

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

Reasons for the Guidelines.

The fight against extreme poverty and social exclusion involves many different actors who occupy different yet unequal positions in society.

On the one hand, institutions, politicians, university researchers and professionals, often acting in good faith, propose solutions based on their own analysis of the causes of poverty. They find themselves in an advantageous position. Even though this group has no single or common identity, for the purposes of this charter they will be referred to as ‘academics or professionals’.

On the other hand, men and women living in situations of poverty are too often only taken into account from the perspective of what they lack and what their needs are. They are placed in the position of having to contribute to solutions which others have imagined for them. They find themselves in an incredibly disadvantaged situation. This group equally has no single or common identity, but for the purposes of this charter they will be referred to as ‘people living in poverty’.

Academics or professionals, as a result of their education and their working environment, learn how to express themselves, develop abstract concepts and take an intellectual approach to questions they face. We all know that a certain cultural weight and power come from mastering such abilities. They possess a knowledge that is recognized by society, which can be communicated to others and which is built up over the long-term. They know the rules of the game. As a result of their status and their functions, they have the power to act, to influence others and to take decisions.

In contrast, peoples’ own knowledge of living in poverty, based mostly on their life experience, is not recognized. Often, their experience is of being treated as objects: they have to submit to procedures, to decisions taken for them, to services, to rules... sometimes even becoming objects for concern, but objects all the same. This failure to take into account the knowledge of people living in poverty is one of the reasons for the failure of anti-poverty programs.

A prerequisite in the fight against poverty and social exclusion is the recognition of people living in poverty as actors in their own right. Recognizing the role that people living in poverty can play also means recognizing the knowledge gained from life experience that they bring with them and without which other kinds of knowledge (academic knowledge or practical knowledge) are ‘incomplete’ and eventually inefficient, even having the opposite effect to that which was initially intended.

Based on the thinking of Joseph Wresinski, the founder of the International Movement ATD Fourth World, and on the approach which he initiated, the conditions necessary for the merging of knowledge and practices were tried and tested during two programmes of research, action and training.

- the Fourth World – University project²
- the Fourth World – Partnership project³

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Joseph Wresinski, *The thinking of the poor in a knowledge that leads to combat*, <http://www.atd-fourthworld.org>

2 «*Le croisement des savoirs - Quand le Quart Monde et l'Université pensent ensemble* » Ed. L'atelier, Ed. Quart Monde -

Paris 1999, 527p – « *The merging of knowledge – People in poverty and academics thinking together* », University Press of America, 2007, 490p

These programmes were initiated by the ATD Fourth World Movement's Institut de Recherche et de Formation aux Relations Humaines in collaboration with the Université de Formation Européenne of Tours (France) and the Faculté Ouverte de Politique Economique et Sociale and the Institut Cardijn of Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgique).

Following these programs, the conditions they elaborated for the merging of knowledge and practices were put to the test in training programs involving academics and professionals (from the fields of health, education and social work etc.) and people living in poverty (members of associations committed to the fight against extreme poverty). Since both academics and professionals and people living in poverty were able to learn from these training programs using the merging of knowledge and practices, these training programs were called 'joint-training programs'.

A. Pre-requisites for the merging of knowledge and practices

The process of the merging of knowledge should in no way be confused with a simple process of ensuring the participation of people living in poverty.

1. Be aware that change is necessary

Extreme poverty is not an inevitable fact of life. Being dissatisfied with the social, economic and cultural realities of today's world leads to the desire and the will to change things. Being the bearer of this desire and will for change and recognizing it in others is a pre-requisite for merging.

2. See each and every person as possessing knowledge

People living in situations of poverty and social exclusion should not be defined solely by what they lack or what they need since they too have knowledge to contribute. The knowledge that they have, gained from their own life experience, when crossed with other types of knowledge, can reveal their ability to distance themselves from their own situation and reflect on it. Such merging produces a knowledge that is more complete and more in keeping with reality.

3. Nobody should be left on their own

We all, as we grow, acquire greater life experience. If this personal life experience cannot feed into the common life experience of a social or professional group, it remains fragile. It is the sense of belonging to a social or professional group which reinforces and consolidates the knowledge that each of us possesses. This means that, in order to participate in merging knowledge and practices with academics and professionals, people living in poverty should not be left isolated or made to feel alone. They need the security of links to people living in the same situations as themselves and they need space and time to reflect, to express themselves and to discuss.

4. See each and every person as part of the research team

Each and every participant must feel that they are a co-researcher, co-trainer and co-actor with a role in identifying and formulating the questions, in coming to common understandings and working out solutions together. Each and every participant has something to offer to every aspect of the research.

B. Conditions for the implementation of the Merging of Knowledge and Practices

1. A genuine presence of people living in poverty

The first condition for the effective merging of knowledge and practices is the actual presence throughout the process of people living in poverty. For this, a genuine presence cannot be reduced to simple verbal or written testimonies or video presentations introduced into the process simply when it is most convenient. Under no circumstances should other actors take the place of those people living in poverty or speak on their behalf, even if they have some knowledge of or intimate involvement with the world of poverty.

2. Creation of the conditions for identifying the different types of knowledge to be shared

It is not usual to find autonomy and reciprocity in the relationships between academics and professionals and those living in poverty.

