



Children as Actors in the Fight against Poverty and Exclusion

**“Who can change the
world without me?”
Julien, Haiti**

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"A lot of people say that children are the future. If everyone really believed it, there would be less, and maybe even no more, poverty in the world. Today the fight against poverty is the most important thing."

Tapori delegation at the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations
Geneva, July 1999

Introduction

Children from all countries and cultures, without exception, have the right to share their dreams of a world where each child has friends and lives in peace. Even at a young age, children can promote children's rights with their own words and actions. When encouraged to express their ideas, allowed to be in contact with others, and supported in what they do on a daily basis to create peace, they participate in the fight against poverty and exclusion.

Today, thousands of children from 7 to 15 years old, in 50 countries on 4 continents, are in link with Tapori. Tapori is a worldwide network of friendship that creates connections between children of all backgrounds.

Who are these children? They meet in schools, neighborhoods, associations, within families, or in group homes. Some live with their families, others do not. Some go regularly to school, others go irregularly or not at all. They live close to landfills, in slums, in the streets of their city, in apartment buildings or in upper class neighborhoods. Some work to help their families survive, others do not.

For the most part, Tapori children meet in groups and dialogue together about specific themes, such as how they can make sure the most excluded children can find a place in their Tapori group, their class, or their neighborhood. They get together to construct a way of acting that doesn't leave anyone out.

Children can be the first line of defense against human and children's rights violations. They have an innate sense of justice. They try to integrate children who are excluded through many actions. Tapori makes known their actions in the fight against extreme poverty: children from a neighborhood contribute to their friend's school fees, a young girl defends a child who is made fun of by her classmates, a boy goes to his town's mayor to ask for an explanation for the destruction of a friend's home...

In Tapori, children are the principal actors. They are the ones who choose to join the group because they decide that they can't carry the weight of the injustices in the society in which they live. Adults support them so they can accomplish their goals in cooperation with other children. Dalida, a child from Eastern Europe writes:

"Tapori means learning to share other children's problems, because that can happen to everyone to have a problem. With two or more people, it's easier to deal with."

The message of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty is inscribed on the marble of the Plaza of Human Rights and Liberties at the Trocadero in Paris (France).

“Where men are condemned to live in poverty, human rights are violated. Joining together to see that those rights are respected is a solemn duty.” Joseph Wresinski.

Children understand this message well and express it in their own words:

"I would just like to say to all children of the world to fight against extreme poverty so that peace can reign in the world."
- Jolie, Africa

"Extreme poverty is like being in prison."
- Geoffrey, Europe

"One finger alone cannot eat Kalakous (starchy vegetable), but when we're together in our action, we're capable of doing beautiful things."
- Cathony, Caribbean

Tapori children have a different view on poverty.

"We always speak about eradicating poverty, but we forget that it isn't only money that changes things. We need friendship between people." - a child from Africa

"Poor people are like us in their hearts. If someone doesn't want to play with a poor child, I'll play with him. It's our heart, our kindness, and our love that are important, not how we hold ourselves or what others say." - Sara, Europe

Children have a lot of ideas to fight poverty and violations of children's rights. In this document, we'll see how children are also creators of peace and why it's important to give them the means to express themselves and take action. They can then motivate adults. But to permit each child's participation, above all that of those most excluded, we should do what's necessary to work with them.

1. How do children create peace?

Children work each day to create peace and friendship. In their simple actions and words, they reach out to the most excluded children. They don't wait for adults to tell them what to do. They don't wait for October 17 to get together and take action either. But October 17 gives children the rare opportunity to weigh in on important subjects and be heard by adults. In public events on this day, the words and actions of children are recognized.



In the Democratic Republic of Congo, October 17 is a very important moment for a number of Tapori groups, which comprise hundreds of children. Their parents must go out walking for kilometers each day to look for work. Children need to support their parents by doing the chores and many can't go to school. October 17 is a time to get together to do a project and meet other children living in difficult circumstances.

