

**PARTICIPATION OF THE POOREST PEOPLE  
A NECESSITY FOR TRUE PARTNERSHIP AND EFFECTIVE ACTION  
IN ENDING PERSISTENT POVERTY**

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Although there is much to be said about lack of access to health care for people living in extreme poverty, I thought that today we might look at an example of state and non-state actors whose interactions or collaborations together and with families living in poverty, were beneficial to all concerned. In particular, Sara and her family who live in poverty in New Orleans was able to bring her knowledge from experience to building projects meant to be of service to people in poverty.

I have spent the past eight years working on an international level as Deputy Director of the International Movement ATD Fourth World. Our experience is in Asia, Africa, Europe, South and North America and more recently in the Middle East. Although this example comes from the United States, I would venture to say that when people in poverty are seen as knowledgeable partners from the outset, many barriers to health, education, housing and all of the human rights can be set on a good path to change.

The three agencies are:

**Healthy Start:** Healthy Start is funded by the federal government. It works to reduce infant mortality and improve the health and well-being of women, infants, children and their families. The program offers support in following up with scheduled doctors visits, before and after the babies are born. It provides cab fare to appointments and offers non-obligatory training in parenting issues, including breast feeding. Healthy Start will hold a “baby shower,” a traditional party where friends and grandmothers “shower” the new baby with gifts, usually needed clothing and equipment like car seats, etc.

**The Birthing Project:** The Birthing Project (BP) is a private, non-profit group started by a woman with much experience in the public health sector, Catherine Hall. The goal of the BP is to improve birth outcomes for women of color. This is done through the provision of technical assistance and support to communities and organizations so that they may replicate and sustain the BP model of education, support and access to care

and services to at risk women and families. The BP is involved with mothers and babies from pre-natal time up to the baby's first birthday.

**ATD Fourth World Movement:** ATD Fourth World is a private, non-profit started in the 1950's by a man who grew up in poverty, Joseph Wresinski. The goal of ATD is the eradication of extreme poverty, working with a human rights approach and a priority in its actions to those most affected by poverty. ATD works to create strong relations among people in poverty and others as well as institutional partnerships for change. We have been working in New Orleans for over 20 years.

The example:

Sara, from New Orleans learned about "Healthy Start" while at a doctor's office for an appointment when she was pregnant with her first child. She took advantage of the benefits offered by Healthy Start. A little later Healthy Start, the state actor, referred Sara to the Birthing Project, a non-state actor.

**Already, we see collaboration and continuity in care for Sara and her newborn.**

So Sara got involved in BP's "sister friend" program. As the name indicates, it is a close alliance offering support and friendship at a time when most new mothers are feeling afraid and insecure. Sara's "sister friend" happened to be Catherine Hall, the founder and director of the BP project. This also had positive consequences for both of them.

**I think it's interesting to see that the Director of the program includes herself in the actions. This is a pertinent way to test the validity of the program and to be creative with it.**

ATD Fourth World met Sara when we were looking for her friend Barbara. Barbara's whole family has been involved with ATD for many years. As a child, Barbara, her

sisters and brothers took part in ATD's cultural educational program called Street Library; their mother attended meetings and brought the family to social activities and outings.

Like many people in the city, Barbara's family had been displaced in 2005 by Hurricane Katrina. When that happened, ATD Fourth World staff started looking for the families involved with this movement. This search took them to several US states where people were living in emergency housing. Many of the displaced people returned slowly to New Orleans, months, years after the hurricane. And, they came back into a city they called home but where they could no longer afford to live. Rents had tripled. People doubled up even more than before the hurricane.

When Barbara returned to New Orleans she came without her mother and the other children. But we finally found her. She had been taken in by her friend Sara who was living with her partner, Wallace, and his son at Sara's mother's house.

**I want to underline here the role that continuity plays in relations with people who are in poverty. Their own situations cannot be controlled by them and are often unpredictable. So it is up those of us who have greater security and stability in life to be creative and adapt. We often need to be mobile, systematic in looking for people and to be regular in visiting them in order to build relations that last and lead to change.**

So, when we reconnected with Barbara and met Sara, both the young women were there with their newborn babies.

It was at this time that the ATD Fourth World Movement was questioning its members as to what they felt would be important to work on together. Previous actions had been suspended as everyone had been evacuated during Katrina and it was now time to start anew.

