

broke but unbroken.



Grassroots Social Movements
and Their Radical Solutions
to Poverty

augusta dwyer

broke but unbroken



Grassroots Social Movements
and Their Radical Solutions
to Poverty

augusta dwyer



Fernwood Publishing • Halifax & Winnipeg
Kumarian Press • Sterling, VA

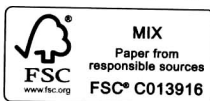
Copyright © 2011 Augusta Dwyer

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

Editing and design: Brenda Conroy

Cover design: John van der Woude

Printed and bound in Canada by Hignell Book Printing



Published in Canada by Fernwood Publishing
32 Oceanvista Lane, Black Point, Nova Scotia, B0J 1B0
and 748 Broadway Avenue, Winnipeg, MB R3G 0X3 www.fernwoodpublishing.ca
and in the United States by Kumarian Press
22883 Quicksilver Drive, Sterling, VA 20166-2012 www.kpbooks.com

Fernwood Publishing Company Limited gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Nova Scotia Department of Tourism and Culture, the Manitoba Department of Culture, Heritage and Tourism under the Manitoba Publishers Marketing Assistance Program and the Province of Manitoba, through the Book Publishing Tax Credit, for our publishing program.



Canadian
Heritage

Patrimoine
canadien



The Canada Council for the Arts
Le Conseil des Arts du Canada

NOVASCOTIA
Tourism and Culture

Manitoba



Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Dwyer, Augusta

Broke but unbroken: grassroots social movements and their radical solutions to poverty /
Augusta Dwyer.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-55266-406-3

1. Social movements. 2. Poor—Political activity. 3. Economic assistance, Domestic. I. Title.

HM881.D99 2011 362.5'7 C2010-908030-0

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dwyer, Augusta, 1956-

Broke but unbroken : grassroots social movements and their radical
solutions to poverty / Augusta Dwyer.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-56549-447-3 (pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-56549-448-0
(library ebook) -- ISBN 978-1-56549-449-7 (consumer ebook)

1. Social movements--Developing countries. 2. Voluntarism--Developing
countries. I. Title.

HM881.D994 2011 303.48'4091724--dc22 2011008712

Contents

Introduction: Dealing with Hope	1
Part 1 Brazil	
1 • A People's Garden.....	15
2 • A People's Production	32
Part 2 Indonesia	
3 • A Walk in the Woods.....	49
4 • Agriculture Is Life and Custom	64
Part 3 India	
5 • Beyond the Slum.....	81
6 • Women Together	104
Part 4 Argentina	
7 • Sí o Sí	121
8 • A New Dynamic.....	136
Conclusion: No Turning Back	147
Notes	155
Acknowledgements	164
Index	165

Introduction

Dealing with Hope

It is not through resignation but resistance in the face of injustice that we affirm ourselves as human beings. — Paulo Freire

Near the corner where First Road meets a traffic circle called Alankar Chowk, a group of cart pullers wait for work, playing cards or resting from the effort of hauling heavy loads throughout the city of Mumbai. Below a small shrine tiled with the image of a kindly white-bearded man in an orange robe, their narrow wooden handcarts are parked side by side like skiffs in a harbour. The *chowk* — which in Hindi means “a place where paths intersect” — is hemmed in by rundown apartment buildings, dilapidated little shops and small businesses like the one that announces, unabashedly, “Portfolio Management.” The *chowk* swells and blares with a seemingly constant flow of traffic, of taxis, trucks and cars. From sidewalk booths, ribbons of lottery tickets and multicoloured packets of tobacco waft in the fumes of all those combustion engines engulfing the hot afternoon breeze.

Pedestrians, bicycles and men pulling handcarts loaded with odd yet practical items — worn-out air conditioners, huge piles of burlap, a dozen rolls of metal sheeting — make their way through the traffic. Along the mostly broken sidewalk, the fruit vendors burn sticks of incense among their wares and women string loops of marigold and jasmine to sell to the crowds of passers-by. Men and women alike load sacks and boxes onto their heads or curl up in the shade of a wall, somehow managing to find the oblivion of sleep within this vast grid of commercial activity.

