In the Fourth World Movement in New York, we’ve been preparing the following statement for a few months. We come from all walks of life: some of us are experiencing hardship, some of us aren’t but have chosen to commit themselves alongside those who are. To work on this message, we’ve read some statements made by members of our Movement in Ireland, the Republic of Mauritius, and the Philippines. We also watched some videos from Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. All of them were related to the theme of this year’s October 17: “Building a sustainable future: Coming together to end poverty and discrimination.” Through this process, we’ve discovered together how what we learned about poverty abroad resonates with our own lives and the struggles we face here.

1/ To build a sustainable future, our struggle must be recognized.

In a video from Latin America, a man explains: “We are making a better planet because we take tons of rubbish out of the dump. For most people, those things are worthless. But for us, as well as an income, we are doing something for our families and children, for those coming after us. We’re leaving a better planet.” For us in New York City, we realized that people living in poverty are cleaning up the planet for us in a lot of places, but they are not only building their future — they are building OUR future.

An Irish mother, Noleen, says: “Persistent poverty is the world we were born into. It’s a hard feeling not to be able to climb up the ladder little by little. It’s hard to feel trapped and dependent.” For us, “everybody who wakes up in the morning has to hustle for a dollar. We just have to hustle more. We are the last ones to get our hand-outs. We got to fight for every dime.” When you are poor, your life, your kids’ life, your family life is not your choice.

2/ To build a sustainable future, our experience and knowledge must be taken into account.

People in Mauritius Island report: “There is this non-profit that decided to offer us training. It is a good idea but the point is ‘Is this training a priority for us just now?’ They would not be able to answer this question because before they wrote the project and raised funds to see it through, they did not come to consult us about it. This project was a good project to start with — it was meant to help us overcome our difficulties — but it became a project that divides our
community and pushes us to do something that we cannot do at the present time; above all, it has belittled our dignity.”

In this situation, the non-profit staff didn’t talk to the community; they tried to make their own decision without involving the people there. If they had talked to a community board first, the community would have known that its members have a say in what happens, that they had been part of the decision-making process.

Also, we want to say that we are not poor, we are rich every day even if we are poor every minute, because our mind is thinking, “How am I going to feed my family today?” But when we can go home, we feel good. As the Pope’s message at the Post-2015 Summit reminded us: “Absolute minimum has three names: lodging, labor, and land”. To have a key to a house in our hand means we can start again. There’s sustainability because there is a sense of ownership.

3/ To build a sustainable future, our rights must be recognized.

In a video from Latin America, a woman says: “I have my dignity. I don’t wait for other people’s crumbs, when as a human being, I can provide for myself, for my home, for my family.” During the Interactive Dialogue: Ending Poverty and Hunger at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit 2015, the Head of State of Mali said, "When people give you their crumbs, they don't acknowledge your dignity."

It seems as though the crumbs are not really to insult you, but to subliminally put you in your place. This is what you’re worth. It holds you down. People struggling to feed their families don’t wait around to be given what they are entitled to. But if they are cleaning junk, they are identified with junk – even if they are doing what they can to make a better living. None of us lets poverty eat at us. We are all trying to make our way out of it. “Forget those crumbs; we’re going to get cake or cornbread.” One of us said: “I will not settle for less because I am not less. I will work hard for what I want and I will not take what is decided for me. I will earn what I deserve.” We don’t accept pity because we are bigger and better than that. We don’t wait for charity.

Still in Latin America, a woman said: “If the Government really wanted, we could accept a piece of land from them which has basic services, that is affordable and pay installments on it according to what we can afford”. That’s like the American Dream. You want to own a home but it is not affordable, especially for poor people – even if we work hard all our life. Cookies can break into crumbs, but crumbs don’t turn into cookies.

We’ve heard so many things, but people have to keep their promises. Most of the time, it’s like telling someone who’s homeless, “I’ll go get you food,” and then you leave and you don’t come back. So we rely on each other to build things up from the ground with sweat equity.

4/ What does a sustainable future means for us?

A woman from Guatemala said, "We have to demand that our poverty is not used to manipulate us. We are not only people to give charity to, but people whose opinion has to be sought.”
Nobody ever wants to feel like they’re being used, and you never want someone to think that you’re using them. A sustainable future, it’s a give and take. A sustainable life is us, giving and receiving.

It’s also a big thing when people think that poor people are using the system. But people really need help. What we all need for a sustainable environment is not to feel guilty when we need help and always for there to be someone who is willing to help us, whether it is in the community or the government or your best friend. We’re asking because we need it, not because we want to take it from you.

We also believe that if you are on your own, you don’t really have that many chances. The first thing that hurts us is being divided. Everybody is separating, but everybody has to play a part to come together. Police in some neighborhoods have forbidden people to stay on the stoop. The fact that people were on the stoop was a big part of the community. They were looking out for one another’s children, and they were helping to prevent crime, because that way everybody knew what was happening on the block. When the police prevent people from staying on the stoop, it does a lot of damage to the sense of community.

If we respect one another, if we can see that we’re all human beings, that we’re the same species, that black and white is not a different set of species — that’s why it’s called the human race. We’re all one. If we respect one another, we could come to terms with all of our problems and fix them. But there’s always this separation: “I’m better than you,” or “I make more money than you.”

A sustainable future is all about breaking barriers.

One of our young people said: “My school is literally garbage. People ask me: ‘Why do you stay there?’ Because that’s my school. I love and respect my teachers. It’s another issue when your teachers barely make any money. They’ve got their own families that they barely see, and they’re spending their paycheck to teach me something. I feel offended by this. How are they going to take care of themselves? It doesn’t make any sense.”

For us, a sustainable future is for people to be able to live as they want, with access to resources. Resources like a job, but also water, which is all we have in the planet that we cannot live without. Also, for us a sustainable future is to educate the children with respect to what they need to know, with their own culture and their own being. You make a sustainable future if you respect your roots and bring up your children in this way. A sustainable future is a world where we have concern for others. One parent says, “I want my children to take care of other people,” but sometimes, we have to fight like hell to keep our children with us.

Another parent said, “To fulfill my goals as a mother, I watched my kids grow up and did the best I could for them. When it comes to education, I stand behind them.” Sometimes we succeed in changing things, sometimes we don’t. It’s a part of life but we still have to fight.

Noleen, from Ireland told us: “What keeps me going day after day? I suppose it’s what is inside, really: it’s self-pride, it’s inner strength, it’s knowing that one day our voice will have to be heard.”