**As an association we have given ourselves the freedom to be with people in poverty and have projects grow out of their expressed interests/aspirations.**

In this evaluation and planning process, we listened to and exchanged a number of times with Sara, Wallace, Barbara and many other families. The two young mothers spoke of their little children. Barbara wanted to be able to “*put our children on the right track;*”

to give her little girl “a good start.” She also wanted to be able to take the baby out of the house to places like the zoo. **For her, going outside, seeing nature, other people and being in the open air were important to the health and well-being of her baby.**

**Sara** spoke of a day care, a safe place to leave the children when the mothers had things to do. For parents in poverty who are dependent on different forms of aid, there is a tremendous amount of administrative work to be done all the time—proving your situation, the changes in your situation, the lack of changes and so on. It takes up an enormous amount of time.

**Wallace** felt we should do something so the little ones could “*familiarize themselves with books so when they learn to read they’re ready to use them. You’ve got to teach them to turn the pages of the books themselves, so they learn how to use them,*” he said. “They need to get the right start.” For Wallace, the body and the mind are linked –good health is dependent on developing the mind and the body. And when the mind and body are strong, you are more likely to find decent work, with decent wages. He knows this from his own life. And, this allows you to pay for good housing, without the dampness or the rats and cockroaches that infest so many low-income housing areas. You are living in a more healthy environment. In fact, people in poverty prove through their lives the interconnections between, cultural, social, political and economic rights. Wresinski , the founder of the ATD Fourth World Movement called this “the indivisibility of human rights.”

That is how, in June 2008, ATD Fourth World volunteer, Maria, along with Sara and Barbara began an in-home learning project with parents infants and toddlers, called Play and Learn Together. **Play and Learn Together (PLT)** creates times and spaces for young children to develop their skills and thinking, prepare for school, and discover the world outside their immediate community. Maria goes on a weekly basis to the homes of Fourth World Movement members with young children in under-resourced neighborhoods with age appropriate books, developmental toys and puzzles, music, and music makers.

Sometimes in the front room of their home, sometimes sitting on the front porch, the toddlers immediately dive into the materials and books to discover what their bodies and minds can do. They play with and manipulate the developmental toys and tools, look at and touch the books, dance to music or a shaker, and continuously learn with their parents and grandparents learning alongside them.

In this non-threatening situation, parents have been able to speak of their concerns about their child's physical or mental development, without fear of being seen as inadequate or bad parents.

**It is an experimental project with a few families. It grew out of people's expressed interests and aspirations for their children, and it will be regularly evaluated with them. This aspect of partnership and participation of people in poverty in planning and implementing is key. They have stock in the project! Having such dialogues happens over time, when trust is created. These are among the conditions for, not only access but the participation of the poor in programs, be they health, education, housing ...**

So as Sara and Barbara were helping to develop PLT, Sara got further involved with the Birthing Project during her second pregnancy. The Birthing Project has given Sara the responsibility of telling other young mothers about the program and encouraging their

involvement. Sara accepted this responsibility and recently took part in a gathering of women who were just starting to implement a Birthing Project in other US cities.. *The* Director of BP said they are looking for office space in New Orleans and one of the main requirements is that Sara can get there easily by public transportation.

**The Birthing Project has made it clear that they need Sara's experience and skills. They have offered training so that she can move forward and develop new capabilities.**

Sara was consulted by the Birthing Project on a grant application with a big foundation. Her input helped define the project for which they sought funding. In working on this, Sara made the tie-in between health and education by including a part in the proposal about the work she and her family are doing with PLT. A baby's health is deeply affected by what parents are living. With PLT Sara and Wallace feel respected, they know their experience and their opinion counts. It makes them open to learning new things.

More recently Sara has taken the initiative of introducing Maria, the FWM volunteer with PLT to the director of BP and is pushing the two associations to work together. She is forging ties that bring together the well-being and future of her baby. She has a dynamic role in this and in the development of the associations in which she is involved. She is contributing to civic and community life through this involvement. Her experience of poverty is a precious knowledge that all the partners need.

My sense is that Sara is going beyond just wanting to introduce two organizations. She is making an instinctive connection between learning and good health.

## TO SUM UP

Why has this experience been successful, or positive? Everybody is learning.

The state and non-state actors were not in competition and were able to collaborate in the best interests of this young mother thereby offering continuity in the care and learning between Healthy Start and the Birthing Project.

ATD Fourth World shows us the necessity of continuity in building relations with people in poverty. Their lives are chaotic so we have to be flexible, mobile, but regular and systematic in seeking them out.

The non-state actors show us the **freedom** they have in:

Defining their role—Catherine Hall worked directly with Sara rather than delegating;

Defining which population they seek and taking the time to look for and be with them as ATD Fourth World did;

Listening to what people in poverty want and inventing projects with them—ATD Fourth World planned PLT with the parents;

the Birthing Project seems to be open to the links that Sara is making in bringing health and education together.

They show us that they recognize Sara, a woman living in poverty as a valued partner in building the project. The Birthing Project has given her responsibilities in the program as has ATD Fourth World.