



**Contribution to the report of Mrs. Magdalena Sepúlveda, Special Reporter
on extreme poverty and human rights, on:**

Participation of persons living in poverty in decisions that affect their lives

Translated from French by Association Points-Coeur

Submitted by:

Association Points-Coeur

Geneva, December 2012

1. The **Association Points-Coeur** is an international NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council. Founded in 1990, Points-Coeur is a global network of volunteers who form deep, lasting, personal bonds with troubled, disadvantaged and socially isolated individuals in some of the world's most desperate areas, so as to affirm their dignity. They also act as an intermediary between these people and the local social structures. The Association Points-Coeur has 31 houses in 23 countries. heartshome.org

2. **This report** has been prepared on the basis of responses from our members on the ground: living in the heart of the most disadvantaged neighborhoods, volunteers from the Association Points-Coeur witness the living conditions of people living in poverty, and the opportunities and obstacles they face to participating in decisions that affect their lives. This contribution also reflects the best practices of local authorities and other civil society organizations with which the members of the Association Points-Coeur work.

ARGENTINA – *Point-Coeur of Villa Jardin neighborhood, East Lanus, Buenos Aires*

3. Interaction deficit – The neighborhood of Villa Jardin is born of municipal land take-overs in the 1960s. Some families have lived on the land for over 50 years, but they do not have a title. Residents have little access to political leaders, who are barely present outside election periods.

Examples of interaction deficit

- A road will soon be built along the Riachuelo River, destroying homes adjacent to the river. Residents were given three months to move. To remedy the problem, the municipality has provided a plan to build 170 housing units in the area, but the people concerned were not consulted and the relocation plan is inadequate. The new units will not suffice for all families evicted, the buildings will not be ready in time and this new special planning breaks solidarity networks in place, which are essential to the survival of people living in poverty.
- The lack of interaction between the authorities and the population also affects the next temporary closure of small free health center *La Salita*. The people are not aware of any alternative proxy measures. This lack of communication creates anxiety in the local population who do not know how far and at what price they will receive care.

4. Main obstacles to participation:

- **The illegal housing** prevents the inhabitants from being considered as legitimate interlocutors;
- **Lacks of political will:** according to our members, this unwillingness is partly due to the ignorance by the authorities about the disadvantaged person of those neighborhoods, which are affected by problems of drugs and violence. They are thus not considered as 'reasonable' stakeholders. **This is why it seems fundamental to encourage all initiatives that promote mutual understanding and social diversity.**

Examples of good practices:

5. Social diversity:

- Points-Coeur's houses are places for meeting and building social ties. In November 2011, the Consul General and the Ambassador of France came to visit our members living in the heart of Villa Jardin neighborhood. Families from the slum were also present. A friendship was born especially with one of the women of the neighborhood, Doña Vicky, who later was invited to the embassy. Such bonds help to break down prejudices and fears that tend to reinforce the exclusion of the poorest.

- The Parish of Villa Jardin is a place for meeting and for activity for youth (football club, dance school) and for initiatives promoting encounters between persons from different social backgrounds (school aid organization offered by students to the most disadvantaged children, street entertainment groups).

6. Education: a cycle of lectures on violence against women was organized by the Sociology University of Buenos Aires in the health center of the district. An average of 20 people attended.

EL SALVADOR - *Point-Coeur of Don Bosco neighborhood, San Salvador*

7. Participation in economic life – The Association Points-Coeur witnesses in San Salvador a government plan to help integration into the labor market, the PATI project (Programa de Apoyo al Temporal Ingreso), which offers free vocational training (florist, shoe repair, electrician ...) to young people and mothers who do not have formal employment. The program is taking place over three years between 2010 and 2013, affecting 36 communities according to the government website www.fisd.l.gob.sv. Recipients receive \$ 100 per month for the first 6 months of training. Members of our association are noticing the benefits of the project. For the past few months, many previously unemployed young people and single mothers from the Comunidad Don Bosco are now working in the neighborhood.

