From our work within impoverished communities, we listen to the voices of men and women who frequently repeat the words “we live in difficult times.” It is a time characterized by crises of paradigms, hope, and traditional values; a time that provokes perplexity, fear, anguish, social pain, and desperation (Garcia Romero, 2002). The experience of popular education of young people and adults challenges us in two ways. On the one hand, it is worth asking, Is popular education valid today? On the other hand, how can we educate such that people develop a critical consciousness that leads them to new practices aimed at transforming the conditions reproducing oppression?

A BROKEN WORLD, A MORE IMPOVERISHED CONTINENT, COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

A broken world is what Gonzalez Buelt (2002) calls the social reality characterized by exclusion, inequality, poverty, and structural violence that has become a persistent characteristic of Latin America and the Caribbean. Gilman (1983) says structural violence is “physical and psychological harm that results from exploitive and unjust social, political and economic systems” (p. 8). Worldwide and regionally, we see evidence that we are living in a socioeconomic, cultural, and religious context that is controversial and challenging for individuals,
institutions, and society in general. As Cervero (2004) says, the neoliberal practices and policies of the rich countries dominate the life of the more impoverished peoples, resulting in their loss of control over the economic, cultural, and political dimensions of their lives. A common symptom of this loss of control and of the impoverishment caused by these economic policies is that people experience a feeling of hopelessness about their future and therefore lack the incentives to strengthen the social ties of their community.

Values such as solidarity and cooperation are lost in the midst of the competition that the global market promotes (Hinkelammert & Mora, 2001), an economy that reduces all relationships to commercialism and self-interest. Neoliberalism reduces human values to competitiveness and relegates the value of human life to a secondary level.

Neoliberalism has had a terrible ideological impact, spreading indifference and cynicism. The persistence of generalized hunger is one of the most horrible characteristics of the modern world. The fact that people continue to die in such great numbers each year from famine and that many millions more perish regularly because of persistent poverty is a calamity the world, unbelievably, has grown coldly used to. This situation does not seem to kindle the kind of shock and outrage that it would be reasonable to expect, given the enormity of the tragedy. Indeed, people often generate either cynicism (“There’s not much anyone can do”) or complacent irresponsibility (“Don’t make me feel guilty—it isn’t my problem”). [Dreze & Amartya, as cited in Iguiniz, 1999, pp. 27S-276]

The current system of neoliberal worldwide domination also continues to be patriarchal. The latter term implies misrecognition of oppression and domination that mainly women from a number of cultures, social classes, races, and religious groups have suffered and continue suffering daily in all the arenas of social and community life. Currently, the dynamic of domination over women is determined and supported by capitalist logic (Gutierrez, 2003). A sign of this dynamic is the homicides of women that each year damage hundreds of homes in Latin America and the Caribbean, executed mostly by young men who murder their partner or ex-partner (“Ni una muerte mas!” 2002).

Another observation is that we live in an adult-centered society (Duarte & Zambrano, 2001). Adult society is accustomed to looking negatively upon young people and devaluing them (Ceballos, 2004b). They are blamed for the deterioration of values and the rise of delinquency and violence. This generation has become the scapegoat for adults, and their lack of confidence in youth has brought about the centralization of community leadership and the absence of a new youthful leadership that supports and gives continuity to community organizations. It has also brought on young people’s search for alternative and dangerous spaces that offer them opportunities, such as gangs, bands, “nations,” and other potentially criminal groups. Young men and women are now the protagonists of the consumer
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market in a society governed by adults and considered on adult terms, but in a continent inhabited mostly by young people. What does it mean to be young today? What challenges should Latin American young people confront? How does this enable intergenerational dialogue and training of young leaders? We are aware of the growing daily violence that generates fear, insecurity, uncertainty, lack of trust, individualism, and apathy, as well as rupture of community cohesiveness (Ceballos, 2004b). There also appears a fundamentalist Christian religiosity, a form of interpreting and living doctrine in a deterministic and absolutist manner. In this way, intolerance, passivity, immobility, and even mutual scorning are promoted. It is a spirituality that is born of hopelessness on earth, projecting its hope in heaven.

Popular adult education is greatly challenged in this context. Its goal must be to foster the capacity to dream, wish, and look toward the future with optimism as creative life attitudes. The strength of people who continue choosing life in spite of calamity and poverty is their great capacity to create hope and oppose the growth of violence, poverty, and disillusionment.

