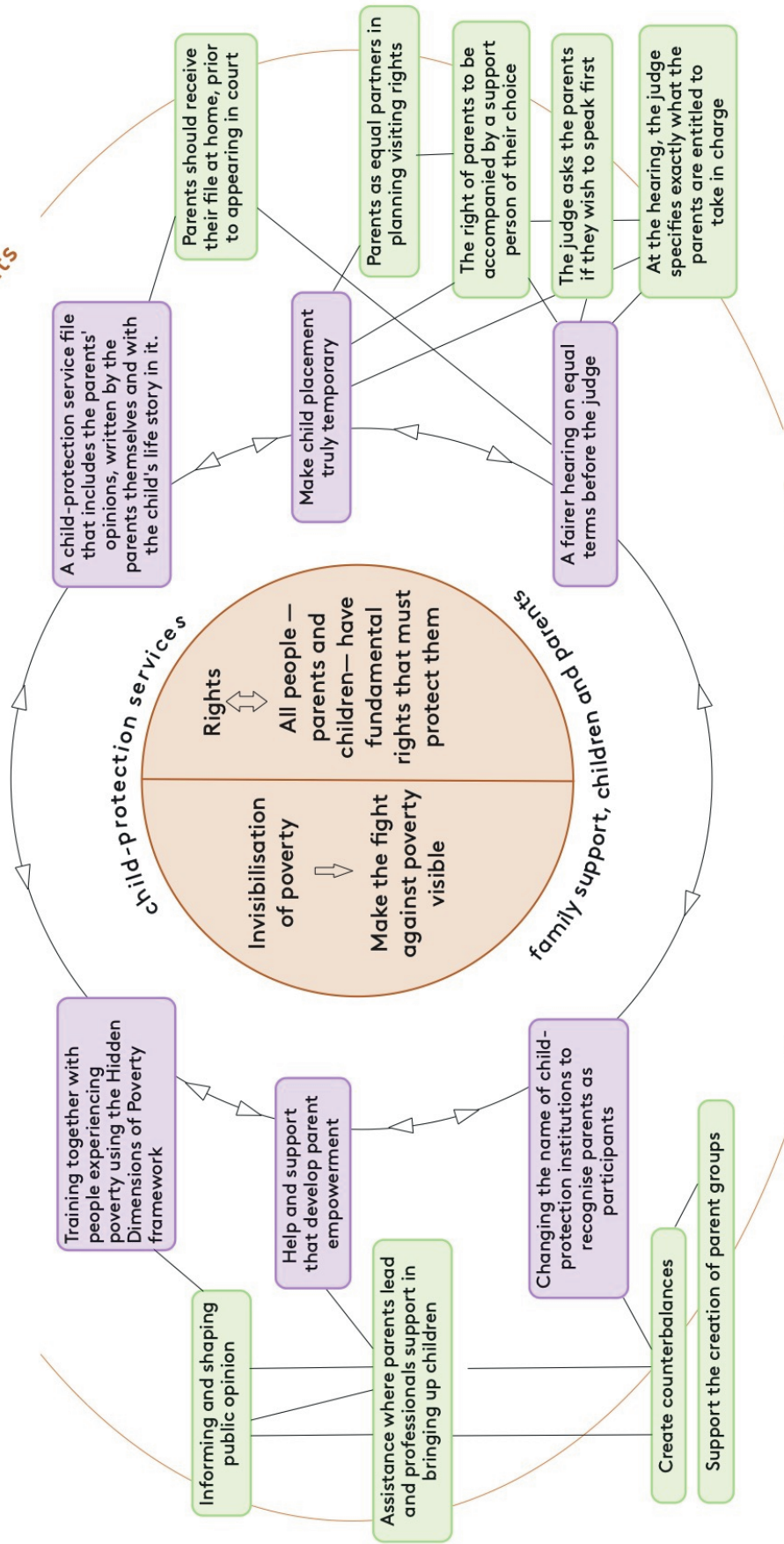
### **About temporary placements**

One professional told me, "All my professional life, when I said to parents, 'Trust me,' I was asking them to be obedient." You talk about visits to neutral places, but this place is not neutral at all. There is a class bias in the way this place is designed. (Céline Truong, Volunteer Corps member, ATD Fourth World, France)

The decisions of the European Court of Human Rights entail positive obligations. Laws can oblige decision-makers to give reasons for their decisions. For example, if parents are asked to have a two-bedroom flat, the judge should specify how the family will be helped to obtain this accommodation. (Jacques Fierens, lawyer, Belgium)

If parents were asked at hearings, "How would you like to exercise your parental role during the placement?" there would be a different atmosphere at the hearing and parents wouldn't feel that their child was being taken away from them. (Marianne Legendre, PMI doctor, France. PMI is a counselling and care service for parents whose children are 0-6 years old)

Evaluate institutions with the experience of all stakeholders, including parents



Create ongoing evaluation spaces like Agora

# 3- METHODOLOGY

HOW DID WE ARRIVE AT THE  
PROPOSALS FOR CHANGE?

# 1-THE FAMILY ADVOCACY PROJECT RESEARCH PROGRAMME FROM 2019 TO 2023

The ATD Fourth World Movement hears the same questions from parents living in extreme poverty:

"What are we doing wrong? Despite all our efforts, our children are going through the same poverty as we are."

"Will our children inherit the fruits of our efforts or will they live in the same poverty as we do?"

## A coordinating team

The International Movement ATD Fourth World's International Leadership Team appointed a team to consider this appeal from parents. The team was initially made up of Susie Devins, Brigitte Jaboureck, and Marie-Cécile Renoux, and was later joined by Elsa de Calignon, all ATD Fourth World Volunteer Corps members.

## Participating teams

Several ATD Fourth World teams in Europe were interested in these issues: Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. They agreed to set up a research project later named the Family Advocacy Project.

Discussions between these teams confirmed that countries have very different contexts, circumstances, and legislation. Some have elaborate family policies that do not fully take into account the realities of the most disadvantaged people. They also have highly regulated child-protection systems that fail to protect children from poverty and create a great deal of suffering for parents and children. Other countries rely on the community or communities as the primary support for families. In some cultures, the family is at the heart of the social construct, while in others it is the individual that takes precedence, and so on.

The activities carried out by ATD Fourth World teams are also varied, including cultural activities with children and their parents, the Fourth World People's University,<sup>6</sup> joint training with institutions and professionals, and support for individuals and families to enable them to gain better recognition of their rights.

Despite all these differences, the coordinating team made every effort to integrate action-research into the initiatives carried out by ATD Fourth World in order to reinforce the work of the local and national teams.

To carry out this work, the coordinating team proposed that local teams conduct participatory studies into the role of family and social ties in breaking the transmission of extreme poverty. Previous research by the ATD Fourth World Movement, such as *Extreme Poverty is Violence*, *Breaking the Silence*, *Searching for Peace*,<sup>7</sup> *The Hidden Dimensions of Poverty* (see

<sup>6</sup> In ATD Fourth World People's University sessions, people living in poverty can meet, speak out, and engage in dialogue with other members of society on specific topics. They are held regularly in different locations in Belgium, France, Spain, and Switzerland.

<sup>7</sup> *Extreme Poverty Is Violence, Breaking the Silence, Searching for Peace* (Edition Quart Monde, 2012) is the result of research carried out by the International Movement ATD Fourth World on the links between extreme poverty, violence, and peace. It involved more than a thousand people around the world.

page 54), and *Pour une nouvelle philosophie sociale, transformer la société à partir des plus pauvres* (For a New Social Philosophy, transforming society starting with the poorest people) (see page 13) provided a solid foundation on which to build.