8. Participation in health policy – The Association Points-Coeur is witnessing another project that affects the Don Bosco neighborhood. The municipality of San Salvador has launched a "participatory community diagnosis", made by *Ecos familiar* (Equipos comunitarios de salud familiar), a project from the Ministry of Health. In San Salvador, *Ecos familiar* convened by district representatives of different communities (first young people, then women, men, homosexuals and transvestites, and finally NGOs, religious and educational representatives) to define with them what are the main health problems that affect each group, and possible solutions. Participants were invited through a letter sent to all households. According to the members of the Association Points-Coeur, about 75 per cent of those invited in the neighborhood Don Bosco took part in this consultation.

9. Education – To fight illiteracy, especially among adults, the Ministry of Education has launched a plan in the poorest areas of the country. Members of the Association Points-Coeur witness efforts in the Don Bosco area: adults can study for free with volunteers in their neighborhood. Classes are held in community halls or in volunteers' houses, using textbooks provided by the program. Participants register directly with the volunteers in their area.

ROMANIA - *Point-Coeur of Ceangai neighborhood, Deva*

10. Interaction with the authorities – Deva’s City Hall has established consultation mechanisms (boxes to receive proposals from people) and get interviews with local authorities representatives every Wednesday.

11. Lack of consultation – Nevertheless, members of the Association Points-Coeur notice that ignorance of cultural specificities may cause ineffective social policies. In Deva, the inhabitants of Roma settlements receive donations of clothing inappropriate to their needs. Thus, many women are given pants they do not wear for cultural reasons. The lack of consultation leads to waste of these clothes, which are eventually burned.

Main obstacles to participation:

12. Lack of education: according to the members of the Association Points-Coeur in Deva, the major obstacle to the participation of people living in poverty is the lack of education. Illiteracy impedes access to information and expression. Especially in Roma neighborhoods, parents who have not been educated do not always perceive the need to send their children to school, or do not have the ability to help them with homework.

SENEGAL – *Point-Coeur of Arafat neighborhood, Dakar*

13. Members of the Association Points-Coeur in Dakar notice few mechanisms for consultation or participation apart from a few debates organized by neighborhood associations or parishes.

Main obstacles to participation:

14. Material poverty relegates political participation outside the scope of priorities. The primary concern of the inhabitants of Arafat is to raise money to survive; the rest is seen as secondary. In addition, the increase in property prices in this poor neighborhood near downtown Dakar pushes people to move to the suburbs. Forced to drive sometimes 2 or 3 hours to get to work, people have little time to devote to political matters.

15. Education deficit:

- **School Dropout:** Most children in disadvantaged neighborhoods of Dakar attend school, but they are barely able to read after they leave school at the end of primary education. Children receive little support from their parents (who are illiterate or do not see the benefit of schooling).
- **Language Barrier:** school lessons are generally in French, while there is a tendency to "wolofisation" of the Senegalese society at the expense of French.
- **Child exploitation:** in Senegal there is a tradition of entrusting children from very poor families at a young age to a "marabout" for he taught them the Qur'an. These children (called "talibés") are actually used for begging and are not in school.

16. Deficiencies of the administrative apparatus: In Arafat, the administrative structure is very light for a neighborhood of several thousand people. This deficiency makes it difficult to envisage any administrative consultation or participation by the inhabitants.

17. Cultural specificity: there is little participatory culture (apart from elections) and little initiative in Senegalese society. In the Arafat neighborhood, people live just as they have always lived. Traditions are more important in the hierarchy of values than economic development or political participation. We see for example very poor families spending large sums of money for religious ceremonies rather than to develop their small business. These traditions are vital to them, even if according to Western standards they appear of secondary importance compared with economic development or political participation.

HONDURAS – *Point-Coeur of Colonia La Trinidad, Tegucigalpa*

18. The La Trinidad neighborhood is born of land takeovers in the mid-1960s. It has been supplied with electricity and water for years, but it is still perceived as a marginal area because of drug problems and insecurity.