CHALLENGES FOR ADULT EDUCATION

The challenge of popular adult education is rather serious considering that currently it is the very meaning of education that is being questioned by the reality of these difficult times. In a context such as this one, is it justifiable to talk about education? What role should it assume in this reality? We insist on granting education the foremost role of opening ways to life, to hope, made possible from the community empowerment of impoverished men and women. It is urgent that education favor the processes of forming personal and social identities of people capable of determining their own lives, autonomous and united—as social agents who are committed to transforming reality and building a new local and global citizenship (Educar en tiempos difíciles, 2002). It must be an education that feels the pain of an oppressed people who suffer, who put head and heart in this place and time in order to proclaim that a better world is possible.

DISCOVERING ANOTHER POSSIBLE INTERPRETATION OF THE WORLD

Thinking and building a different Latin America in these difficult times implies taking risks. According to Freire (2000), an important step is becoming conscious of our presence and being in the world as a risk. Why should we take this risk? He states that risk is a necessary ingredient for mobility, without which there is neither culture nor history. Without risk we become paralyzed, absent, invisible. The importance of education lies in the fact that instead of letting
ourselves become paralyzed by fear and risk denial, education stimulates women and men to accept risk. Accepting risk means we live in difficult times, and it is possible for people to have a stake in social change and stand as a presence that transforms reality and makes possible another world. It is a prophetic act that denounces a situation of injustice and inequality and announces another possible reality. A prophetic act can be defined as a close look at reality that blends feeling with reality, offering an opportunity to be heard and to speak. It must denounce what is understood as unjust, even risking one’s own life and acceptance; an act that mobilizes, proposes action, and overcomes accusation. The latter is done from a transcendent conscience, a Utopia. It adopts a collective rather than an individualist attitude. Simply said, it is capable of opening ways to the future, denouncing what is wrong, and moving ahead of the thoughts of one’s contemporaries.

If we as human beings are not just purely spectators but rather builders of history, we should accept the risk of reversing history for impoverished men and women, and never be comfortable seeing their reality as something “natural,” resorting to expressions such as “That’s the way it is,” “It’s always been this way,” and “It will always be this way; nobody can change it.” It is more difficult to take on the perpetual struggle that almost always favors justice, peace, and ethics (Freire, 2000). Therefore we are talking about an education that risks itself to “promote a culture of resistance that is the elemental corollary of a culture of life and peace in the times that we live” (Gutierrez, 2001, p. 125).

REEDUCATING THE PREFERENCE FOR WHAT IS HUMAN AS A LIFE ETHIC

“The learning of citizenship in this city is a slow learning process and even a painful one, but it has to do with civility and with humanity: it is how to learn to reeducate the preference for what is human” (Barcena & Melich, 2000, p. 53). It is about how to consider the city not from coercive fear where everyone is a potential enemy but rather from loving one another, even a stranger, and from a feeling of responsibility and hospitality. Still, making people’s relationships more human in a broken world is not an easy task and cannot be accomplished with abstract theories. Vera Candau (2002), a Brazilian educator, states that education is a dynamic “that daily affects bodies, emotions, desires, ideas, sensibilities, commitments and dreams . . . a task that is not at all easy in times of illness, insecurity, violence, lack of clear horizons . . . difficult times” (p. 9). An ethic of life refers to the living, real, concrete subject; it transcends the system but also refers in a special way to the weak, the poor man and woman, the excluded, “because in them the reality of a negated life clamors incessantly”
When one is born and grows up with a negated life, one easily learns to deny the lives of other men and women.

To Educate Is to Recognize Limits

Both will and desire need to recognize limits; they must be disciplined. The notion of limits here refers to standards as well as to awareness of being finite. Freire affirms that an unlimited will is a despotic will that denies other wills: “It is the illicit will of the ‘owners of the world’ that, egotistical and arbitrary, only see themselves” (2000, p. 34). Building community from the impoverished barrio, the city, and the family or from every relational space presupposes a clear freedom-authority relationship: “I am convinced that no education that pretends to be in service of the beauty of the human presence in the world, in service of the seriousness of ethical rigor, of justice, of firmness of character, of respect for difference, of insertion in the struggle for the realization of the dream of solidarity, can become reality outside of the tense and dramatic relation in which both authority and freedom, living fully their limits and possibilities, learn, without respite, almost to assume themselves as authority and as freedom” (pp. 34-35).