To avoid losing sight of the objectives, the coordinating team wrote a concept note that served as a reference throughout the research without becoming a straitjacket. The team left enough flexibility to take account of the contributions that emerged as the research progressed. In this way, specific themes were set aside and others were proposed that had not been thought of at the outset. The open-ended framework allowed teams to become independent and others to join the work in progress. For example, the coordinating team in Spain built this research project on the Merging of Knowledge<sup>8</sup> a demanding research methodology that produces rigorous, in-depth knowledge. As a result, they were unable to complete the project in the same amount of time as the other teams. ATD members in the Netherlands, after interviewing parents on the subject, wrote a book entitled *Recht op bescherming van het gezin: Schrijvende armoede en uithuisplaatsing van kinderen* (The Right to Family Protection: Extreme poverty and child placement), which was published during the Family Advocacy Project. The parents were so caught up in writing and distributing the book that they had no time to attend the meetings. In 2022 the team in Poland included research in its activities and joined the other groups. A Volunteer Corps member from Switzerland interviewed members of a family over three generations to write a portrait of the family, and this work was linked to the Family Advocacy Project (see the attached family portrait).

**The objectives of the research project were as follows:**

- Enabling people living in extreme poverty to express the richness of the ties that bind them to their children, what weakens these ties, what strengthens them, and what preserves them. Participants placed this reflection in the political, economic, social, and cultural context specific to each team.
- Working with people living in extreme poverty to pinpoint pivotal moments in their lives that identify their resources, capabilities, and contributions; or, conversely, the systems that perpetuate social exclusion and extreme poverty.
- Developing possibilities, avenues, and proposals for change.

**The participants** (see page 77)

**Each country formed a group of parents** (in France, there was a group in Normandy and one in Brittany; and in Belgium, there was a group in Flanders and one in Wallonia). These groups comprised between five and twelve adults. We gave priority to the parents of children under the age of eighteen. All of them were adamant that they would discuss family ties, a painful subject for them, only if it brought about change. This desire for change affected all the research work. In order to bring about change, the team identified areas to explore, such as institutions, legislation, and social attitudes, and also ensured that the research enabled the participating parents to have more resources (such as gaining self-confidence, understanding the social services' processes, and having a parent support network) to create changes in their own lives.

<sup>8</sup> Described in the publication of the research group Quart Monde–Université, *Le croisement des savoirs. Quand le Quart Monde et l'Université pensent ensemble* (Paris, Ed. de l'atelier and Ed. Quart Monde, 1999).



The coordinating team called on **academics** who had already worked with people living in poverty, to support and participate in the action-research. There were eight in total: philosophers, lawyers, sociologists, and professors of social work. Some of them took part in the social philosophy seminar organised by ATD Fourth World, which published its findings in 2023. The academic contributions helped contextualise parents' experiences and perspectives regarding current trends and developments.

#### **Fourth World People's University**

At the start of the research, **the Fourth World People's University** in several countries looked at the question of transmission: What have you received from your parents or the adults who brought you up? What do you want to pass on to your children?

The parents played an important role in highlighting several points concerning transmission. First, many spoke of the weight of the stigma attached to parents living in poverty, which prevents them from developing their educational potential and encourages the development of a culture of silence within families. Then, despite a hard or difficult childhood, people talked about the strength of the adults who brought them up, their courage and resistance, and the values they received from them. Also addressed was the impact of child protection on the weakening or breakdown of family ties and the suffering it causes both parents and children.

#### **Discussions between parent groups put to the test by COVID-19**

For the next step we wanted to connect the various groups of parents, to experience first-hand what it means to be part of the same participatory research project and to learn from parents in other countries. However, in 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to modify the schedule. The parent groups could not meet as planned, so we had to devise new ways to stay connected with each of the participants and offer them support during periods of confinement, especially as institutions were ill-equipped to help in these circumstances.

The parents felt abandoned. In order to stay connected to the different groups, the coordinating team organised telephone and video conferences. The groups spoke different languages, and exchanging information this way is neither easy nor adequate. Only two groups could meet in person for a short time when the confinement was lifted in both countries. Throughout this period, the sense of belonging to the same research project persisted, yet the capacity for research to generate knowledge was significantly limited. It wasn't until 2021 that the research truly gained momentum.

#### **An in-person meeting**

**On 15 May 2022: "Thinking, Acting, and Advocating so children have a future without poverty" was the title of the first in-person meeting of all the participants. It took place at the ATD Fourth World International Centre in Pierrelaye, France. The 2020-2021 telephone calls and video conferences highlighted the need to closely examine parental contributions to their children's well-being. This concern formed the basis of the meeting on 15 May.**

The coordinating team began by asking each participant to say why they were taking part in the research. The parents said: "so that things can change", "for my children's future", "so that injustice can stop", "because I'm

furious that families are being separated", "to fight together", "to continue the fight for all families and future generations", "to participate in change", "for the love of our children", and so on. This moment solidified both individual and collective participation in the Family Advocacy Project.

Each parent was then asked to identify a personal battle they fought on their children's behalf. They wrote it down or recounted it orally, then analysed it to highlight the obstacles encountered, the support sought, the difficulties, the setbacks and the efforts made, using the "obstacle course" method (see page 52).

Some parents said, "We don't understand what's happening to us." This key phrase led to the development of knowledge that enabled parents to build their understanding of what they were experiencing and to reflect on their relationships with institutions.

Many of the battles involved the placement of children outside the family, a painful time when parents find themselves alone and have difficulty maintaining the bond with their children. They said they couldn't talk to their children about their efforts to return family life to normal: "we get blamed", "we don't have the right", and "it upsets the children". These were new key phrases that led us to look at the parent-child relationship in child protection. In Spain, child placements away from the parents are rare, and when such a measure is taken, the child is entrusted to other family members. Parents in Spain talked mainly about the social exclusion they suffer. They put family ties into the context of social ties.

The participants realised that they were experiencing similar things in very different countries. This gave rise to a desire to get to know one another better, to learn and understand how things are done elsewhere in order to develop proposals for change enriched by everyone's experiences.

A video of the meeting and a working document enabled parents who took part in the meeting to tell those in their group who could not attend, about what they had worked on.

#### **Until the end of 2022: writing and choosing a collective narrative**

Each group of parents agreed to choose an account about the struggles of one of their group, and then they worked on it to present the context, the legislation or policy concerned, the various people involved and their role, etc. This account described all the difficulties encountered, the obstacles, the battles fought, the resistance, the perseverance, the length of the battles, the support, the failures, the successes, etc.

A number of groups had difficulty choosing one person's account because no single account adequately reflected all their experiences. So they decided to build a narrative from pieces of each participant's experience.

In all cases, the account developed from being a personal narrative to a group narrative. It was translated and sent to another group, who in turn sent theirs. At that stage, all the accounts dealt with child protection and the placement of children away from their parents or out of the family.

#### **First trimester 2023: Analysis of the narrative using the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty**

As the countries are very different, the coordinating team sought a common

analytical framework that would enable dialogue and joint reflection. After discussions with the teams overseeing the various groups, it chose the framework of the international research on the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty. This was to prove a powerful method of analysis (see page 52).

The coordinating team asked each group of parents to analyse their own accounts by using the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty research framework.

Then the groups of parents were brought together in pairs: Switzerland and Brittany, the United Kingdom and Belgium, and Poland and Normandy. (Spain worked on its own using the Merging of Knowledge methodology with local academics and social activists. The Netherlands group, having finished writing a book, focused on intensifying engagements with partners to advocate for the rights of families facing extremely precarious situations.) After meeting two or three times, participants from one country analysed the accounts of parents from the other country, also using the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty framework.

The group of academics also met and analysed the accounts, again using the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty framework.