19. Representative body – Local residents can make their needs known through a neighborhood council (patronato) they elect the Steering Committee. This committee acts as a bridge between residents and local authorities, especially in times of election, when the candidates offer their financial support (for the pavement of a street, installing a sink, etc.). **Example:** a project of the World Bank (construction of a retaining wall of the creek that runs through the area) was made after consultation with residents across the board.

Main obstacles to participation:

20. Lack of political interest: The Vice President of the patronato, interviewed by members of the Association Points-Coeur, notes that in recent years both the patronato and the people from La Trinidad show a certain passivity. The most urgent needs are met; it is more difficult to mobilize people for community projects now.

21. Political inconstancy: Some projects are carried out by or at the request of local people, through the patronato, with financial assistance provided by the candidates at election time (e.g. canteen for children conducted at the end of 1990s). But when projects require regular financial support, they collapse quickly because they depend too much on a political system that is inherently versatile.

22. Youth Violence: a youth group called "Genesis" existed in La Trinidad between 1982 and 1990, allowing local youth to participate in the cultural life of the country (theater, music, sport, excursions). But the emergence in the 1990s of gangs ("maras") had a very negative impact on this group of young (drugs, insecurity) and brought the experience to an end.

CHILE – *Point-Coeur of Porvenir Bajo, Playa Ancha, Valparaíso*

23. Neighborhood assembly – In the district of Porvenir Bajo, a assembly of neighbors (Junta de los vecinos Unión y Progreso) meets three times a year to establish a timetable (participation is open to all residents from 14 years). In principle, the meeting must act as an intermediary between residents and the municipality, but in fact, the president does not maintain contact with the authorities and very few projects are undertaken by the Assembly, on the other hand, the municipality does not consult the people to organize projects that affect the neighborhood (such as drainage works, installation of sanitary service or garbage). The only project where there is collaboration is the distribution by the municipality of Christmas gifts to children in the neighborhood.

Main obstacles to participation:

24. Lack of collaboration between the assembly and the municipality: on the side of the assembly officials, lack of commitment; on the side of the municipality, lack of political will to consult people, and ignorance of the reality of the neighborhood.

25. Education deficit: causes passivity of people who do not raise their voices and demand their rights, even when the opportunity is given to them. Example: in the area of Porvenir Bajo, the health center *Quebrada Verde* offers an annual meeting to review the past year and allow the residents to share their suggestions. But participation is low and very few people take this opportunity to make their voices heard.

26. Political disinterest – members of the Association Points-Coeur note that there is currently less culture of political commitment than in the years of the dictatorship. For example, the neighborhood assembly might get the benefit of recognition and financial support from the municipality if there were more inhabitants engaged in it, but most have a priority to find solutions to their own problems (unemployment, alcoholism) and do not engage easily in community projects.

CHILE - *Trabajo País Project*

27. Trabajo País is a Chilean Catholic student project with which the Association Points-Coeur works. The heart of the project is an annual week during which students from over 40 Chilean universities and technical institutes travel to rural communities to carry out construction projects. The identification of needs and the projects are done in close collaboration with local communities. In 2012, 1,300 volunteers have worked in 33 regions of Chile.

28. Project Objectives: To spread a culture of solidarity and unity in Chile by promoting the encounter between Chileans from different geographical and social origins; to stimulate local initiatives; to form academics of integrity who know the different cultural and social realities of

their country, and will take it into account once asked to take responsibility within Chilean society.

29. Action method: at the beginning of the Tabajo País annual process, project members identify with the help of Chilean dioceses which areas have the greatest need for a construction project. Delegates visit local organizations (neighborhood assemblies, parishes, etc.) to identify with them the needs of the community. The people are then informed of the dates of the student visits because their cooperation is essential to the project.