Faustin, an adult facilitator of the Tapori group “Enfants Etoiles” (Star Kids) in the Democratic Republic of Congo writes about their experience on October 17, 2003:

The Star Kids decided to go to visit former child soldiers...in a city very far from their neighborhood. It was on Sunday, October 19...the Star Kids and the children from the group “Friendship and Peace” [another group from a nearby neighborhood] got to know the former child soldiers. This was done through dances, poetry, games about peace, saying no to war and to the use of 12 to 16 year-olds in the army. According to the children, extreme poverty never ends in a country in war and instability...The former children soldiers were very happy with the initiative of the Tapori children and promised to cooperate with them.

Jolie, a child from the Star Kids group adds:

“We went to present Tapori. We promised our friendship to the former child soldiers and they promised us their sincere collaboration.”

Walking a long time to meet with a group of former child soldiers is a sign that children want to bring peace and thus, make contact with those children whose lives are the farthest from it.

Children take action at their own level, even if they don’t belong to a group. In their daily lives they do things to help others that seem small, but mean a lot. On October 17, 2003 Catherine, from La Paz, Bolivia gave the following testimony:

“One day my friend joined my class. She’s very small and all the students made fun of her. She felt sad. The next day when she arrived they teased her, calling her a pipsqueak, an elf, a flea, an ant. At first I laughed, but the day after I thought about it and I told her that I was sorry. She was ashamed. I spoke with the other children in my class and we thought about it together. We went to see her and said sorry together. I felt as happy as she did.”

In France on October 17, 2004, ATD Fourth World Movement and the French Senate organized a large gathering of children in Paris called the Junior Senate. It brought together 310 10 to 15 year-olds of different backgrounds from all over France. These children gave testimonies, some about their own difficulties due to poverty and others about how they felt called by the issue of exclusion and what they did to fight it. Cedric stated:

“I know a man that everyone calls ‘Rags’ because he wears clothes he finds in the trash, rags. No one speaks with or takes an interest in him. He’s not mean, but with his funny appearance he looks a little scary. I decided to say hello to him.”

Pénélope gave the following testimony during the Junior Senate and reminds us that it’s not easy to be friends with those who are excluded.

“Last year in my class at school, two girls were excluded. They were called ‘fleabags.’ I tried to talk with one of them and become her friend; it wasn’t easy because my friends in the class started to distance themselves from me.”

Children can go a long way in their commitment to the fight against poverty. One class in Schaerbeek, Belgium wrote to the mayor and councilors of their city, *"We also think that groups of children can help out people in difficulty and the elderly. We're capable of doing things for others. That creates connections, maybe some friendship, and definitely more respect between people who don't know each other."*

Maria-Luisa, a teacher from Bolivia explained:

Alberto lived alone with his older brother, who was going to school and working. Because of this, Alberto was all alone, with no support. He didn't do his homework, which is why he dropped out school. I was surprised by the attitude of the other students, who were worried about his absence. Before getting to know Tapori, he would have just been another drop out. The students asked me to try to help him a little bit more. Together, we tried to do a lot, but despite that Alberto didn't stay in school. But the students continued to be his friend and built a strong friendship so as not to leave him all alone.

Excerpt of the contribution of Tapori Bolivia to the seminar in Montreal

Children are willing to go beyond prejudices to meet and get to know each other. They're often open to others. Two girls from Western Europe explain what they gained from getting to know children from other backgrounds:

In our group we're very different. There are children of different ages and some go to school, while others don't. Some live in pretty houses and others live in apartment buildings. There are children who are a little bit hyperactive and are hard to get along with, but little by little we learn how to be with them. We discover that some children have a lot of worries at home or at school. When we do things together and talk together we get to be friends. Even if we fight sometimes, we know how to make up afterward. Taking time to find out more about and respect each other is indispensable. When a child is violent it's because he's unhappy and it doesn't help to reject him.

Sometimes we have the impression that extreme poverty is impossible to destroy, that we can't do anything alone. With the group, we have more courage to reach others. For example, we don't like to see young travelers begging in the city streets and so we thought about how to become friends with them.¹ We came up with the idea of inviting them to play the accordion in our concert. The children told us they'd really like to be able to go to school, but they were evicted from the land where they were because a building was going to be built there. To thank them, we gave each one of them a backpack and some school supplies."