- The participants should be independent of each other

An effective merging of knowledge and practices relies upon the working groups being composed of people who are not dependent upon each other. To safeguard the freedom of thought and expression of each and every participant, the professionals working in a particular service should not be placed in the same group as the beneficiaries or users of that service, e.g. teachers with parents of their pupils, doctors or social workers etc. with their clients..

- There should be reference groups

Each actor in the merging of knowledge and practices has, as a reference point, the group to which he or she belongs (other actors living in poverty, fellow members of NGOs or associations, professionals, academics...). It is within such groups that each participant finds a certain security, freedom and time and space to work on their own thoughts before taking part in the merging of knowledge and practices. On the other hand, understanding and taking on board the knowledge of other groups needs a certain amount of maturity and clarification. The time and space within one's own group allows participants to make certain questions their own, form their own inquiries and build their own expertise.

3. Creation of a space of trust and security

Merging knowledge and practices is only possible when all participants can trust in and feel secure with each other and with the framework in which the discussions are held.

- A form of contract must establish the rules for the strict confidentiality covering everything that is said or written. This is particularly important for those people living in poverty. What they say is often the fruit of long experience of suffering and struggle, and the people themselves can still feel very fragile. They therefore need to be protected by strict

confidentiality. This also fully applies to all that is said by the academics and professionals, whose work elsewhere often requires them to respect rules of professional confidentiality.

- *On the other hand, the ethical framework within which the discussions are held* consists of a certain number of values inherent in a dialogue between people: active listening, respect for what the other says, a willingness to be critical about one's own knowledge and ideas, and a conviction that all knowledge is always 'under construction'.

4. The conditions needed for a true dialogue must be guaranteed

The reality that people often occupy many different and unequal positions in society is clearly also present in the merging of knowledge and practices. It would therefore be wrong to fall into the trap of pretending that all the participants are automatically in a position of equality, when this is not the case.

Making discussion possible thus depends on creating the conditions where everybody's voice carries the same weight, and this is the role of a pedagogical team or of the discussion facilitators. This team should be made up of people who have known, over a good number of years, those living in poverty, their difficulties and their resources and also people from the world of academics or professionals.

- *With regard to those people living in poverty*

The role of the discussion facilitators is to help the people living in poverty to express themselves in their own words without trying to take their place or put words in their mouths. This means creating the conditions which will allow the poor themselves to build on their own knowledge: to take a step back and look again over their experience, to look at their own experience in the light of that of others so that they can draw wider lessons from them, and to support them as they try to understand the other participants. It also means accompanying those living in poverty both before and after each training session so that they do not lose contact with their own life and social environment.

- *With regard to the academics and professionals*

Academics and professionals also have difficulty expressing exactly what they want to say in words and in writing. Accustomed and trained to work and communicate with their peers, they tend to use words or phrases that appear abstract and incomprehensible to the uninitiated. The role of the discussion facilitators is to help them make their thoughts more accessible to others and to accompany them in their efforts to understand what those living in poverty contribute to the discussion.

The role of the discussion facilitators is also to help the academics and professionals understand the rhythm and the time necessary for the merging of knowledge and practices and not to by-pass certain stages.

- *With regard to facilitating the merging*

The role of the discussion facilitators is to ensure that all participants can express themselves and be understood, and also respect the time given to each person to speak. To achieve this aim, they will choose to pay particular attention to what those living in poverty have to say.

5. Applying the specific merging knowledge and practices methodology

The merging of knowledge and practices is part of a building process and requires both tools and reinforcing structures, just as much in its research activities as in the joint training programmer. The pedagogical team is responsible for the methodology adopted and for adapting it to suit the differing contexts.

The foundations of the methodology are as follows:

- The experience of each and everyone

Giving an account of one's experience allows all the participants to start on an equal footing. Recounting facts about one's life creates an interaction between those living in poverty and the academics or professionals.

- The rhythm and the time needed for the process

Throughout the discussions and exchanges, all the participants need to see that their particular way of understanding and of expressing themselves is being respected. Periods of silence have to be respected, people have to be allowed to say all that they want to say and everybody has to be given the time to understand together all the words being used. Sometimes, tensions can build on one side or another during the discussions and being able to go back regularly to one's peer group can allow people to stand back from the situation.

In-depth work takes time. Time is needed to create confidence, to establish a meaningful dialogue, to analyse what is being recounted, and to understand what each person is trying to say. The length of time required is however relative to the intended goals, but in any case one has to allow for the time it takes for things to mature.

- Building together

The aim of the merging of knowledge and practices is to improve the links and relations between people living in poverty and all other members of society (be they academics, professionals, institutions, politicians, trade unionists etc.). This goal, made possible by procedures that are both transparent and known to all, is what motivates the efforts of those participating. Being able to identify disagreements is an essential step. Without examining these areas of disagreement, there can be no way to build anything together. The best way to really confront differing points of view is for everyone to get involved, wherever possible, in producing something together.

Knowledge-merging does not mean simply getting a bigger total of knowledge. Simultaneously and progressively in the course of this process, each participant is enabled, from which ever milieu they come from, to have a greater security in their understanding of the world around them and a greater control over the place that they adopt in it. Merging, in this sense, means exposing oneself to the knowledge and experience of others in order to build knowledge that is more complete and greater than the sum of its parts.

What is at stake here is not only gaining a better understanding of each other, but also of putting into place a permanent participatory democracy in which people living in poverty can be actors in their own right.