The Dimensions of Persistent Poverty in the US Today

*People with a direct experience of poverty, practitioners and academics collaborate to define poverty*

**Background and Context**

The 2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) seek, as a first Goal, “to end poverty in all its forms everywhere” by 2030\(^1\). They recognize the multidimensional nature of poverty and call for new ways of measuring progress in the eradication of poverty by including a strong emphasis on participation. With that perspective, and in order to fulfill these ambitions comprehensively, it is crucial that people with experiences of poverty contribute to the global thinking and dialogue that will define the content of all the forms of poverty.

The International Movement ATD Fourth World and the University of Oxford, led by Robert Walker, are undertaking groundbreaking international research in which people experiencing poverty, practitioners, and academics will identify together the key dimensions of poverty and the dynamic relations between these dimensions.

This project will be conducted in seven countries spanning five continents. Four countries - Bangladesh, the UK, France and Tanzania - will conduct the full project, and Bolivia, Ukraine, and the U.S. will serve as satellites conducting complimentary parallel research on a smaller scale. Each country will conduct its own research process, but the overall coherency of the methodology will provide a basis for comparison and global crosscutting evidence.

**A Unique Participatory Approach**

The *Merging of Knowledge* approach, developed by ATD Fourth World over the past 20 years, recognizes people with direct experiences of chronic poverty as co-researchers on an equal footing with academics and practitioners\(^2\). This approach prioritizes the experiences and knowledge of people in poverty as relevant while recognizing and exploring diversity in experiences of poverty. It permits participants (people with lived experiences of poverty,

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academics, practitioners, and others) to work together in a nonjudgmental environment and affords the space for critical thinking. It starts with peer groups, where people with similar backgrounds meet together to discuss their experiences and perceptions related to poverty. The different peer groups will then meet all together to share their findings with one another and collaborate to expand their definitions of poverty. This sharing will happen locally at first, then delegates from the different regions will come to New York City to collaborate in this same way at the national level.

The Multidimensional Aspects of Poverty in the US

Today, the realities experienced by U.S. residents directly affected by poverty, the analyses of these experiences, and the practices to end poverty are widely diverse and complex. By being recognized actors in the production of qualitative data and their analyses, the Merging of Knowledge contributors participate in an empowering dynamic that has a deep impact on findings.

Seven locations have confirmed their participation in this research project:

- **New York City** (NY): With advocacy competences at the UN, logistical capacities, and a deep rooting in underserved communities, New York is the home base of this project. NYC will contribute input about urban poverty on the East Coast. The participation of isolated people, families living in the shelter systems, communities living in under-resourced neighborhoods, academics, and practitioners is expected.

- **Trenton** (NJ) In association with the New York City team, Trenton provides input from one of the highest poverty rates in the state of New Jersey.

- **Boston** (MA): With its connections to the Harvard Department of Sociology and its outreach capacities, Boston will co-facilitate the overall project. This location will bring input from a small city that makes legible the interconnection between urban policies and poverty. Input is expected from the LGBT community, families living in persistent poverty, and undocumented people.

- **Oakland** (CA): In partnership with the St. Mary’s Center, Oakland will convey the perspective of at-risk seniors.

- **Gallup** (NM): In partnership with the University of New Mexico, North Campus (Department of Adult Education), participative research here will include the perspective of Native American and rural populations.
• **New Orleans** (LA): Through a long term presence of ATD Fourth World, the action-research will be implemented through the main project of the team there and with new partners.

• **Appalachia** (VA): The ATD Fourth World team in Virginia will help bring a rural perspective to the study.

In each location, one liaison officer will support the participation of the actors of this research, guarantee the implementation of the methodology at the ethical and technical levels, assist the actors in their local analysis, and facilitate coordination with the US Research Team.

The US Research Team is responsible for designing the global analysis structures, supporting each location in their implementation, and fostering the learning process within each location, between locations, and at the international level. Composed of 5 people with a direct experience of poverty, 1 practitioner, 2 academic, 1 research assistant, and 2 project coordinators, this team will enable the overall Merging of Knowledge process and draw global conclusions through a final seminar in New York where delegates from each location will participate. They will finalize the findings, write the US report, and contribute to the international conclusion.

The work of the US Research Team will be supported by the International Team under the guidance of the scientific advisory panel comprised of international experts. Methodological counselors will be available to advise the US Research team.