¹ Known by the name gypsies, these families live in mobile homes and travel from city to city. Some settle down in one place, especially the poorest, who no longer have the means to travel.

2. How to allow children to participate fully and express themselves?

Children can create peace if they have the right conditions. Not all of them are able to express their ideas and their opinions. It takes time to build confidence in one's self and others, a friendship with others that allows communication.



Simon, a child from Western Europe who has participated for a number of years in ATD Fourth World Movement's activities and is now a young adult, works with children's charities. Simon grew up in extreme poverty, but when listened to and taken seriously as a child, he was able to express his opinions about many different subjects, especially those concerning children and young people. He spoke in public for the first time at the age of seven during an October 17th commemoration...and he became an active member of society with his own contribution.

Allowing children to make a place for the most excluded in the group permits each child to be heard and have an experience of friendship.

In Haiti the group Lalin ak Soley (the sun and the moon in Creole) meets regularly in one of the poorest neighborhoods of the capital. Mackenson, a child from the group, is a reliable participant in its meetings. But he's also handicapped and can't walk. For him to be able to participate, his big brother or an adult facilitator from the group must carry him on their backs to the meeting place.

Mackenson is a happy child and makes those around him happy as well. On October 17, 2004, the ATD Fourth World team in Haiti organized a meeting of very poor families and their allies. Since this happened during a turbulent time in the country, they weren't sure that the ceremony would happen. But the families and children were able to get together after all. The children prepared a few skits and got up on stage. Out of the blue they put Mackenson right in the middle of all of them. All the parents applauded. They said, "He's here too!" For them it was the sign that nobody had been forgotten. Mackenson's family and the Tapori group's facilitators work hard for Mackenson to be able to participate each time. It's encouraging to all the parents that Mackenson can go out and have a normal life.

Only taking into account the words of children who are the easiest to reach and most able to express themselves means depriving ourselves of the experiences of the poorest children. It also makes it impossible for children who have a lot to learn from dialoguing to get to know one another.

Mr. André C. is a teacher in an elementary school in Belgium. In 2003 he proposed to his students to participate in a Tapori campaign. He gave them the choice to accept or refuse. All of the class said yes with no hesitation. The

Tapori campaign was created based on the story "Looking for Turtle,"². André tells how this changed the atmosphere among his students:

"Very quickly the students identified with the different animals in the story. When the children could speak, in their own way they played the role of each animal. They called each other a lot of different names in class and I let this happen, even if there were sometimes hurt feelings. I wanted to show that the other animals who couldn't understand Turtle could be very violent and aggressive, even in their words and gestures. When a child decided to play the role of Turtle, she could also come up with her lines, saying, 'I'm sad, I'm unhappy, no one likes me.' When they took on the role of the toad there was a long silence: Here I'm forced to think about others, to ask myself, 'Is the other person next to me doing okay?' It's only when the children really took on the characters' roles that they could say that verbal communication is very important.

Very quickly, there were a number of children who said, 'You know, we can be the toad one day or one minute, the panther the next minute, and the turtle the day after.' Experiencing that with the children in my class was fantastic for me. Not only did they identify with the animals, but they understood the message. And if they understood the message they were mature enough to express other things than the words they were accustomed to hear and say: complaints or violent and aggressive words. So there was only one thing left that we didn't know about. The act of taking an interest in what we didn't know about, and had few opportunities to explore, made the project a success."

Consulting children shouldn't be a symbolic action, as in asking their opinions about insignificant things. They should be asked to participate in each moment of their lives. Assuring the children's participation is a long process. ATD Fourth World volunteers make a long-term investment so that each child is listened to, as demonstrated by Noudia's story.

² During a drought, Turtle is chased from the village by the other animals. The drought continues and Lion calls together all the animals. Toad has the courage to say that Turtle isn't at the meeting because he's been chased away. All the animals go to look for him.

Noudia is a child of Eastern European origin who lives in **Western Europe**. She was ten years old when we met her. We wanted her to take part in the projects that we organized with the local children. But for her, it wasn't easy to take part. She wasn't educated, and she didn't have the necessary confidence to join a children's group or to go to school. She was deeply ashamed of herself and of her family who survived through begging. The others rejected her. She did not participate in many activities, not even in the street library because of the way the other children looked at her.