### **Incorporating this action-research into the work of the "Responsive" project<sup>9</sup>**

The coordinating team wanted this research work to be recognised for revealing and analysing experiences that have not been acknowledged. Anna Rurka is an ATD ally and a senior lecturer at the University of Paris Nanterre in psychological sciences and educational sciences. She also chairs the "Sciences with society for tomorrow's democratic world" programme as part of the "Sciences with and for society" initiative at the University of Paris Nanterre. It is in this capacity that she has proposed incorporating the Family Advocacy Project's research into the work of the "Responsive" project in which she is also involved. The "Responsive" project aims to "increase the openness, sensitivity, and responsiveness to the voices of citizens in social services across Europe, particularly in child protection". This collaboration presents an excellent opportunity for the Family Advocacy Project research to be studied at the university level and would give recognition to parents whose experiences have been overlooked and often silenced.

### **June 2023: In-person meetings of the paired groups with parents and academics. Research into the underlying causes for the difficulties and obstacles facing parents and children as well as the consequences impacting the children's lives.**

Meetings of the paired groups plus two academics were held over two days. Delegates from each group (between four and six people), presented their analysis of the narratives from the other group.

Day one: Presentation of the narrative and analysis.

In paired groups, we examined the underlying causes of the difficulties and

<sup>9</sup>The "Responsive" project: <https://responsive-europe.eu/>

obstacles parents and children encounter on a daily basis. We asked "why" and delved further by examining the underlying reasons.

Then we explored how these difficulties and obstacles affect the life and future of children. We debated the points of view of parents and academics regarding the best interests of the child.

Day two: The same process was followed for the other group's narrative. Each paired group produced eight texts: two narratives, two analyses based on the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty, two investigations into the causes, and two investigations into the consequences for children. These eight texts were translated into French, English, Polish, and Spanish.

One participant illustrated the essence of the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty with posters she created at the art workshop she participates in with her children (see page 75).

Each local group was led by an ATD Volunteer Corps member or an ally. The meetings in paired groups each brought together between twelve and sixteen people.

The group of academics worked on the same narratives using the same Hidden Dimensions of Poverty framework. They took part, two at a time, during the in-person meetings of the paired groups. Their contributions, particularly in terms of the law, epistemic injustice, and the invisibilisation of poverty, enabled the parents to fully identify with these concepts and broaden their field of thought.

The coordinating team wrote working documents based on these three meetings, enabling each country to assess the collective progress and work that was completed.

### **September 2023. Proposals for change**

Using the working documents as a basis, each local group was asked to meet with ATD's national delegation (or its proxy) in their respective country to brainstorm strategies for implementing changes.

**On 18-20 November 2023: Process and proposals review held at ATD's International Centre in Pierrelaye. The name of the session was: "Building a Future Without Poverty for Children: Parents and Society Together".**

On 18 and 19 November, all the participants in the Family Advocacy Project gathered together in preparation for the public presentation on 20 November. The day was chosen because it is the International Day for the Rights of the Child. The aim was to present the methodology, discuss the results with the attendees, and refine the desired changes and resulting proposals. Six researchers involved in the "Responsive" project shared their views on the work of the Family Advocacy Project. Each local group had invited people — professionals, researchers, and politicians — involved in the areas of change they wished to implement. The participation of these guests was an asset when it came to putting forward proposals for change.

# The Family Advocacy Project Process

"What are we doing wrong? Despite all our efforts, our children are experiencing the same poverty as we are."

2019

A coordinating team is set up

ATD Fourth World teams involved

Belgium (Flanders, Wallonia), France (Brittany, Normandy), the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom

2020

ATD Fourth World People's University sessions

Parents' groups created in each place

"What have we received from our parents or the people who raised us?"

2021

Contacting academics

Discussions between paired groups

Values and silence about poverty

"What weakens or reinforces family ties?"

15 May 2022

The Netherlands group concentrates on writing a book on the right to the protection of the family

Thinking, Acting, and Advocating so children have a future without poverty

"Why did I join the Family Advocacy Project?"  
Analysing a struggle in terms of an obstacle course — what helps and what hinders?

The academics form a group

We want things to change

We are fighters  
We can't tell our children  
We don't understand what's happening to us

October 2022

The group in Spain works on the Family Advocacy Project through an action-research using the Merging of Knowledge approach

In each place:  
• the group writes a narrative  
• they familiarise themselves with the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty framework

2023

The academics analyse all the narratives

The paired groups exchange their narratives and analyse them using the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty framework

All the narratives are related to child-protection issues

June 2023

The paired groups meet with two academics each and discuss their analyses, trying to understand the causes and consequences

Two major areas are identified for change:  
• the invisibilisation of poverty  
• rights

September 2023

Each place works out proposals for change

18-20 November 2023

Group work in three workshops, each including two paired groups and two academics

Three proposals for change are written for the invisibilisation of poverty and three for rights

20 November 2023

Public presentation of proposals for change

2024 and beyond....

Projects in each country to make known and promote the changes needed

Leading questions from parents
  Group meetings
  Parallel work at national levels
  Results or outcomes
  Work at local levels
  Group work

## 2- THE METHODOLOGY BASED ON THE NARRATIVES AND THEIR ANALYSIS

**On two occasions, the Family Advocacy Project used one of the narratives as part of the research method.** After the meeting on 15 May 2022, all the participants spoke of this narrative as "**an account of struggle**" because it was about the very difficult interactions between parents and institutions. The coordinating team asked the participants to analyse this account using different methods, first using the "obstacle course" method and then using the framework of the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty international research carried out jointly with Oxford University and ATD Fourth World.

Parents spoke of the many painful things that happen to their children: the rejections, the humiliations, and the misunderstandings. They also said how hard they have to struggle to survive. It seemed essential to be able to record in writing a moment in their lives as parents when they had invested in their children's future, whatever the outcome.

**They were asked to describe a moment when they wanted to change things for the sake of their children's future.** Focusing on an important, and often painful, moment in their lives in this way means rediscovering a chronology, untangling the different things that happen at the same time, finding the people involved, their functions, the institutions to which they belong, etc., in order to make themselves understood by others. It also means being able to express how they feel. These struggles were expressed either orally or in writing.

**Each parent was then asked to analyse their personal account using the "obstacle course" method.** They were given cards with obstacles and cards that identified support measures. First, they named one obstacle they had encountered on the card and identified whether this obstacle made them slow down, come to a halt, need assistance, or regress. They also had cards to identify the support they received or accessed and how that helped them to advance. Thanks to this method, parents understood the types of obstacles they face; some obstacles can be beyond their control, while others are administrative or personal in nature. With this initial analysis, the parents became aware that they are, each and every one of them, fighters — people who do not give up, even if there are periods of discouragement. The process helped to highlight steps that were taken over time and to understand what can help and what does not. It's a strength for the future. These "accounts of struggle" and these struggles are long, sometimes spanning several years. They affect vital aspects of their family life. After careful examination, the parents saw that the support came from people they knew but not from an institution; the institutions appeared to be obstacles to be overcome. One father said, "We have to fight for the bare necessities in life and that's not fair," and also, "It's a battle we fight."

The struggles spoken of related to housing, school, and health, and also very often to child-protection measures, whether it be the placement of children out of their care or the fear of placement.

During the analyses of the narratives, the parents were asked: "Do you tell the children about the battles you are fighting for them?" Without hesitation,

they replied, "No," adding that in the context of child protection, they were not allowed to talk about it. Either they are forbidden to do so, as is the case in the United Kingdom when children are adopted, or they are advised against it so that the children are not upset.