Education Helps Us Dream That Another World Is Possible

As strong as the conditioning force of the economy might be on our individual and social behavior, we cannot be passive about it, affirms Freire (2000), because the contrary would be to renounce our capacity to think, compare, choose, decide, project, and dream. In other words, the influence of the economic structure in our lives is not almighty; it also has limits, and those limits are defined by our capacity to know and transform reality with the help of thought, our capacity to project change and reality itself into the future, and the strength of our choices. Learning to live in a broken world and dream that another world is possible involves education. It has to be implied in social practice, as an “ethical event” (Barcena & Melich, 2000, p. 12) and implies a “political practice” (Cervero, Wilson, & Associates, 2001, p. 13) through which the community is empowered.

In the midst of so many destructive forces acting against humanity, education must be an affirmation for what is eminently human. In a system that dis-empowers its subjects, education has the rewarding task of empowering its subjects. This is only possible with dreams, with Utopia, with projections (Freire, 2000). The economic structures condition us, but they do not determine us; nor can they completely limit us. The human being is capable of stepping back and reflecting, denouncing these structures, because it is in their midst that the struggles for transforming this broken and guilty world are born. Knowing that one is conditioned, but not fatalistically, by the world market structures opens for human beings who are aware of this conditioning a path to intervening in the world, living one's own dreams, and generating hope for today.
In this way, education is an invitation to stubbornly develop another possible (and, of course, better) reality. Every educational process implies empowerment of the capacity to imagine, dream about people’s Utopia, give, and offer meaning. Education is based on the conviction that to overcome injustice, poverty, violence, and market-driven society requires transformation of social structures, and this “implies the joint exercise of imagining a world that is less ugly, less cruel” (Freire, 2000, p. 39).

**EDUCATING FOR SOLIDARITY, COMPASSION, AND RESISTANCE**

*Solidarity* is a term that has been cherished throughout the ages (Vigil, 1991). It signifies recognition, respect, collaboration, alliance, friendship, and help. It means effective and also collective tenderness, a way for human groups to help one another while sharing mutual growth. In an etymological sense, it means to face jointly, and be collectively submerged in challenge and hope (Casaldahga & Vigil, 1993). It assumes recognition of the identity of another and a compassionate (suffering with, feeling with) attitude.

**THE PROCESS OF EMPOWERMENT IN IMPOVERISHED AND EXCLUDED COMMUNITIES**

The most appropriate way of approaching processes of empowerment is recollecting people’s narratives of empowerment in their own place of intervention. This is the case of Dona Ramona. She is about fifty years old, a single mother with four children between fifteen and twenty. She is very involved in her community and for many years has participated in its organizations, including work on a proposal for a community development agenda. She narrates part of her experience for us:

This project helped us to reflect on and organize our experiences. Before learning to reflect, we were not organized in our community labors. Also, before this project took place we only used to write letters asking for aid from the government and other institutions, with the understanding that we were doing the right thing. The organizing experience helped us to join together in facing the problems, listening to everyone in the Barrio, becoming interested, and improving relationships. We learned to be more tolerant and learned to solve conflicts when they arose. This process went farther than just organizing because it also had an impact on our personal, professional, and family life, because it required coherence between one’s personal and social life, more democratic forms, greater unity and understanding, respect for differences and unity in diversity. We understood that regardless of family name, political party, or the street one
lives on, what is important is one’s contribution, because it is important for
the barrio and the barrio belongs to everyone.

We realized that we couldn’t be united if each one of us was working
toward different goals. This has allowed the community leaders to work
more closely together and find out what the community wants, and what it
wants from its leaders. It has helped us in training for dialogue with other
organizations and governmental institutions. It has helped to resolve
conflicts; we have learned to be more democratic. Today I have a family and
I can say that we are working democratically though it is very difficult to do
it.... Democracy is about conceding authority and to sharing it... and I
believe that the organizations are also in this process. As a woman I have felt
more recognized and valued, because we have also worked on issues of
self-esteem and respect. But what is most important, I think, is that we have
joined together, we have experienced solidarity in doing this work. But now
we still have a lot more to do because the work outside of our community is
not easy.

