



Ending Social and Institutional Maltreatment Acting together for just, peaceful and inclusive societies Concept Note

Poverty has multiple dimensions, some visible and others hidden, but all interlinked. The 2024-2025 theme of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty (IDEP), will highlight one of the [Hidden Dimension of Poverty](#) the social and institutional maltreatment experienced by people living in poverty, and consider ways to act together on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 to promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies.

“Social and institutional maltreatment destroys our dignity. It often makes you feel weak because you put all your energy into doing something and in the end, you don't see the results. It's a divisive thing.” - A person in poverty

People living in poverty face negative attitudes. They are stigmatised, discriminated against, judged for example by their appearance, accent, address (or lack of it), blamed for their situation, and treated with disrespect. The maltreatment is more pronounced for people who face other forms of prejudice as well, including gender, sexual orientation, race, or ethnicity. Social maltreatment creates a setting for institutional maltreatment, with a combination of negative attitudes (mistrust, disrespect) as well as controlling discriminatory policies and practices, denying people of their fundamental human rights (for example, access to healthcare, education, housing, and the right to legal identity).

Formal institutions, public and private, shape the negative experience of poverty through public discourse and the design, codification and implementation of policy and services. In framing policies, institutions tend to reflect and amplify discriminatory attitudes and practices rather than to challenge them.

Similarly, the design and implementation of policies tend to exclude people living in poverty and fail to respond appropriately or meet their basic needs. Poverty persists even in highly

developed countries after decades of social protection programmes and instead of questioning the ill-designed and inappropriate policies and practices, people in poverty continue to be blamed. Often people in poverty find their interactions with institutions to be characterised by judgement, subjugation, compliance, and control. People feel rejected, inadequate, or humiliated and when trying to move out of poverty, they cannot access or are denied the support they need from the very institutions mandated to enable or empower them. In some parts of the world, institutional maltreatment of families living in poverty is also a cause for concern as attitudes and practices of government service providers make parents feel inadequate or ashamed of their situation and fearful of having their children removed.

“We are not seen as families who need help or support, but as parents who have failed. Our living conditions are not taken into account. This perception of failure distorts relations between parents and professionals and becomes a pretext for reproducing the domination of institutions over parents.” - European seminar “Building a future without poverty for children: parents and society together” (November 2023)

Social and institutional maltreatment interact and amplify each other, fuelling this double-edged violence and deepening the injustice. A meaningful understanding of poverty and how the different forms of violence and domination interact with each other and impact people in poverty is critical.

People experiencing poverty face severely constrained difficult choices and have no voice in decisions made by authorities. Living in poverty means being ignored, excluded, and exploited, experiencing intense physical, mental, and emotional suffering - feeling insecure, fearful, and desperate. Given the deeply entrenched



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discriminatory attitudes and practices, people also feel hopeless and disempowered. Daily experiences of injustice and dehumanisation undermines self-esteem, destroys personal agency, denies people of their dignity and the chance of getting out of poverty. Social and institutional maltreatment is a catastrophic loss of human potential to society.

“When you live in extreme poverty, you are caught up in a complex system of power relationships and domination. We need to adopt a systemic approach to show how these different dimensions interact with each other.”

Consultation on the theme of October 17, Forum for Overcoming Poverty (March 2024)

Acting together for just, peaceful, and inclusive societies

SDG 16 aims to achieve peaceful and inclusive societies, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. People everywhere should be free of fear from all forms of violence including the sustained violence of poverty. Freedom from the violence of poverty will be achieved only if discussions and actions around poverty eradication are no longer carried out without the people the most directly impacted. We need to recognize and acknowledge that poverty persists because of unjust systems, structural discrimination, deliberative laws, policies, and actions including exploitative economic practices that violate inherent fundamental human rights.

Policies and practices to end poverty must be evidence based. People with first hand experiential knowledge must be fully involved in building policies from start to finish, participating meaningfully in the design, implementation and evaluation of antipoverty strategies that will effectively tackle the visible and hidden dimensions of poverty.

Taking firm steps towards just, peaceful, and inclusive societies include:

- 1/ putting in place conditions for people with lived experience of poverty to share their knowledge and for that knowledge to be recognised and valued;
- 2/ supporting actions to enable the people living in poverty to regain confidence and agency to act and
- 3/ recognising the contributions that people experiencing poverty bring to society and their invaluable experiential knowledge of policy and practices related to poverty.

To correct the collective failure of poverty, we call on everyone to take these firm steps and act together to promote effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions that will appropriately, effectively, and respectfully respond to the needs of the people left furthest behind.

Commemorated since 1987 as the World Day for Overcoming Extreme Poverty and recognized by the United Nations in 1992, the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty promotes dialogue and understanding between people living in poverty and their communities, and society at large. “It represents an opportunity to acknowledge the efforts and struggles of people living in poverty, a chance for them to make their concerns heard, and a moment to recognize that poor people are in the forefront in the fight against poverty.” (United Nations, Report of the Secretary General, A/61/308, para. 58) More information about initiatives, events and activities to mark October 17 around the world can be found at: [UNDESA website](https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/poverty/2024.html).

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Note: This concept paper draws inspiration from the global consultation on the October 17th theme with people experiencing poverty and organisations working closely with them, conducted by the Forum for Overcoming Extreme Poverty and the participatory research on the Hidden Dimensions of Poverty, carried out by the ATD Fourth World and the University of Oxford. The views in this document do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations or its Member States.