By using this method, the participants in the Family Advocacy Project were confronted with the fact that the institutions are different from one European country to another, and that it is difficult to understand their role and to go into more detail about them. What's more, the accounts were given by individuals, and after the meeting on 15 May 2022, in response to the parents' desire to continue meeting, the coordinating team proposed moving on to **a more collective stage.**

In this stage, the coordinating team asked each group of parents to choose one individual account from the group, one with which they could all identify. They were also asked to choose an account about a situation that needs to change to give their children a better future. However, while some groups followed the instructions to the letter, others constructed a narrative from bits and pieces borrowed from one another's accounts. This was the case when the parents' accounts all had the same theme, for example their relationship with their children in care. Parents were required to explain the institutions or people mentioned in the account so that a group of parents from another country could understand them.

All the accounts chosen focused on situations involving child protection. This is a policy that causes them great suffering and prevents them from contributing to a future without poverty for their children, and in respect of which they want to work on proposals for change.

**One group's narrative was sent to another group to be analysed using the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty framework.** By proposing this same analysis framework, the coordinating team and the group leaders wanted to facilitate a deeper understanding and dialogue between groups with different contexts. In previous meetings we had not seen this deeper level of understanding. This method enabled parents in one country to understand the lives of parents in another. They saw the similarities and the differences. They were able to identify the suffering they have to endure and the resistance it develops, the obstacles to taking action such as being deprived of the power to act, institutional or social maltreatment, and unrecognised contributions. They were able to identify what prevents their struggles from bearing fruit. Sometimes they were scandalised by the practices or laws of another country, and at other times they discovered actions that could help them in their own country.

When the two paired groups exchanged their stories and worked together during the two-day workshop, the discussions were rich. At this stage, the academics contributed their own analysis, highlighting what the parents recounted about their experiences. For example, when parents talked about professionals and said, "They know and we don't," the academics identified this as epistemic injustice; that is, an injustice linked to knowledge. Or when parents said, "They give us appointments to go and see our children during our working hours," academics talked about the invisibilisation of poverty; that is, the failure to perceive the reality of the lives of families and individuals living in poverty. Another example shared was, "It's hard to leave our children but we don't have the right to show it," which resulted in the

academics talking about emotional castration, etc. This dialogue with academics enabled parents to move from the descriptive to the analytical, so that they were able to put their thoughts into words and know that their experience was recognised and studied. It gave them strength, reassuring them that they are not alone, that this is a prevalent occurrence in society (see pages 54 to 56).

This stage was fundamental to identifying the causes of the difficulties and obstacles that the parents face every day. Additionally, it was essential in considering the proposals for change and the following questions: If there is institutional maltreatment, why is there institutional maltreatment and how can it be remedied? If there is social maltreatment, why is there social maltreatment, and how can it be remedied? If the contributions of people experiencing poverty are not recognised, i.e. their knowledge, skills, and actions, why are they not recognised and how can that be remedied? (See page 58.)

### **3-EXTRACTS FROM THE ANALYSIS OF THE NARRATIVES USING THE HIDDEN DIMENSIONS OF POVERTY FRAMEWORK**

As detailed above, one account, or composite account, was prepared by each group of parents. These were exchanged, and during workshops each group analysed an account prepared by another group using the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty framework. Working in pairs, each group presented its chosen dimension(s) for analysis. They may have opted to develop a particular dimension because it appears frequently in the narrative, or because it highlights a major injustice. In each workshop, two academics also analysed the two accounts, using the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty framework. Each of the analyses — that of the parents and that of the academics — were improved after being discussed among the participants. In all the workshops, and therefore in all the narratives, the interdependence between suffering, resistance, and disempowerment — the heart of the framework — was essential to understanding situations and the fact that they persist and are reproduced. Also, the core of the framework is strongly linked to the dimensions of social maltreatment, institutional maltreatment and unrecognised contributions.

Here are some extracts from the analyses:

#### **Unrecognised contributions**

Parent: "When my daughter was in hospital, they wouldn't let me bathe her. A nurse told me, 'I'll do it,' and then asked, 'Do you know how?' I used to do it at home. It's painful when you feel prejudice and judgement towards yourself."



Parent: "I had to prove to the social services that my children were not in danger because of my disability. My child was placed with me, in our home, but with the usual child protective measures in place."

Parent: "The professionals didn't understand because they didn't receive the same education. They haven't realised who we are. They all have the same training manual [...] and they ask us to follow this manual so that they can give us back our children. But perhaps this training method should be changed, or the manual should be written in another language that we can understand."

Academic: "What is not recognised in parents is their ability, their competence, and their knowledge of how to educate and care for their children. In philosophy [...] we call it epistemic injustice; that is, injustice linked to knowledge."

### **Institutional or social maltreatment**

Parent: "Institutions like to have a hold on us. They dictate our visiting hours; the days are always on weekdays. We're looking for work and it's getting in the way of the visiting hours, so they ask us to get a job. It's like a snake biting its own tail."

Parent: "Procedure takes precedence over families."

Parent: "I'm going to talk about institutional maltreatment: for example, we're always told we're not trying hard enough, we're always told to do more."

Academic: "I saw social maltreatment as a way of looking at children and parents with preconceived ideas, in other words, with distorting glasses. Even before you (the parents) enter the courts or the offices, there are already preconceived ideas in the way you are perceived."

### **Empowerment**

Parent: "What I find terrible is that we mustn't show our emotions. It's forbidden. It's not right. But what they forget is that we're human beings."

Academic: "There's the idea of emotional castration, meaning that families are prevented from expressing and passing on their emotions to their children. It's as if it were wrong to have emotions. It's a very strange idea; emotions are part of attachment, part of what we build in a family."

### **Suffering**

Parent: "You're suffering and the people in front of you don't realise that you're suffering."

Parent: "Parents don't want to be told to be resilient. Sometimes they can't get up and do everything for their children every day. This word resilience hits us over the head. If you're not resilient it's because you haven't done what you've been told."

Academic: "You're not a bad parent if you're not resilient. It's something that shouldn't be turned against people. Resilience is a substitute for social protection in the sense that if the state can no longer provide income, it says

'be resilient'. The expectation that can come from that is that people have to cope on their own."