This snapshot of a chaotic, busy intersection where the poor come to work, to sell or to beg is real, and replicated in underdeveloped countries around the world. Yet it is also emblematic of the way many people, including policymakers, the media and even philanthropists, tend to see the poor and poverty: as a problem so vast and so complicated that the poor themselves could not possibly have any solutions to bring to it. They are victims, not protagonists, lacking the time, the tools and the desire to think about the politics of their situation. For many, the slum dweller and the impoverished peasant farmer are not like the rest of us somehow. Even in wealthy na-

tions, the poor are seen as risk-averse, as incapable of long-term planning, as individuals scrambling to make ends meet on their own without any real sense of collectivism or political agency. Thus, poverty is to be survived by the poor, and solved by those who are not.

However, Alankar Chowk is also a place where paths of perception intersect. "Cities, especially but by no means exclusively those in the developing world," writes South African political scientist Mark Swilling, "are now locales of hopelessness and hope: hopelessness due to the sheer magnitude of the challenges we face, and hope due to the efforts of countless social movements that are finding ingenious solutions to intractable problems in the complex interstices of these awesome, unsustainable social structures." This book deals with the hope. In fact, it goes beyond hope to look at the actual achievements of four grassroots social movements of the poor. It shows how, in their quest for rights and resources, they are proving to be far more successful than traditional aid initiatives, progressively minded governments or piecemeal economic growth in ameliorating the conditions of poverty. Among these organizations is the Indian Alliance, which has an office on First Road. Originally formed in 1976 as the Bombay Slum Dwellers Federation, the Alliance today unites some two million slum and pavement dwellers. Their struggle for housing and tenure rights is just one example of how, increasingly, poor people are recognizing that they do not have to accept the bondage of poverty. Their achievements in changing not only the circumstances to which fate seems to have destined them to live their lives, but also traditional perceptions of them as helpless recipients of aid, are bringing an entirely new focus to the poverty debate.

Over the past several decades, particular global tendencies have exacerbated the growth of Third World poverty. These are the seemingly bland and anodyne features that by now constitute the reigning capitalist orthodoxy. Its features include the exploitation of resources for the benefit of large, international corporations, the constant search for new trade niches and ever-cheaper labour, and the blatant promotion of agribusiness and its addiction to chemicals. Throw in the fiscal policies imposed by global bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization on debtor nations, and you have a continuous assault on the lives of poor and indigenous peoples, a big, relentless and efficient system for poverty growth. As Swilling sums it up, "the power of those who control the world's resources depends on the systemic disempowerment of the global poor."

Yet alleviating economic and social inequality is also, by and large, determined by those at the top. In the predominant view of both government leaders and society in general, the only way to eradicate poverty is with some of our rich-nation money — an idea that evolved from a previous belief

that what the poor needed was to be civilized. With no way of making a connection to the cart pullers or beggars or street vendors, society trusts its governments and international institutions to do so — to deliver the sacks of grain, the vaccinations, the multi-million-dollar advice that will fortify capitalism, create jobs and change lives.

Another popular view has to do with the reforming powers of progressive politics. If the poor were to elect the right party to government, it would be accountable to the people. Development would blossom, equality reign and poverty slowly disappear, just like their candidates always promise. For others, effective government would also allow the market to function as it apparently should. Private enterprise, modernized and unfettered, would create the wealth and jobs that will eventually lift the poor from poverty, like a giant tidal wave of economic energy.

Yet for all the donations, foundations, soft loans, debt forgiveness and development schemes, the spectre of poverty only seems to proliferate. We have only to look at countries like Brazil or South Africa for just a couple of examples of political parties within which the aspirations of the poor and oppressed coalesced, that once elected, ignored their discourse, their promises and even their history. In developing nations such as India, Brazil and Indonesia, sustained growth of gross domestic product (GDP) has failed to bring the prosperity the market promises to billions of people. India's astoundingly high childhood malnutrition rates, for example, have barely moved, from 42.7 percent in 1999 to 40.4 percent in 2006 — despite the economic growth of those years. Even the concerted might of the United Nations and its famous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have brought only piecemeal improvements, while their main target — to halve extreme poverty by 2015 — seems as distant as it did in 2000, when the initiative was declared and signed.

