



**Merging of Knowledge
and Practices**
when working with people
living in situations of poverty



ATD
FOURTH WORLD

Pinciples

August 2016

A specific way of being and acting

The Merging of Knowledge and Practices approach when working with people living in situations of poverty© is a philosophy, a specific way of being and acting, which materializes into projects and actions aimed at fighting poverty and social exclusion. It is a continuous search for the very specific conditions which will enable people living in poverty to truly be partners and actors, with others, in creating a more just society.

The Merging of Knowledge approach is:

- **C**onsidering each person in poverty as someone who thinks and who can teach me what no one else can teach me about poverty and society. This is also about considering the person as someone who is personally engaged for the cause or may be engaged on behalf of his or her community (activism).
- **A**ccepting to challenge our own knowledge, representations, practices and be willing to make room for new questions, taking into account unrecognized knowledge brought forward by those most excluded.
- **B**eing convinced that the society needs the knowledge and know-how of people in poverty, merged with other knowledges and practices, in order to better combat poverty.
- **B**eing concerned with not isolating oneself with people in poverty; rather, having the ambition to join them, enriching knowledge together and with others, through a collective work, to build projects and a future together.

The ways in which we behave and act depend on these elements: Do I allow the person to develop and express his/her thoughts, to teach us things, to question our ways of thinking and acting by taking into account the views of each person ?

Reciprocity ---

What characterizes the Merging of Knowledge and Practices approach is the reciprocity. The approach is designed to guarantee that knowledge is developed within a relationship with people living in poverty, a relationship in which they can teach the others and learn themselves.

A comprehensive approach

Solidarity and activism, group gathering and times of knowledge-merging, are each part of the same approach: the Wresinski approach. These three dynamics encourage people in poverty to act from a place of autonomy and foster their engagement in the fight against poverty, alongside other committed citizens, together creating a supportive community that leaves no one behind and enables everyone to exercise their fundamental rights. These three dynamics are not exclusive but complementary, as we always go back and forth between these three elements.

The process of the Merging of Knowledge should in no way be reduced to a method or a set of techniques that we simply apply. It is an approach, because depending on the context, we look into how different types of knowledge - which usually ignore or reject one another - can meet, can question each other and ultimately, create new knowledge.

A pedagogy on this Merging of Knowledge

approach has been developed and refined by the ATD Fourth World Movement.

It allows each person to express oneself, to listen carefully to the ones having most difficulties, to take into account his or her thinking. It enables a co-production of knowledge for social change. Training programs, times for reflection, are organized to help implement this approach, to support one another.

Presence

- **Breaking the isolation** - The starting point is the presence through solidarity and activism: Reaching out to people isolated by extreme poverty, being available to receive what they live and say, understanding their ways of resisting and fighting. The ambition is to build from them and with them this Movement against poverty and for an inclusive society.

Group gathering

- **Recognizing oneself as part of a bigger group** - Then comes the time of gathering with other persons experiencing the same realities, along with other committed citizens, in order to develop a thinking, expression, dialogue, and build true activism.

Knowledge-merging

- **Being a partner of the society** - Times of knowledge-merging allow, through a specific pedagogy, to build knowledge between different actors, with training, action and research purposes.

Merging of Knowledge in 9 points

These key points are guidelines for organizers and facilitators of knowledge-merging. The charter 'Guidelines for the Merging of Knowledge and Practices When Working with People Living in Situations of Poverty and Social Exclusion' and the book «The Merging of Knowledge and Practices» are the reference texts to understand and implement this approach.

1 Setting a concrete goal

Knowledge-merging, just like participation, is not an aim in itself. The goal is the eradication of poverty and each phase of knowledge-merging has a proper goal that contributes to this objective and which has to be explained to all the actors involved in the process.

Examples of goals : Academic success for all children of a neighborhood – training to become full-fledged actors in a society – Guarantee access to healthcare for all - ...

2 Group composition

Merging knowledge involves collaborative work between actors in a situation of poverty (life experience) and actors with social, professional, political responsibilities (practical knowledge) or involved with research (academic knowledge).