What Doha Ramona lived is what we have called an experience of community
empowerment provided by a project of popular adult education called
Education for Local Development. Together with other men and women,
Doha Ramona developed an agenda for development of their barrio (Ceballos,
2004a).

THE AGENDAS OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

An agenda of community development lists the issues and problems that are
considered as priorities in a determined sector. Some readers might understand
what we call “agenda” as a plan. Although the agenda helps people introduce a
sort of planning in their activities, we understand that the term conveys the
meaning of collectively elaborating a list of problems and issues that the com-

munity itself places in a priority order, so that it can take on the problems as a
collective, transforming the elaboration, diagnosis, and actions of a problem in
an educational and liberating experience for the community. These agendas are
considered as a social strategy of investment and political negotiation on a micro
level. They go beyond defining a list of topics, or a notebook. They are also a
mechanism of learning and forming a democratic and participating culture, of
technical preparation, of social appropriation of knowledge—in summary, an
empowerment strategy. Those who are involved in making this type of agenda
have engaged in processes that require them to diagnose, analyze, and state the
problems within their experience of reality. These agendas are born as strate-
gies of various programs directed toward impoverished communities. Such
programs are often labeled as “for community development” or “local devel-


the overall progress or development of a community in a certain territory, or of a target population, involving all the interested parties.

The major part of these programs proposes integral development. They propose that the community of the barrio be the agent of its own development, and they place themselves in the tradition of struggle for social justice. Building their priorities involves social, technological, and cultural factors. Projects of this kind have achieved connection of the agendas with research, knowledge, dialogue, tolerance, consensus, and the needs of a determined sector and opportunities for collective solution. Their formation has been interactive because it has implied developing strategies of negotiation within the barrio and the community throughout the process, which in turn empowered the groups to deal with external agents (such as the state or municipal government). This process assumes participation as a key criterion. The logic of dialogue, of collective building, of open discussion turns out to be essential to the process. It is supported in communication, trust, cooperation, decentralization, and solidarity. The people of the community then become a single entity, which believes in the barrio’s organizational force.

The agendas for development also bring with them community empowerment through strengthening community organizations in every aspect (decentralization of leadership, training of youth leadership, closer ties to the community, independence of organizations from political parties, less impulsiveness and better long-term planning, and of course democratization and participation), working as individuals and also in a collective sense. The agendas drive a process where the barrios (community leadership and community dwellers) have acquired tools that empower their participation through training workshops and community work projects in making decisions about their own development.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF AGENDAS TO THE PROCESS**

The process of making agendas, from its beginning, mandated an encounter with the community leaders and decision makers. This meant having a space for dialogue and raising sensitivity, tolerance, and openness to innovation; recognition of tools and difficulties in working together; and finally, shared roles. The desire to serve the community and recognition of the worsening situation of poverty and neglect by the governmental authorities allowed working together, and as a result the birth of networks and spaces of coordination where a significant number of community organizations collaborated. This unity was based on the common necessity that brings us together (impoverishment) and a shared desire: improving our reality.
The agendas initiate the process by reviving the community’s shared memory. They remember the origin and birth of the barrio. To create Gualey’s collective memory, the residents of a Dominican barrio organized an encounter of all of the elderly people who were present at its beginning. There, the history of the barrio, its origin, its original culture, and its main problems were told. It was an encounter with the grandparents and great-grandparents of the community that in turn generated an intergenerational dialogue. There followed as a result a participatory diagnosis and analysis of the reality of each barrio involving those men and women who participated in the process. This diagnosis was the starting point for dialogue, discussion, and later prioritization of the issues for the agenda.

The agenda of the community integrates training and education, inclusion and participation, and information; it collects in this way the elements that, according to the World Bank, are keys to empowerment (Narayan, 2004). The methodological and pedagogical process consisted of training through workshops, in which numerous topics were addressed and investigated. These workshops sought to strengthen organizations and empower the community in and during the process. With help from the Poveda Center, the processes included as part of the educative program the sponsoring of two intercommunity forums, in which several barrios participated. “During the forums, staff from the Poveda Center interacted with the leaders and community dwellers from other barrios in a way that broadened organizational relationships. The forum implied a previous process of discussion within each organization from the several barrios about the topic that was being addressed, which had been previously agreed on” (Narayan, 2004).