We felt that a preliminary step was necessary if we wanted Noudia to join the group at the cultural center. We started to visit her at home with a computer. She immediately connected the project with her deep desire to go to school. She wanted always to write with the computer. Her family also took part, including her sisters and her parents.

We created an Internet site with the children of the cultural center. On the first page was a tree with a photograph of each child in the group. Even if Noudia had not yet joined the group, she had her place on the tree and so was present in the minds of the other children. They did not even know her first name, they just insulted her. Gradually during the meetings, they learned to call her by her first name and got to know her through her personal web page.

Noudia got to know the other children each time we went to her place with the computer and she looked at the site, which grew gradually with the personal pages of each child. But the link with Noudia remained very fragile and she did not feel ready to take part in the group at the cultural center.

One day, Noudia recorded a song in her language. She felt able to do it because she was at home and she felt safe. Her mother did not know that her daughter could sing so marvelously. Her song was added to the song page on the site. At the cultural center, the other children started to listen to her song, and were very impressed by the way Noudia sang. They loved to listen to her. With this song, she existed in a positive way for the others and she was known for something beautiful she could do.

This project gave sufficient confidence to Noudia to enable her to join the group. But it took time - at least a year before she dared to come to the cultural center. And then, strengthened by this experience, she was able to enroll in school. In 1999, we asked Noudia to take part in the International Forum of the Tabori children in Geneva. She was able to participate thanks to the confidence in herself that she had gained through the group at the cultural center. Noudia said during the Forum that for her, the most important human right was to be able to go to school and she talked of children who, instead of going to school, have to work to help their family to survive.

Noudia has a lot to share and through the long-term support of the adults around her, she was capable not only of claiming her own rights, but also of defending others' rights.

3. Children experience October 17th

The ATD Fourth World team in Bolivia has a lot of experience organizing October 17th commemorations with children as the focal point. Charo, a permanent volunteer writes in her contribution:

“During the last six years we’ve done public activities with children at the Prado Plaza, a central location in the city of La Paz. This space is used by different organizations to get together and share their actions with other citizens.

We think it’s a good way to share Tapori, as much for the children as for the adult facilitators. Many families come to this public space on the weekends, and this allowed many children to participate in the Tapori campaign for October 17th...Children from different Tapori groups feel very recognized and committed to leading this activity.”

The Tapori group from the Villa Fatima area discovered the commemorative stone in July 2005. We asked them how they could contribute to the activities for the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty at the Prado. They wanted to publicize the commemorative stone and its meaning to the victims of poverty. So they decided to make this day known by preparing a play, fliers, and a workshop to allow others to learn about the October 17th logo. In December 2005 we got together with children to evaluate what they experienced.

"With Tapori I learned to help people who have fewer resources than us and also that we can all help tear down the walls of extreme poverty."
Pablo, 13

"October 17 is important for me because it's a day when we recognize the value of people who have had to fight against extreme poverty: mothers, fathers, teenagers, and children."
Manolo Gutiérrez, 13

Excerpt of the contribution of Tapori Bolivia for the seminar in Montreal

4. How do children motivate adults?

Children often have a simple, but profound vision of the world. If there's a child who has no friends, you should be her friend. If something is broken, it should be fixed. If there's someone with no home, he should have a home. This way of thinking is powerful because of its simplicity. It's also a logic that speaks to adults. By listening to children and paying attention to their actions, adults can learn a lot.



Faustin, facilitator of the Taporì group the Star Kids, describes how children came together on March 21, 2003, International Day of Fresh Water:

"The children had the audacity to clean and fix up the large fountain. There were parents around who saw this and asked themselves, 'What are these kids doing?' They realized that it was up to them, the adults, to do this and not the children. I remember how the parents picked up their tools and cleaned out the canal that the children were too small to do. Everyone in the neighborhood was thrilled and couldn't stop talking about it."