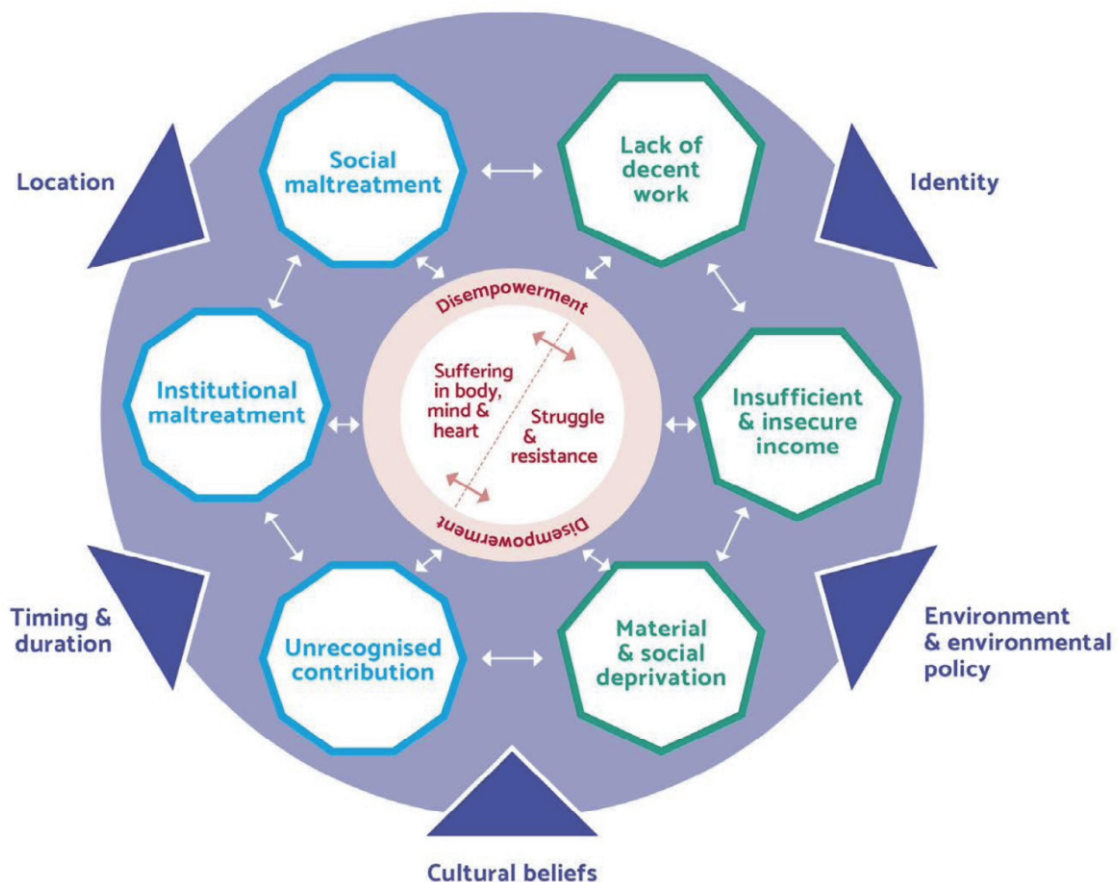
### Resistance

Parent: "To resist is to refuse to go backwards. And to fight is to want to move forward."

Parent: "The fight is what we must do and resistance is within us."

Parent: "I dared to say it in front of the judge. My lawyer said, 'calm down', and I said, 'I'm not going to calm down. My children have been in care for fourteen years. They're asking me to get a place to live, I don't have my children; they're asking me to do certain things, I don't have my children; I do what they say, I don't have my children. I'm fighting for other people's children, not for myself personally."

Academic: "You said that sometimes you express your anger and it's not taken well by judges or social workers. People are often afraid to express anger or to let it out because it's not socially valued. [...] but at the same time, if we don't express this anger and use it as a resource for resistance, it actually causes suffering. I don't think we should be afraid of our anger and we should sometimes take it on board, because it's a political resource."



*ATD Fourth World - Oxford University  
diagram on the dimensions of poverty, January 2019*

## 4- A LOOK AT THE METHODOLOGY FOR BUILDING PATHWAYS FOR CHANGE

Analysis of the narratives using the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty framework enabled us to identify the causes of the difficulties or injustices that parents encounter in building relationships with their children under child-protection measures.

**The participants, and first and foremost the parents, want to develop proposals for change, and to do this they need to get to the reasons behind the causes.** The coordinating team calls this approach “underlying causes”. For example, the parents often mention having experienced institutional maltreatment. We need to find the causes of this maltreatment: Where does it come from? Why can it exist? Why doesn't anyone seem to see it?

It is also necessary to recognise **the consequences** that these difficulties or injustices have on parents, children, professionals, and society. Recognising the consequences for parents is no easy task, because they are catastrophic, locking people into suffering and trauma that cannot be erased, that are part of their history, and that they feel will be passed on to future generations.

This work on the consequences and underlying causes (see pages 58 and 59) leads to the identification of two main areas in which proposals should be made:

- **The invisibility of extreme poverty in child-protection systems**
- **The access to fundamental rights in child-protection systems**

Each group was asked to meet with its ATD Fourth World national delegation (or its proxies) to reflect on potential changes in these two main areas.

On receiving the work from each country, the coordinating team noted that in respect of the invisibilisation of poverty, the proposals for change related to the help that parents need in order to have or regain a family life, training for all the professionals and stakeholders (perhaps training together), and relationships with the institutions. In the area of the law and the exercise of fundamental rights, the proposals for change related to the adversarial court hearing, the child-protection file and records, and the duration of temporary placement.

## 5- EXTRACTS FROM DISCUSSIONS ABOUT THE UNDERLYING CAUSES OF THE INVISIBILISATION OF POVERTY

Parents in Poland and in France asked each other questions:

"In France, is poverty a reason for placing children in care?"

– "We feel it's because of poverty, but they don't say so. They say we're not stable because we don't have housing, or because we were removed from our parents as children. We are placed into care from generation to generation. The judges blame our childhood for what our future will be."

"And in Poland, are people placed in care for reasons of poverty?"

– "It depends on the cooperation between the family and the social services. We find ourselves in situations where the family has been given conditions to fulfil, but these conditions are unattainable for the family. We tell them to do something and they don't have the money to do it."

Parent: "In my family, we're scared because we know we can't ask for help without being judged or asked to do something. We're afraid they'll take our children away from us. And that's what happens. In fact, we don't ask for anything anymore; it's just easier to manage on our own."

Academics' contribution

Academic: "[There is] a report produced by the National Observatory of Poverty and Social Exclusion [in France] which highlights four dimensions of the invisibilisation of parents in child protection. One of these is extremely important, and is echoed in the discussions we had earlier: the invisibilisation of living conditions in the broadest sense. [...] The second dimension is the invisibilisation of parents as the primary educators of their children. The third dimension is being rendered invisible as a social being. In other words, we tend to think that there's nothing around the parents or that the environment around parents is not necessarily a good one. [...] And the last invisibilisation is that we don't necessarily recognise parents as citizens, like everyone else with all the rights associated with the status of citizen, to be able to express themselves, defend themselves, speak out, etc."

**Regarding child-protection law and the exercise of fundamental rights**

Parent: "As parents, we don't know all our rights. The rights exist, but only in theory. The judge doesn't feel obliged to inform us. He knows the law and for him that's enough. But the judge is not a better person than we are. That's why everyone needs to know their rights, so that all parties are on an equal footing. Because we don't know our rights, we can't exercise them."

Parent: "The judge has granted us visits from all our children together, but despite our repeated requests, the services don't organise them. Nothing happens. On the other hand, if they ask us for something and we don't do it, they're going to space out our visiting rights. They have the right to make a mistake, but we don't."

Academic: "Entry into child protection is defined by the protection of the child. As a parent, you are not seen as someone who needs help, but as a parent who is failing, without anyone questioning your living conditions. This presumption of failure underpins the asymmetry in relations between parents and professionals and justifies the domination of institutions over parents."

## 6- EXTRACTS FROM DISCUSSIONS ON THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE REMOVAL OF CHILDREN FROM THE CARE OF THE PARENTS

Parent: "My children don't know why they're in care. They resent me; they withdraw into themselves."

Parent: "Given that our child was placed in care at birth, a six-day-old baby, I don't see how he can understand 'we're putting you in foster care'. Even we didn't really understand why; he was just an infant."

Parent: "Children are placed in institutions for their own safety. But by putting him in an institution he will be less loved, not embraced; there are a lot of psychological problems, and the child will be looked down upon by the other children, for example at school."

Parent: "Children are given the impression that their parents don't want them, when this is not the case. Psychologically and emotionally, this can have physical consequences. Certain shocks can make you ill. The child does not understand what is happening to them and cannot express their emotions. They tend not to accept their emotions. They don't understand and they don't have the words to understand. This destroys both parent and child. We're told that they're putting them there until the parent gets better, but instead they're exacerbating the problem. They don't listen to the problems of the children or the parents. And that's hard."

Academic: "Regarding the impact on children, the first is on attachment. In order to develop, babies need what we call an attachment figure. This is the person who will take care of them on a daily basis, and it's very important for their development. And when there's a rupture, when there's a placement, it means there's also a separation from the attachment figure. This can be very, very difficult for the child, which is why they can become very agitated afterwards because they are separated from the figure that is important to them."