Today, about half of the world population — almost three billion people — live in poverty: in refugee camps, in city slums and in an increasingly un-giving countryside that is still home to something like three quarters of the global poor. An extraordinary number of them, 800 million, are chronically hungry and malnourished. In Africa, half the population still lives on \$1 a day, and almost half — 42 percent — do not even have access to clean drinking water. Meanwhile, global warming and environmental destruction are making small-scale farming an ever more unviable proposition. Overwhelmed by the media images of the world we share with the poor, it is no wonder people in rich nations believe the message that poverty is so complex that only an elite layer of experts, policymakers, corporations and economists can eventually figure out some mechanism to end it.

However, the grassroots social movements increasingly shouldering their way onto the world stage defy that belief as they seek a world far different

in social and economic terms than the one we live in now. They understand that it is their right *not* to be landless, homeless or unemployed while national and international economic policies favour a few and disregard the rest. The millions of poor people who form and run these movements show that beyond those dismal scenes of Third World poverty, behind the multiple realities of economic injustice, something significant is going on, as momentous to the rest of us as it is to the poor themselves. How and why they organize, the way they struggle for more than mere survival, but for rights, education and social justice, not only challenge the decision-making hegemony of national governments and global institutions, they also question long-held assumptions about what the poor can and want to achieve, not only for themselves but for entire societies.

The terms “grassroots” and “social movements” are broad and fluid concepts nowadays, taking in everything from professional organizations that work among the poor, to community-based organizations, to protest mobilizations. Recent history has brought us Yellow, Orange and Velvet revolutions as examples of “people power,” as well as civil rights, women’s and environmental movements, groups of unrepresented or disenfranchised members of affluent societies who fell outside standard class analysis.

The movements whose stories are related in this book are all based in low-income or underdeveloped countries. They are made up of impoverished people who have joined together to struggle for some concrete goal along with other enduring, often intangible goals that arise as a result of these same struggles. Their aims are both immediate and long-term. They encompass each participant’s desire for land, housing or jobs, as well as empowerment and eventual social change. These movements therefore combine elements of protest and resistance with the kinds of activities carried out typically by non-governmental organizations, or NGOs, activities that involve the ongoing search for sustainable solutions in the lives of the poor. This dual nature gives them undeniable staying power and is a major factor in their achievements in fighting poverty.

Swilling, who heads the Sustainability Institute at the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa, sees the work of such movements as building “self-organized systems within poor communities.” He notes the way they remain autonomous whether they are engaged in conflicts or negotiations, or in partnership with other bodies such as local governments and development agencies. “What changes when this happens,” he points out, “is not the power relations per se but rather the way solutions are defined, contested, negotiated and implemented. Over time, the substance of these power relationships starts to change.”

Grassroots social movements that have over the years proven themselves successful in achieving such solutions — essentially in their struggles

against poverty and exclusion — are the focus of this book. Three of them, the Indian Alliance, the Peasant Union of Indonesia and Brazil's Landless Rural Workers Movement, have amassed remarkably large memberships over several decades. The fourth, the National Movement of Factories Recovered by Workers, is comparatively small, with some 10,000 members, and still relatively new. The social and historical implications of its success in taking over and running 122 workplaces in Argentina since 2001, however, convinced me that this organization needed to be included. It is a phenomenon that, as City University of New York political scientist Peter Ranis noted in *Socialism and Democracy*, "reinserts the working class as a central ingredient in the pursuit of a just society."

I followed other criteria as well, choosing to concentrate on movements that had been initiated essentially by the poor themselves and that promote participatory democracy within their structures. Extraordinarily heartening in and of itself, I believe this respect for the opinions and decisions of every member is a key feature of these movements' success and potential. It explains the broadening of the issues they are taking on beyond the original or basic demands, such as, in the case of the Landless Rural Workers Movement, meaningful education as well as a plot of land. Taken together, these features shed new light on the way millions of the planet's most disadvantaged people think about, care about and set about consciously building structures of democracy, responsibility and justice.

While resistance to a system that denies them access to resources lies at their core, they have proven to be more resilient than many straightforward opposition movements. Mobilization may begin over a single problematic issue or particular crisis, yet as this is overcome, members remain in the movement and retain the features of protest, such as demonstrations, occupations and other forms of direct action. A common language of rights allows them to embrace specific demands but also contributes to alliances with others in diverse countries, cultures and contexts.