Sometimes children can remind us that friendship is something very important to them. Alice, from France, sent the following message to Taporì:

"In my middle school I know a girl who's a little chubby and has braces. Everyone makes fun of her. I went to talk to people who tease her and said, 'What if you were chubby and had braces? Would you like it if people made fun of you?' That afternoon, they didn't say one unkind word to her. In student council, I said that she was being made fun of. Everyone said that during recess she should come and see the principal. The principal told her, 'Show me who makes fun of you and I'll give them detention!' I don't know if it's good to give them detention, though. I'd like them to find out what a good friend she is. They need to see her good side."

Thus Alice refocuses the situation on the basics: other children make fun of her friend because they don't know her. Punishment won't let them get to know her better. This example shows that children are able to organize themselves and have things to say about the best way to be with others.

Andreï and Daniel are two friends from school who live close to Paris, France. They're both six-years old. Andreï and his family are from Romania. They've lived on a vacant lot in a cabin built of scrap pieces of wood for a year. One day bulldozers arrived and destroyed Andreï's home because the living conditions were judged to be too unsanitary.

Andreï told Daniel what happened. After speaking with his mother, Daniel went with her to the mayor's office to demand an explanation from the mayor. The mayor saw Daniel and his mother and listened to Daniel tell about Andreï's family and their house. He saw the strength of Daniel's friendship with Andreï, but also his sense of injustice. Pushed by Daniel to live up to his responsibilities, the mayor looked for a way to rehouse the family and ended up placing them in a building owned by the city.

In 1999, to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Convention relative to the Rights of the Child, Tapori organized a Children's Forum at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. Mary Robinson, at the time the High Commissioner for Human Rights at the UN, attended a session where children spoke out, as well as a more festive moment at the Wilson Palace. She reacted and reiterated why it's necessary for children to speak with adults from the political and diplomatic world.

"This morning when I listened to the seven children who spoke, I was very touched by the importance they placed on the family, on education, on what they want to do for the world. Their speech wasn't egotistical. They thought about the way to contribute to others' happiness.

...I saw other adults around me, including distinguished ambassadors, who had tears in their eyes. That shows that the children told us things that were really listened to.

You, the Tapori children, you know what needs to be done. These meetings like the one we had today are very important for me, my colleagues, other agencies at the United Nations, and diplomats, because we always risk fighting for abstractions, for ideas and you bring us back to real life."

Mary Robinson, 1999

5. Our recommendations

- Children can create peace in their families, their neighborhood, their parish, or their schools when they have the necessary means and support. We ask that communities, states, and associations of all kinds take care that each child has the possibility to participate and share what they know how to do to create peace and solidarity. That means that each child must have a niveau de vie sufficient to take part in the life of their community. That also means that each child should be able to go to school and learn.



Convention on the Rights of the Child article 12 :

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child...

- Each child should be able to belong to a group or a children's association to meet and think with other children. They should be supported by adults to allow each child to find her place in the group and be able to express herself. States such as city councils and children's councils should encourage projects that foster children's words, while also ensuring that even the most excluded children are present.
- Adults must give children good conditions to speak, give their opinions, and be heard. We should recognize their acts of peace and friendship and encourage them to get together with other children. Being listened to and having access to a forum for self-expression need to be possible on a long-term basis, not just for special events.

- States; associations; and local, national, and international institutions should see that the child delegates are not always the same children. Often those named as delegates to represent their group, region, or country are those who express their thoughts the most easily. Those organizations and institutions which consult child delegates should find a way to allow the most excluded children to participate through well-financed, well-staffed long-term projects. They should also prioritize those projects that allow children from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds to work together. Multidisciplinary and artistic projects should also be used to facilitate complex thinking and self-expression. Allowing the full participation of the poorest children makes them stronger and more self-confident. This can act as an impulsion for them to change their lives and the lives of other children.
- We need to give children the opportunity to make a real contribution to the fight against poverty. For anti-poverty initiatives to be a real success, all stakeholders, including the poorest children in the community, need to be full actors in their planning, implementation, and evaluation.
- Meetings between those from the political and diplomatic world and children can be enriching for both sides. This allows children to explain what they want for the world and adults to listen and respond to the children. This also gives children more trust in those who have power and makes them feel that their voice counts. This can be done on the local, national, or international level. It's important to note, however, that these meetings must be assiduously prepared to assure that children are able to express exactly what they want to say.