Academic: "[When siblings are separated], there's something about the breakdown of ties that clearly signals an injustice. An injustice linked to this inability to pass on [life knowledge, values, and family history]. We often think of transmission between parents and children, but we can also think of it between brothers and sisters, and between children and parents."

4-

**VIEWPOINT OF THE FAMILY  
ADVOCACY PROJECT  
COORDINATING TEAM:**

cross-cutting issues that emerged

In this section, the coordinating team aims to bring together important aspects of the work on the Family Advocacy Project. From the beginning, one of these aspects, transmission of knowledge within the family, recurred in one form or another at each stage of the project. The other two, the lack of democracy and the role of fathers, emerged in the course of the research and at each stage. Without being named as such, they inspired proposals for change and in some cases reshuffled the methodology.

## 1- PASSING ON A FAMILY HISTORY IN THE CONTEXT OF CHILD PROTECTION

During the **Fourth World People's University sessions and from the very first meetings of the Family Advocacy Project**, the participants stated that during their own childhood, life was hard, their parents had many difficulties and worries, but that they had received from them values such as courage, resistance, respect, and politeness towards others and the importance of work. There were also moments of shared happiness, but the challenges of their parents' lives did not always allow, or did not allow enough, for words or tokens of affection.

Those who have been placed in care talked about the insecurity caused by this break-up of the family, an insecurity that persists throughout their lives. In particular, they expressed the fear of not knowing how to act as a parent because they were deprived of a role model during their childhood. This fear is all the greater because it is the image of them that institutions reflect back to them. The transmission of information between parents and children in the context of child protection is severely hampered, yet whatever the circumstances of their lives, children need to know their history and need to talk to a variety of people, including members of their own family, in order to understand it.

In many situations, neither the parents nor the children understand the reasons for the removal of the children and their placement into care. The explanations given by judges or professionals remained outside their own understanding. This lack of understanding of the reason for the removal of the children has long-term impacts on both the children and the parents. The parents are afraid that this pattern will repeat itself without them being able to do anything to change the course of events. They harbour strong fears and distrust of institutions. In the course of this research, the parents expressed the view that they were not so much looking for explanations for what they were experiencing as looking for a meaning that they could pass on to their children and thus give them a glimpse of a different future. In the analyses using the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty framework, the parents dwelt at length on the suffering they were experiencing and on the emotions they were unable to express to their children. They said that their children were also suffering, and that the placement made them powerless in the face of this suffering. The parents also said that sometimes the experience is so difficult that they have no words to express it, no trusted interlocutors to receive it, and they remain in silence; a silence that weighs heavily between parents and children.

During the placement, **the meeting times between parents and children** (see

page 36) are most often very short and spread out over a long time, and so do not allow for an in-depth meeting that would encourage the transmission of knowledge between parents and children. The parents of children placed in care soon after birth even wonder whether the child will recognise them from one visit to the next. The Normandy parents' group calculated that the average visiting time is two hours every fortnight, so about two days a year in total; or, if the child is placed from birth until the age of eighteen, about thirty-six days in eighteen years. Under such conditions, in such a short space of time, what can be experienced and passed on between parents and children?

What's more, these visits are supervised — they take place in the presence of a third party. All gestures, attitudes, and words are studied and interpreted by the supervising professional. Parents say they are unable to express emotions such as the pain of separation because they are told it will upset the child. Yet the transmission of emotions between parents and children also involves dialogue. Nor can they tell their children that they are doing everything they can to ensure they return home, because this decision is not theirs to make. By telling their children this, they will be giving them hopes and expectations that are likely to upset them. They cannot pass on to their children everything they do for them.

When siblings are placed in care, they are rarely placed together, even when it is recognised that they have a strong bond. Parental visits are very often scheduled for each child separately, with services unable to coordinate a visit with all the children at the same time. So, over time, the brothers and sisters take different paths in life. They no longer know each other or share the same history. There is no longer any possibility of transmission between brothers and sisters. Yet parents tell us how important their own siblings have been and still are to them as a source of support in their lives.

As the children grow up, the only **evidence they have of their history** is reports from social workers, formal reports highlighting shortcomings, difficulties, constant moves, etc. They have no access to the views of their parents or other adults important to them, such as their teachers, sports coaches, grandparents, and others about their childhood (see page 34). Children suffer, not only during their childhood but throughout their lives, from not having the keys to understanding their parents, and sometimes some end up resenting their parents. This is a considerable disservice to families who live in poverty.

Throughout the Family Advocacy Project, parents — even those raising their own children — spoke about separation and placement of children in care. They told us about it as if it were a fear instilled in them, passed on through generations in their environment of extreme poverty. The professionals who work with these parents belong to services that are proud of the progress their institutions have made and of the new knowledge they are applying to parenting. They are unaware of the history and practices that preceded them, or they want to turn the page without having carried out a thorough evaluation of the history of the institution they work for. Like all professionals, they can work in the present without paying attention to the past. This **disparity creates a gulf between parents and professionals**, a profound lack of awareness that is a source of many problems and undermines parents' and institutions' search for purpose.



The Sudan family in Switzerland collaborated with an ATD Volunteer Corps member to document their family history spanning three generations. This narrative sought to understand the relationship between society, institutions, and people living in poverty over a long time (see the attached family portrait). The first generation lived through the coercive social measures implemented in Switzerland until 1981. The Swiss Confederation, acknowledging the violence inherent in these practices, issued a formal apology in 2013. Throughout the Sudan family's history, we can see the **weight of the trauma inflicted** by these measures over several generations. We became aware of the family's ensuing "bad" reputation following them, and of the resources and time the family needed to rebuild and assert their identity in the face of powerful institutions.

One of the small working groups of the Family Advocacy Project included a Belgian professional who had worked for many years in a child-protection service. During a meeting on 20 November 2023, she asked the parents in the group to forgive her for what they were subjected to in the context of child protection. She said that she had become aware of this by participating in the Agora group, in which parents and professionals looked together at the application of laws or draft legislation. This forum for dialogue between parents and professionals opened her eyes to the disparity between the aims of child-protection services and the realities experienced by parents and children. **This personal apology deeply moved** the parents. One mother said, "I always have to apologise to the social service professionals and services, and this is the first time I've ever received an apology." The news quickly spread to the other groups. This event demonstrates the weight of the collective trauma suffered by people living in poverty and highlights the impossibility of overcoming it without acknowledging its existence.

In the course of this work, we spoke of the injustice of transmission (see page 15), an injustice rooted in the invisibilisation of the history of people experiencing poverty with regard to child-protection systems. In section 2, the parents highlighted the invisibilisation of poverty as experienced by themselves and their children. This invisibilisation encompasses not only the harshness of their lives but also their daily resistance and their hopes that persist despite everything. If we look at this from the aspect of transmission, we can see that this invisibilisation not only pertains to the present, but also extends to the invisibilisation of their history.

Participants in the Fourth World People's University sessions say that there they can put into words their past and present experiences. There they feel listened to and respected. The sessions enable them to develop individual and collective thinking and identities.

During subsequent Family Advocacy Project meetings, the same need for social recognition emerged, a desire to transmit values within the family that children could take pride in and rely on for their own development. The question then arose: "What would enable the struggle of the parents of children in care to be valued and recognised?" Not all parents have a Fourth World People's University that they can attend, but the need for a group approach was part of the answer to this question. If parents are isolated in their struggle, without anyone to validate them, it is difficult for the child to feel proud. When the struggle becomes a collective one, shared and recognised by others, it takes its place in society and can be experienced with

pride. After the meeting on 20 November, some parents spoke to their children about the work of the Family Advocacy Project. One of the children, aged seventeen, spoke about it to his social worker. He was able to convey his parents' struggle, which had been recognised and validated by society. These children are challenging our societies — and each and every one of us — to assert the dignity of their parents' struggle.