This broadening of the parameters of struggle and defining of solutions to poverty imply a significant evolution of the protest movement. The slum dwellers in the Indian Alliance, for example, identify land on which housing for them may be built. In a context where water and electricity often fail, they design and oversee construction of the housing in order to make sure it works for them; invariably, it ends up costing much less than had it been built by the state or an international institution. In Brazil, the Landless Rural Workers Movement, or MST, promotes the setting up of cooperatives, organic farming and responsible use of the environment among its members to help them compete with large landowners and agribusiness.

Scholars of social movements have long attempted to define their inner workings and the historical circumstances surrounding their formation.

They consider, for example, the rational calculations individuals must make in order to join a social or solidarity movement; in other words, how it has to be in their interest as individuals to do so. Some, like University of Florida anthropologist Anthony Oliver-Smith in his study of resistance movements to big development projects, also consider other factors, what he calls “the bonds of sentiment, affect and other *gemeinschaft* emotions in the formation of solidarity groups.” Oliver-Smith identifies the tension between these ideas as “one of the most persistent issues in social movement research,” and observes how “certain kinds of movements based on concepts of collective identity, spiritual values, or aesthetics... can be dismissed as patently irrational and given short shrift by policy-makers and other authorities.”

While such scrutiny is not the focus of this book, what is interesting in the movements studied here is the combination of both the rational and the “emotional.” Those joining or forming the social movement make concrete gains. But at the same time we find identification with the movement, internal diversity and the adoption of meaningful rituals — such as the political theatricals, or *misticas*, devised by the MST in Brazil — as a kind of emotional or ideological hook. Just as the personal experiences and perceptions of participants are multiple, fluid and often a question of process, they absorb and exchange meanings among themselves and with their coordinators in understanding their situation. A powerful sense of identification with the movement and its long-term goals allows them to keep growing, in size and relevance, as members take on more and more of the multiple problems that confront them.

The importance each of the four social movements described in the following chapters places on participatory democracy is particularly noteworthy, inspiring and instructive. To what extent does the requirement some see for articulate and even charismatic leaders in determining the success of social movements find balance with a need for such participatory democracy within them? This question is also linked to the notion of “framing,” as originated by Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman in 1974. Goffman came up with the concept of framing to describe the set of interpretations individuals use to perceive their reality and from that, guide their actions. Frame “alignment” is seen as the main role of movement leaders, as they articulate the need to change the predominant social view that poverty is the fault of the poor (or in some cases, previous colonizers) rather than an inevitable ingredient of capitalism. The experiences of the grassroots movements described in this book provide intriguing examples of how to find and support just such a balance.

Although the role of leaders in the Indian Alliance, for example, has been crucial to its success, the frame they provide is their emphasis on the reality that slum and street dwellers, by simply surviving, have amassed a

huge amount of skills and knowledge usually taken for granted. What's more, as this movement spreads from Mumbai to cities across India, knowledge is transmitted by and amongst its members rather than by outside development experts or social workers. The balance here is also between individual responsibility and empowerment, and this makes the Alliance's critique of traditional national and international development methods both pointed and constructive.

In Argentina, horizontal decision-making is the basis of every cooperative determined to keep its source of employment by taking over and running its workplace. The recuperation of moribund factories by workers occurred against the backdrop of a crashing economy, stratospheric rates of unemployment and a resulting poverty boom. As business owners simply walked away from their companies (many of which had enjoyed hefty subsidies from the Argentine taxpayer), some workers decided to stay and run things themselves. Out of the massive street protests and generalized anger against a system that clearly wasn't functioning, the National Movement of Factories Recovered by Workers, or MNFRT, has emerged as the leading organization representing the cooperative self-management of workplaces in all kinds of sectors. In every member cooperative, decisions are taken through workers' assemblies. Elected factory councils can be recalled at any time if they don't carry out their responsibilities, and profits are equally divided among cooperative members. While in some cases, such democracy has been challenged by leftwing political parties seeking to utilize them as an example, or even by their own factory councils intent on lining their pockets, the power of the majority has always won out. The economic transparency of the cooperative makes every single worker-managed workplace a success story in itself, a microcosm of workers' power and collective strength.