The aim of any knowledge-merging action is to strengthen people in situations of poverty in their ability to think and act with others in the interest of their own projects. The association or the group of which they are members engage with each other over duration of time as a way to support their training, commitment and responsibility.

It is necessary that professionals or organizational members participating in the merging of knowledge are supported by their institutions so that it impacts not only the individuals but also the institutions.

3 Working in peer groups (professional and/or researchers – persons in situations of poverty)

Knowledge-merging is about alternating between individual reflection and collective work. Peer groups allow each group to hold autonomous knowledge, which is valued and sometimes challenged. Peer groups form spaces where people are encouraged to develop free thinking.

They foster knowledge-building through exchanges and safety in expressions of differences of opinion between people acknowledging their belonging to the same group. This implies for facilitators to provide support for each person and group, during the transition from individual to collective reflection and even more so when resistance might arise because of this transition.

5 What people in poverty say is both the starting point and the guiding thread of the approach

This is a fundamental ethical principle. The role of facilitators here is crucial to successfully identify the unusual, quirky, disturbing perspective, not necessarily understandable at the beginning, which is often brought forward by the most excluded person. It is from this point of view, this experience that we can question the practices, concepts, political choices ...of other actors.

This is about making room to what can shed a new light, and for the knowledge-merging to produce new understandings, practices, and a more comprehensive knowledge.

4 Co-facilitation

- The group of people in poverty is accompanied by a referent-facilitator (most likely from a social organization) who knows about their life realities, who is close to them. The facilitator must guarantee their freedom of expression, which is the reason why he/she cannot be related to those of the group by constraints of intervention, e.g. as their service provider.

- The group of professionals/researchers is accompanied by a referent-facilitator who is himself a practitioner or researcher, who knows about their professional realities, and who is accepted by them. He/She guarantees their freedom of expression and cannot be in a direct hierarchical relationship.

- The co-facilitation is equally performed by the facilitators of each group. Facilitators have the responsibility of the pedagogy and are trained in the Merging of Knowledge approach.

Facilitation

peer groups / merging

Personal Reflection / group reflection

Presentation of reflection

Listening to each person / group et comprehension questions

Exchanges and reactions between people / groups

Co-construction and collective decision

6 Working on mutual representations

This is systematically the first step. The aim here is to become aware of our own representations and those of others, to realize how personal experience influence the ways in which we see and engage with others.

It is a way to get to know each other and start a cooperative work by setting forth the first conditions which will enable dialogue.

8 Co-production and co-writing: From the merging of knowledge to the merging of powers

Facilitators support the participants so they can - drawing on the former cross-analysis and confrontation - identify and put in shape elements they deem as essential: questions, points of agreement or disagreement, action plan, working scope, conditions, recommendations, elements of knowledge...

Without confrontation, there cannot be any collective construction. The best way to really confront points of view is to engage each other in a common production.

This phase is important not to distort the words, the ideas of people in poverty and to ensure that they master their ideas, with others, all the way through.

It is also a way for these people to be able to take the ownership, explain and promote this work done in common.

7 Cross-analysis and confrontation

In the Merging of Knowledge approach, we start from the reality of life experience, not from abstract ideas. This analysis of reality by the peer group is the basis for the cross-analysis that takes place in plenary session.

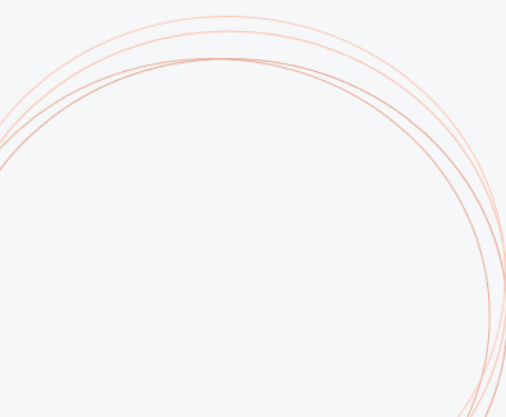
Each participant and each peer group expresses their viewpoint, debates them, and agrees to confront the views of the other group.

To confront is to compare, but it is also about taking into account what the other says to help reconsider points of view, different ways of doing, different knowledge.