30. Cultural exchanges: During the week of action, in addition to the work of building or repairs, workshops are organized to promote cultural exchanges between different groups: students lead workshops in which they transmit their academic knowledge according to the needs of the community and locals conduct workshops in which they convey to students the culture, traditions and knowledge of the place. This exchange aims: to give people living in poverty the means to make their voices heard, to highlight their own knowledge and that each Chilean knows its country deeper, in order to overcome prejudices and social divisions.

31. Participatory evaluation: After the week of work, the zone representative must ask visited people to complete a questionnaire to evaluate the realization of the project. The representative must also evaluate the process in its area so as to determine whether the objectives have been achieved, and what area should be visited again.

32. Obstacles: the project is running on mode of volunteering: time and economic constraints that are imposed on the students do not permit the development of the assessment phase as it should be, with priority being given to other phases of the project.

More information on www.trabajopais.cl

BRAZIL – Points-Coeur’s Home Village La Fazenda do Natal, Passagem dos Teixeiras, Bahia

33. La Fazenda do Natal is a place of welcome where members of the Association Points-Coeur and persons received (mothers, street children, mentally handicapped persons) live together in the countryside. This allows residents out some time (months or years) of an urban environment marked by poverty, drugs and violence. Gradually, they resume part-time work outside the village so as to prepare for their return to normal life.

34. Participation of beneficiaries – those admitted are not assisted, but fully participate in the life of the Fazenda: maintenance, cooking, crafts. Over time, some are required to serve on the board of the Fazenda (an instance of consultation and decision).

35. Capacity building – In the *Fazenda* project, it is essential that everyone is involved at its maximum capacity: because the goal is not only to change the living environment, but to solicit its responsibility and will, to strengthen its capacity in preparation for the return to

normal life. Those admitted are thus brought to reclaim all the responsibilities of life. In this way, no decision is taken for children without parental consent (to attend such school, such training, etc.).

Examples of capacity building:

- Raphael, 25, lived as a child in the *Fazenda*. There he could live with people who had other aspirations in life than street and drugs, and he could desire a different future for himself. After getting his Baccalaureate, he is today working in a company in the city of Camaçari and following evening technical courses.
- Lucia, 36, after spending several years with her daughter at the *Fazenda*, she prepares her departure selling necklaces that she made herself and second-hand clothes in the nearby town. With the money she has learned to manage and set aside, she is able to buy a piece of land that the members of the Association Points-Coeur help to find.

BRAZIL – *Neojiba*¹ Orchestra, which collaborates the Association Points-Coeur, Salvador da Bahia

36. *Neojiba* is a project born in 2007 in Salvador da Bahia on the model of the Venezuelan orchestra *El Sistema* (1975). It aims for the social integration of the poorest young people through music. Its founder, Ricardo Castro, offers approximately 170 children and youth of every social class free lessons in classical music.

37. Youth capacity building – Youth are quickly brought to assume responsibilities in the orchestra, both in the teaching of music and in the organization (lute-making, fundraising, communication, etc.). They receive a lot, and want to pass that they received. The trust they receive and responsibilities entrusted to them enable them to gain confidence in themselves and develop their full potential. They develop a sense of responsibility and excellence that they express in their personal, family and student life. The *Neojiba* project aims to highlight the immense potential of every young person, including those who live in the favelas.

38. Social diversity and fight against prejudice – The project is also a great contribution in the field of social mix (children come from different backgrounds, though predominantly from disadvantaged backgrounds) and the fight against cultural poverty. Relatives and friends of young people are also involved, because they come with enthusiasm to *Neojiba* concerts in the most beautiful concert halls of Salvador.

More information on www.neojiba.org/en

¹ Núcleos Estaduais de Orquestras Juvenis e Infantis da Bahia.