The definitive step in making the agendas culminated with selection of priorities (problems to be solved) and strategies (how to solve these problems). But this did not mean that it ended the process. The agendas, published and distributed, form the starting point of a series of organized struggles and networking that should lead to achievement of what they have proposed.

THE KEY TO REDUCING IMPOVERISHMENT AND OPPRESSION

The concept of empowerment, according to the World Bank, stems from the premise that in conditions of poverty the options of the poor are limited because of their lack of resources and the little power they have for negotiating better loans. In this way, empowerment means “increasing one’s authority and control over the resources and decisions that affect one’s life” (Narayan, 2004, p. 11) and understanding empowerment as fundamental in reducing poverty.

But from what idea of power do we start out? Traditionally, power has been related to authoritarianism, use of force, imposition and violence, and a “power
The term *empower* assumes another idea of power. It is about a “power of” and a “power with”; achieving it requires an educational process that unblocks what has been learned. Suppose, then, a different concept and use of power, with a change of wording from “power over” to “power of” and “power with.” But movement or a dialectical relationship is also necessary. If the tasks for empowerment of impoverished communities are accomplished, it is also necessary to work toward flexibility and sensibility on the part of those who for centuries were considered to have the right to decide and exercise total power. The latter is mostly forgotten and is much more complex. It is therefore understood that the process of empowerment cannot be neutral, and it cannot be based only on allowing access to economic goods. “Empowering poor men and women requires removal of formal and informal institutional barriers that prevent them from taking action to improve their well-being (individual or collective) and that limit their choices. The key formal institutions are the state, markets, civil society, and international agencies; informal institutions include norms of social exclusion, exploitative relations, and corruption” (Narayan, 2004).

The impoverished population cannot emancipate itself without freeing the nation from the system that produces poverty—that is, the neoliberal global market. Many who focus on poverty limit themselves to questioning the attitude of the poor. For example, although affirming that the less we explore the resources and capacity of the poor—expanding their freedom of choice and action and supporting their efforts to escape from poverty—the number of poor people will only continue to increase and the impact of poverty in their lives will only become worse (Narayan, 2004).

Adult popular education is the key and plays a necessary part in this process of empowerment. From the point of view of adult education, empowerment can be understood as a pedagogical proposal in impoverished communities; thus it is a cognitive, psychological, economic, and theological (defined as popular religiosity, vision, and imagination about God) process. The cognitive component consists of understanding the conditions of subordination, its causes on a big and small scale, and the necessity of options (De Leon, 1999). This is why it is necessary to develop a critical conscience (Henriquez, Villaman, & Zaiter, 1999) and a change of mentality about reality as a condition for producing transformational action and recognizing the mental and economic obstacles that impede change. Developing a critical conscience means offering elements that allow one to see and question reality and the system that produces these same conditions of poverty. This is a fundamental role of adult popular education.

We understand that empowerment implies working with a critical conscience. We propose four dimensions: values, science, politics, and theology. Adult education is a key factor in the process of empowerment by contributing to development of a critical conscience within these four dimensions. This is what Freire
(2000, 2002) intended to achieve. It has to do with building an alternative project in which the majority have the possibility of achieving their goals as persons. This is a personal as well as a community process, and it must consider both aspects. Here self-esteem is a key and should be equal to the other processes (remember the case of Dona Ramona). Therefore the force of change is in the community; empowerment cannot limit itself to being only an individual process since its strength lies in community. Consequently, the community must be empowered, not just isolated individuals.

**EMPOWERMENT FOR WHAT?**

No one empowers anyone, and no one can empower oneself. What can be done in terms of education is to place the empowerment process in the person as well as in the group, but in the end people and their communities are the real subjects and protagonists of their own process.

Empowerment is not neutral. It generates questions about power relationships, about their centralization, and in particular about situations of social injustice that oppress the impoverished classes. It means questioning the structures that promote unjust and unequal social relations in order to understand reality, leading actions that produce change—a real transformation of society and of the conditioning that hinders and limits personal, social, economic, and theological growth. It is not possible to empower and at the same time leave the status quo untouched.

Nonneutrality carries us to what we call the political dimension of empowerment. This implies assuming commitment to transform reality on a small and a grand scale, within the community as well as in the market system that is placed on top of us but does not determine us, as Freire (2002) clearly states.

**References**