9 Taking time, adapting to each other's pace, having faith in the intelligence of people in poverty and in collective intelligence.

During the discussion, everyone has the right to have his/her own pace of comprehension and expression. It is necessary to respect times of silence, to allow each person to go after what he/she means, and to understand together the meaning of some words. Sometimes tensions arise from both sides during the exchanges, so going back to peer groups then can be a useful mean to take the necessary distance.

The duration is essential for in-depth work. Long duration is necessary to create trust, establish a dialogue, analyze situations, understand what the other is saying, prepare our own interventions. Duration is however related to the objectives that we set, but in any case we always need to take into account the time of maturation.



About types of knowledge

In the merging of knowledge and practices with people in poverty approach, three sources of knowledge are mobilized: theoretical/academic knowledge - knowledge of action/professional knowledge - knowledge related to life experience.

These types of knowledge are plural and complementary. One type of knowledge cannot replace the other. All knowledge is under construction and may be revised anytime. In doing so, there is always a back and forth and a constant verification between theory, practice and the realities of life.

It is also necessary to recognize the knowledge associated with the life experience of people living in poverty.

It is widely acknowledged that scientists, academics have a knowledge. They have been learning in schools, in universities, they continue to learn from the research they conduct, the readings they immerse themselves in, the symposia they attend worldwide... They have a knowledge that is theoretical, academic.

Professionals of social action, be it social work, health, education, justice, democratic institutions... all have knowledge acquired during their training, deepened by their actions on the ground and by team work.

In the merging of knowledge and practices approach, there is a third partner: people in poverty who bring knowledge from their life. This is not just a personal life experience, but a true knowledge, just as academic knowledge and knowledge of action are. It is a knowledge that is built from the analysis of the experience: when people no longer have jobs, when children are failing at school, when people no longer have the means to defend themselves in court, are forced to live on the street, can not seek medical treatment, when they are not consulted and count for nothing.

For life experience to become communicable knowledge, it must be built with others. Life testimony is not enough, it has to be analyzed, confronted, articulated with other information.

It is the role of some social and civic organizations to allow people with difficult life experiences to come together, to express themselves, to confront their viewpoints to build a knowledge to be crossed with others.

A LITTLE BIT OF HISTORY

The challenge of merging knowledge and practices has been identified and initiated by the ATD Fourth World Movement and is rooted in the approach taken by Joseph Wresinski, through two Franco-Belgian programs of action research - training « Fourth World - University » (1996-1998) and « Fourth World Partner » (2000-2001).

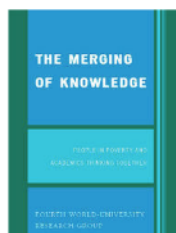
Both programs gathered academics (professors and researchers) from different fields (law, economics, sociology, history, psychology, educational sciences...), professionals from different sectors (education, justice, police, youth welfare, social work, health, vocational training, housing, public service, culture...) mandated by their institutions, and members of ATD Fourth World - among them activists with experience of poverty - allies and full-time volunteers.

To know **more**

- **Guidelines for the Merging of Knowledge and Practices when working with people living in situations of poverty and social exclusion**

<https://www.atd-quartmonde.fr/charte-du-croisement-des-savoirs-et-des-pratiques-fr-angl-nl-esp-it/>

- **Book : “The Merging of Knowledge: People in Poverty and Academics Thinking Together**



This book relates the success of a seemingly impossible challenge: to have a group of academics and people living in persistent poverty conduct research together. What conditions can the knowledge drawn from poverty cross with academic rigor? What type of knowledge does this collaboration result in? This is what The Merging of Knowledge presents in terms of the processes of The Fourth World-University program and the result of its five groups of work: history, family, knowledge, work and human activity, and citizenship.

The Merging of Knowledge and Practices approach

The approach is developed by ATD Fourth World through Merging of Knowledge Workshops supporting projects worldwide.

In France, the Wresinski Network on «Participation and Knowledge-merging» is open to anyone who is committed to an approach based on partnership and active participation of people and populations living in extreme poverty. This network aims at reflecting about the implementation and development of the merging of knowledge and associated projects in France.

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Merging of Knowledge and Practices Workshops

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