THAILAND – Klong Toey Community Center, which collaborates the Association Points-Coeur, Bangkok

39. Klong Toey is a large slum in Bangkok where Points-Coeur's house is located. In 1979, the Social Service and Development Unit of the Churches of Christ in Thailand has created the Klong Toey Community Center, now run by an Australian NGO, *Urban Neighbors of Hope*. Initially, the center was created for children "at risk" of Klong Toey, to give them an education and a safe place for recreation. Today, about 220 children and 50 adults visit the Centre daily.

40. Consultation – The Center's activities are diverse (football club, medical consultations, education for disabled children, micro-enterprises) but in all projects the participation of residents is paramount. Local people are involved to identify the needs of the neighborhood, and volunteers at the center live in the slum community to get inside the challenges people face.

41. Capacity building – The Center is not an assistance project: the services it offers aims to help residents to develop their potential and to train local Thai leaders.

Examples of capacity building:

- **Strengthening self-esteem:** The Center has created a football club which currently trains 122 young men from 7 to 30 years, 6 days a week. It is not just a sport program; teams reach a very good level and participate in tournaments throughout Bangkok, which strengthens the self-esteem of young people and their demand for a higher quality of life. In addition, this intensive activity evaded the dangers of the street (drugs and gangs).
- **Economic Development and Entrepreneurship:** The Center has developed the *Helping Hands* micro-enterprises project, which aims to "help the poor to help themselves". *Helping Hands* morally and materially encourages locals to start small businesses: street food, crafts, second hand store, etc. A great example of success is the *Helping Hands Thai Cooking School*, one of the first activities offered by the website [Tripadvisor.com](http://tripadvisor.com).
- **Social mix:** In order to prevent the slum children from the dangers of the street and to develop their creativity – a key value for development – the Centre has created Kids Leisure Clubs. Currently, 95 children between 3 and 12 years benefit from this program. Clubs are regularly invited to the *New International School of Thailand (NIST)* to take advantage of its sports facilities: the aim is also that mixing with people outside the slum, children can acquire a broader vision of the world and make a idea of the future in which they are rights to aspire.

More information on <http://klongtoeycc.com/>

CONCLUSION – Obstacle mapping and recommendations

Main obstacles to participation:

42. The major obstacles to participation of persons living in poverty in the decisions that affect their lives identified by Members of the Association Points-Coeur in their various places of work are mainly:

- **Extreme poverty** that relegates the desire to participate in public life to the back burner;
- **Lack of education** (including lack of awareness of rights arising from the inherent dignity of each person);
- **Lack of political will** to involve people living in poverty in public life

43. The view that political leaders have about people living in poverty seems to us to be a determinant factor in political will to engage these individuals in decisions that affect their lives. Only the awareness of the value and potential of each person, regardless of socio-economic background, can cause leaders to make efforts to take into account the opinion of the poorest.

44. How people living in poverty see themselves seems also critical. So that the poorest persons are involved in decisions that affect their lives, and are thus not only beneficiaries, but the subjects of development, it is sometimes necessary to bring about a "change in their relation to reality." At first, it means to become aware of their dignity as a person, although relegated to the margins of society; secondly, this means to consider themselves as actors for the transformation of their environment, both because of their ability to be legitimate interlocutors for the implementation of social policies and because of their own capacities for initiative.

45. This double change of view (political leaders of poor people and poor people of themselves) can only be achieved **through fighting against prejudice and social exclusion.**

Recommendations:

46. The Association Points-Coeur promotes the recognition of the capacities for creativity and generosity of the poorest, regardless of the conditions under which they are living. This is why it encourages and welcomes **any initiative promoting the personal encounter between people from different social backgrounds** (eg *Trabajo Pais, Points-Coeur*), believing that social diversity and mutual understanding are the best defenses against prejudice and exclusion. It also **encourages any initiative that promotes cultural capacities of people living in poverty** (eg *Neojiba, Klong Toey Community Center*), breaking the prejudice that these people can only receive and not give, and demonstrating the relevance of the right of each person to participate in cultural life and to contribute to it, for the good of society as a whole.