## **2- LACK OF DEMOCRACY IN CHILD PROTECTION: ONE OF THE SOURCES OF INSTITUTIONAL MALTREATMENT A RETROSPECTIVE BY THE FAMILY ADVOCACY PROJECT TEAM**

We have just referred to a population unable to share its account of a heavy and traumatic past. This dispossession prevents people from standing before others with pride and hinders their engagement in a life within society. We want to highlight some aspects that came to our attention during the Family Advocacy Project: that is, many obstacles that prevent people from participating as citizens and that reveal a lack of democracy in child-protection services.

In some European countries, child-protection measures do not respect parents fundamental rights. For example, parents in the United Kingdom told us about the forced adoption that the majority of them have experienced. These are situations that they find very hard to talk about, so great is their suffering. These adoptions can be planned by social services before the child is born — particularly when other children have already been adopted — because of the possible future risks to the child. In Switzerland, parents are subject to general guardianship measures that make them dependent on the decisions of their guardian, even affecting their right to bring up their children. In addition to existing legislation in these two countries, we noted that child protection systems in other countries are seriously lacking in democracy. These include:

- unfair adversarial hearings;
- difficulty in accessing files;
- supposedly temporary placements that last a very long time, often until the child reaches the age of majority;
- assistance that does not guarantee the parents' fundamental rights; and parents being excluded from decisions about measures that affect their children.

These observations have led to proposals for change (see pages 15 and 34), with the aim of reducing institutional maltreatment, respecting parents' rights, and promoting democracy. But other aspects of a lack of democracy have emerged, less visible but just as important.

### **Lack of control over scheduling**

The first step in arranging visits between parents and children is finding mutually agreed dates and times. With parents living in poverty who have their children in care, this can be extremely difficult. Their schedules are almost entirely imposed on them, what with the dates and times they can visit their children, meetings with various social workers, medical appointments, job-hunting appointments, food distribution appointments, and so on.

Looking only at visits with children: because the children in a family do not

necessarily depend on the same service, parents may have several visits to make in different places. Fathers who are employed have the right to visit their children during working hours. The employer grants leave once or twice but cannot grant it every time, so these fathers do not see their children for long periods. The starting point is the social services' timetable, not the parents' availability. Not having control of their own time is a profound attack on personal freedom. This situation makes them dependent and does not allow them to take charge of improving their situation. They are expected to submit.

The services' stranglehold on parents' schedules often made it difficult to set up meetings for the Family Advocacy Project. It's as if parents aren't entitled to a social and civic life.

### **Guilty or presumed innocent?**

The European Court of Human Rights states that when a measure is taken in respect of a child, an attempt must be made to maintain the child in his or her family as far as possible. The primary responsibility for bringing up children lies with the parents, who must be helped. Placement should be exceptional, "as a last resort", and for as short a time as possible.

When parents in poverty are summoned before a judge, they are seen as parents at fault for many things. They say that they're going through a difficult time, that they've asked for help but it hasn't been forthcoming or hasn't been adequate or hasn't been soon enough. They are seen as the only people to blame for their children's situation, accused of neglect, instability, non-cooperation, etc. The professionals write this in their reports, which are sent to the judge. The parents are alone, devastated, unable to mount a defence. From the very first hearing, there is a presumption of guilt, not innocence as in other courts.

### **The right to take action together**

For parents, the period when their children's future is being decided is a time of great loneliness and isolation. In this intense trauma, they would like to be able to meet other parents who have been through the same thing, have experience, and can listen, support, and guide them in obtaining their rights. This need was expressed throughout the research and appears in several of the proposals for change. It goes beyond simply implementing one specific proposal or another. It is a question of democracy. Some projects are already being carried out; for example:

- In the United Kingdom and other countries, there is a support network of parents of children in care and their allies — professionals who want to support the parents' perspective.
- In Poland, the Korale association was set up to support parents when their children are placed in care. It provides support by listening and by helping parents to exercise their rights.
- In Flanders, Belgium, support families help families living in extreme poverty raise their children by working with them on holiday plans, outings, and so on.

Every country should promote the creation of associations and citizens' groups that are independent of institutions and have the resources to provide information and training to make the area of child protection more democratic.

### 3- THE ROLE OF FATHERS IN CHILD PROTECTION

Among the parents taking part in the Family Advocacy Project, fathers were more likely to be employed than mothers. It was difficult for them to engage fully in the research process, especially by attending group meetings. But they were interviewed, and the parents at the meetings took their input into account. They were also kept informed of progress, questions that came up, and results.

Fathers often say that child-protection services tend to prioritise mothers over them, even in cases where parents are separated and share parental responsibility. They are kept less informed. The same applies for schools and health services. Their working hours are not taken into account for appointments with social services or for visits to their children, and job insecurity means that they cannot afford to be absent.

They say they are apprehensive about meetings with professionals because they are afraid of losing their temper if they disagree. They have long experience of not being listened to. They do what they're told and they're always asked for more, but they can't ask the professionals for anything, and if they do they're most often refused. Yet they have a knowledge of their children that complements that of the mothers, and they would like to be able to express it. They have the impression that professionals are the people who know, and that their knowledge as fathers counts for nothing. There are misunderstandings about how to exercise parental authority. Yet these fathers want to pass on values to their children, and in particular they often cite the value of work.

In addition, the presence of men and fathers is evident in the mothers' reflections. A significant number of the women taking part in the Family Advocacy Project are separated. Several of them report that social services encouraged them to leave their partner in order to preserve their relationship with their children. The reasons given by the services can be many and legitimate. And the women are aware that their partner needs help, but when they ask for help they don't get adequate support. As a result, they find themselves on their own when the social services suggest they separate. They are alone in front of a difficult choice. They know that if they leave their partner, he will be abandoned by everyone, and there is a great risk that he will disappear from their children's lives without them understanding why. We wonder about the message this sends out to women, men, and children alike. Are steps being taken to help and protect the children and the mother, and to support the father in his concerns and his paternal role? The proposal to change the name of the child-protection service to "family support service – parents and children" promotes a global view of the family, so that men are no longer forgotten or hidden away.

The question of the role that fathers and mothers take on in building a family and in their relationship with social services could not be explored in depth in the course of this work. The question remains: Is the family sphere exclusively or predominantly associated with women in our contemporary societies and in their institutions, especially those responsible for child protection?

# 5- CONCLUSIONS and PERSPECTIVES

## AN APPROACH TO SOCIAL CHANGE

by Bruno Dabout, *Director General of the International Movement ATD Fourth World*

This report results from a great deal of hard, dedicated, and emotionally demanding work by families with lived experience of poverty. From different European countries, most of them have been involved with child-protection systems in their home nations. They make it clear that the issue of broken families and severed social ties is crucial when we look at the causes of persistent poverty. To tackle those causes, certain steps must be taken:

- Stop continuing to remove children from their families generation after generation;
- Stop people from experiencing social isolation and destitution as adults after growing up in the child-protection system;
- Stop harming adults by repeatedly asking them to give an account of their past, about their roots and their family history — narratives that have been deliberately hidden by the system, that have been invisibilised.

The work carried out by the Family Advocacy Project reflected in this report is central to the life of our movement. In the midst of poverty, the fear of children being removed and placed into the care of the state is still very present for parents in Belgium, France, Poland, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and other European countries where ATD Fourth World is present.

Over the last thirty years, members of ATD Fourth World have seen little progress and sometimes damaging setbacks in the goal of changing the child-protection system into a system of support for the whole family — children and parents. Statistics confirm that the number of non-consensual or "forced" placements of children outside their families and the number of children placed for adoption have both increased.