**Outcome:**

- The universality of the Sustainable Development Goals and specifically Goal 1: ending poverty “everywhere” is evident in our work in the US. Wealthy countries have to support their way of looking for solutions with evidence-based research in order to recognize and eradicate extreme poverty in their own borders by 2030. The US faces a huge challenge, and the MAP Research Project is a contribution to clarify what poverty means in order to implement relevant policies based on a solid knowledge rooted in the experiences of people living in poverty.

- Capacities are built so people living in poverty can be at the decision-making table and can contribute with their experience, knowledge, voice, and intelligence to tackle with others one of the biggest challenges of mankind: eradicating poverty. Without their expertise, the concept of poverty is still partial and the relevancy of the stakeholders’ actions incomplete at both a national and international level.

- The limited scale of this project will produce limited results in the US. Still, it demonstrates the fact that this kind of participation in a rigorous research project is possible and meaningful to orient policy decision-making. That is an important step for the field.
Global Structure:

- **International Steering Committee**
- **Methodological Counselors**
- **National Research Team**
- **People with direct experience of poverty**
- **Coordinators**
- **Research Assistant**
- **Independent Researchers**
- **Independent Practitioner**

Locations:
- New York City
- Trenton
- Oakland
- New Orleans
- Gallup
- Appalachian
- Boston
Time Frame:

Team building
- National Merging of Knowledge training applied to the research
- National Research Team is composed
- Reach out and identify each peer group

Implementing the research
- Each peer group in each location meets 4 times
- Analyzing Merging

Consolidation
- National and international consolidation
- Refining the dimensions and the interactions globally

Synthesis
- National conclusion Report

Diffusion
- Side event at the UN
- Events at universities
- Presentation to local and national government

December 2016

Sept-Dec 2017

July-Dec 2018
Appendix:

Composition of the US Research Team:

Activists:
- Marlon Wallen lives in Boston (Massachusetts). He does activist work with immigrants, low-income communities, and HIV-AIDS populations.
- Shawn Hasley lives near Gallup (New Mexico). He works as an adult educator at the University of New Mexico.
- Yamasheta Wilson lives in Harlem (New York). He is a poet, an activist, and a human rights defender that finds in his own life the knowledge and experience that inspires his poetry and activism.
- Johnny Ocean lives in Queens (New York). Father of three children, he has an in-depth knowledge of the social system and brings the hope of a better future for his family.
- Kimberly Tyre lives in Harlem (New York). As a parent involved with CWOP (Child Welfare Organizing Project), she advocates for sustainable solutions to extreme poverty that keep the family together.

Academics:
- Donna Haig Friedman lives in Boston (Massachusetts). She is a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Social Policy of the McCormack Graduate School (UMass-Boston).
- Amelia Mallona lives in Boston (Massachusetts). She is an Associate Professor at the School of Professional and Continuing Studies (Springfield College) and works on participatory research.

Practitioners:
- Julia Sick: Currently a graduate student at the Silberman School of Social Work at CUNY-Hunter College, she studies Social Work and Community Organizing, Planning, and Development and Social Policy.

Coordinators:
- Guillaume Charvon lives in New York City (New York). As an ATD Fourth World full-time volunteer, he worked at the Research Institute of the International Fourth World Movement before implementing participatory research in Burkina Faso. He is currently in charge of the New York Office of ATD Fourth World.
- Maryann Broxton lives in Boston (Massachusetts) where she is a housing and food justice activist with a BA from Lesley University. She was a board member for Homes for Families, a housing advocacy non-profit, and was a member of their Constituent Advisory Team for eight years.

Research Assistant:
- Karen Weiser lives in New York City (New York). She has a doctorate in English and participates in activism related to environmental justice and human rights.
International Academic Advisory Panel

**Sabina Alkire**, Director of the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, University of Oxford

**Grace Bantebya-Kyomuhendo**, Professor in the School of Women and Gender Studies at the University of Makerere, Kampala

**Francois Bourguignon**, Professor at Paris School of Economics, former Chief Economist at the World Bank

**Martine Durant**, Chief Statistician, Director of the OECD Statistics Department

**Gael Giraud**, Chief Economist, Agence Française de Developpement (French international development agency)

**Paul Healey**, Head of Profession for Social Development, Department for International Development (DfID),

**Ides Nicaise**, Professor at the University of Leuven, Belgium, coordinator of the European project REInVEST.


**Magdalena Sepulveda**, former UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Senior Research Fellow at the UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)

**Christopher Winship**, Diker-Tishman Professor of Sociology, Harvard University.