The "system" (which includes civil society as well as state institutions and the public) does not seem capable of distinguishing between removal because of sexual abuse or other physical violence in the household, which occur at all levels of society, and protective measures based on the parents' lack of formal education or their inability, because of their poverty, to ensure that their children have all they need in terms of food, clothes, housing, and education.

The system does not seem capable of combining child protection with the work to overcome poverty and exclusion, nor does it seem capable of preventing temporary separation measures from becoming permanent in the majority of cases involving families who live in poverty. In referring to failures of the system, this report does not seek to place blame on any one particular agency or group, and we are certainly not seeking to discourage people within the system who are doing their best and striving to improve lives. However, there are failures and we all need to be part of the solution.

At the heart of these failures is the system's apparent incapacity to recognise parents as stakeholders with whom professionals can and should collaborate to change difficult and sometimes inhumane situations. The parents are the missing partners in making the system work better and change in the right direction.

Part of the problem underpinning this situation is both a lack of financial resources and a lack of human resources.

This Family Advocacy Project enabled parents with lived experience of poverty to reflect on their personal experiences and those of others close to them. It also enabled them to understand the experiences and analyses of parents in other European countries. They discovered the differences in institutional and legislative organisation and the points in common in their respective child-protection systems. Perhaps unsurprisingly, their work revealed that, underneath the differences in child-protection policy and organisation from one country to another, and sometimes from one region or canton to another, there were systemic similarities. These similarities shaped the themes of the workshops and the recommendations.

It is clear in this report that the invisibilisation of poverty and the experience of poverty are major issues that we all need to address. Indeed, the suffering, resistance, and disempowerment that are at the heart of the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty, described in the international research conducted by ATD Fourth World and Oxford University from 2016 to 2019, are also at the heart of the accounts given by the participants in the Family Advocacy Project.

Making these "hidden dimensions" visible in this research made it possible to ask a number of key questions and then to examine and explore a range of measures to improve the culture, legal proceedings, and professional practice within the child-protection system.

Some of the key questions explored included:

- How can we develop training for professionals, parents, civil society organisations, and wider society that takes into account not only the situation of poverty but also the experience of parents, and that in doing so combats stereotypes?
- How can all of us involved in the system better receive and respond to parents' requests for assistance, so that they are empowered to act?
- How can we transform our relationships with institutions to shift away from a culture of control to one of trust and collaboration in raising children?

Cultural change in itself does not produce the required series of concrete changes for individual situations, but it does create the conditions to make them possible. This report demonstrates that we also need to change the culture and practice of the child-protection legal system because although the law is designed to protect individuals, it sometimes oppresses them. Some of the legal principles developed in the relevant case law of the European Court of Human Rights are not always implemented or not fully implemented. Key principles include the need to consider an out-of-family placement as a temporary measure and that whenever possible it should be terminated and the children reunited with their families. All related measures must be consistent with the ultimate objective of reuniting parents and children.

The participants compiled a range of recommendations that propose shifts in culture and approach, and are presented in this report. They include:



- Realising that it is not possible for parents to raise their children in a situation of constant surveillance. Parents express the need for assistance in their parenting efforts, but this support must be truly independent from supervision;
- Understanding the crucial need for transparency for all stakeholders. When someone goes to court for an alleged crime, they receive a file that includes the allegations against them. Yet when parents appear in family court, they do not have access to social services' reports detailing the accusations against them. It's essential for the parents to have access to these documents before the hearing;
- Requiring the social services' reports to incorporate the point of view of the parents and other adults involved, not only those of the mandated institutions. This inclusive approach ensures that the reports accurately reflect the parents' efforts and potential; and the views, wishes, and feelings of the child should be included;
- Improving the conduct of the adversarial hearing so that parents are able to participate fully;
- Changing the conditions under which supervised visits with children take place;
- Changing the commonly held view that parents living in poverty are negligent or incapable of raising their children.

The parents who took part in this project agreed to look back on some very painful experiences in their lives, provided that this would actually produce change, not just for themselves, but to secure a future without poverty for all children. To meet this challenge, we need to ask ourselves: Why is it so complicated to bring about change that will transform these systems?

The changes proposed by the participants are diverse in scope and nature. Some are specific changes, which seem tangible and concrete, yet they are challenging to implement. Behind them lie changes in practices and policies linked to a change in culture.

The complexity of the changes that need to be implemented explains in part why it is so difficult to get the system to address them despite the goodwill, enormous efforts, and intelligence of the families affected by these situations as well as the efforts of many professionals.

Institutions and associations must face up to a cultural change by taking parents' points of view into account, but they cannot do so alone without the support of a social transformation. The general public is not aware of what goes on in the child-protection system, and even less aware of the point of view of the parents who become involved in the system. They remain outside the system, leaving professionals, parents, and children trapped within it. Without public awareness, there will be no cultural change, and no political resources in terms of people or funding to support it.

The results of the Family Advocacy Project set out in this report are an intermediate stage in work that must continue and be introduced in different places, countries, regions, departments, cantons, etc. In each place, we need to find the right people to receive the proposals. The political proposals should be addressed at the national level and other levels of government. Other proposals can be supported by research initiatives at the broader European level.

Wherever they are made, if these proposals are to take shape and work together, there needs to be an ongoing evaluation, conducted with parents with lived experience of poverty, of how the system is evolving. We need to advocate for this evaluation and make it happen.

At this stage of the work, I am reminded of what Joseph Wresinski wrote for young members of the ATD Fourth World Volunteer Corps:

**"We should recognise that the harshest affliction striking human beings, especially the most impoverished, is the promise broken, the project unachievable, the commitment unfulfilled. Often, it is quite difficult to gauge what might be achievable now and tomorrow, but if we commit to the path of helping our neighbour, we are required then to fulfil our promises."**

—Joseph Wresinski, *Ecrits et Paroles aux Volontaires*

We very much hope that this research will contribute to the journey that mothers and fathers with experience of poverty, ATD Fourth World activists and Volunteer Corps members, professionals, researchers, and people from all walks of life are taking together to bring about social transformation that will build a future without poverty for all children.



# ANNEXES

## Creative Expressions

by two participants in the Family Advocacy Project

## Participants in the family advocacy project

## Bibliography

## Acknowledgements

# CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS BY TWO PARTICIPANTS IN THE FAMILY ADVOCACY PROJECT

Feelings and fears of living in poverty  
by Tammy Mayes

You wake in the morning and wonder what the day will bring.  
You worry, will another bill come through the door?

Will you be able to pay it?

Will there be a knock on the door?

We're doing our best with the means we have, our children are fed, clothed, a roof over their heads, and the big part is they are loved.

You worry about what people think;



you don't tell people you live in poverty,

You feel shame; you feel guilty because people expect you to do what they feel is right!

We go without, so our children have everything they NEED. It's not designer stuff, but who cares? Society does!

Why, I don't know!!

Why is it important for children to have designer stuff?  
Why aren't normal clothes good enough?

Children are precious: when you're pregnant, all you can do is imagine how they will be! You want what's best for them.



Drawings by Emmanuelle Jaffres

But you know designer stuff is not the be-all and end-all!

The schools demand you buy this, and buy that but they don't understand that you budget for everything.

You see the smiles on your children's faces; you see how happy they are!

All they want is your love and cuddles, you don't need money for that!

Children don't need designer stuff; they don't need the latest technology. They need love, clothes, food, and a roof over their head.

You get into debt to fit into society.

Why? When will people learn that living in poverty is NOT NEGLECT?

People in poverty have lots going for them. They are human beings, not a number.



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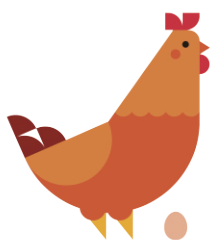
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