In the case of the Peasant Union of Indonesia, or SPI, the equilibrium between decentralized decision-making and the ability to speak in a unified voice is fundamental to both its internal democracy and its success. Its early years were characterized by a series of isolated or regional responses to land theft and repression by corporations and government during the authoritarian, thirty-two-year-long regime of Suharto. At the time, the creation of a national organization whose aim was to forcibly take fertile farmland would have been illegal, even as activists recognized that just such a movement was needed. Only with the post-Suharto Reformasi, or Reform, did open organizing become possible, allowing the SPI to grow to a membership of 700,000 smallholders and forest dwellers. As they exchange ideas, information and decisions among themselves and with a central office in Jakarta, many thousands of twenty-five-member bases across the vast Indonesian archipelago now sustain the values of autonomy.

In its struggle to win back or retain the rights of Indonesia's forest peas-

ants, moreover, the SPI is promoting another kind of democracy, environmental democracy. The state's control of millions of hectares of land through the creation of a national forest puts them at the centre of most agrarian struggles in Indonesia today. Throughout Southeast Asia, in fact, an astonishingly high number of peasants — more than 100 million — live in forests. Powerful interests in logging, mining and agribusiness leave most of them subject to eviction at any time. And one of the latest schemes to fight global warming, Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, will, ironically, exacerbate the precarious nature of their tenure. The SPI's rights-based approach to environmental conservation, therefore, comes into direct conflict with the notion that preserving tropical forests means cutting the people who live in them out of the equation. As such, it has enormous repercussions for the entire region.

In Brazil, the MST consciously discards the notion of hierarchical leadership for what one militant describes as “circles of representation,” continually training new leaders and recycling old ones throughout the entire organization. When it began in the late 1970s, its members were encouraged, championed and even protected by churches and left-leaning trade unionists. Yet those who stood on the front lines were the destitute peasants evicted from large estates by the switch to mechanized farming. Those who occupied the first pieces of public lands and demanded their expropriation for their own use, lived for years in black tarp shacks and direct the movement today are the landless peasants themselves.

This is not to say that in these and in other examples of grassroots movements, those who are not poor — sympathetic outsiders in a sense — cannot or do not play important roles. At issue is the potential for tension, for the movement being taken over by supporters or organizers who may well be capable of articulating a deeper, more structural dimension to what is otherwise a series of personal tribulations. As Srilatha Batliwala of the Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations at Harvard University has observed, “This broadening of the term grassroots and grassroots movements disguises the very real difference in power, resources, visibility, access, structure, ideology and strategies between movements of directly affected people and those of their champions, spokespeople or advocates.” The price of information, technology, experience and even financial support can be high, from internal strife to meddling with the decision-making processes of the majority. In the most successful grassroots social movements, this potential imbalance is replaced with alliance, with mutual learning and with a deep respect for autonomy. There is a recognition that while cross-class solidarity can be a significant moral and ideological lever for those forced by the dominating class to feel like nonentities in their own society, it must encourage rather than stifle their voices and sense of initiative.

After twenty years in the MST, for example, a former Catholic lay worker named Rubinilsa Leandro de Souza still remembers how she felt, setting out in the middle of the night, during the first fitful land occupations in Pernambuco. "People are believing in you," she said, "in you, this young person. You jump up into the truck and head for the land, and when you arrive, there are another 400 families. And so you begin to believe in the average person's strength, to feel that, when the people are organized, they have invincible strength. I think that is what motivates you, what makes you believe — the fact that you actually have a concrete proposal for a particular situation."

Rubinilsa's experiences led her to drop her lay work for the church and dedicate herself fulltime to the MST, compelled, as she put it, by "this desire to see something being done that transformed people." In fact, the diverse personal stories related in the following chapters portray this transformation. They are just a few of the multiple examples of how participation in collective struggles brings the most disadvantaged and marginalized of people to take on, in a personal sense, bigger questions about the nature of social justice and democracy. No one comes out of a struggle the same person they went in. Experiences of repression and solidarity unearth inner resources and strength of purpose many didn't know they possessed. The overcoming of obstacles leads to the discovery of a new consciousness and confidence. Like a snake discarding its old skin, the poor who construct change at the same time shed the culturally embedded belief that only small groups of elite decision-makers know what is best for them.

The experience of struggle can also provide fertile ground for the blossoming of the creativity of the poor. In the district of Pandeglang, on the Indonesian island of Java, Saeful Anwar makes his living from a single hectare of land. This he carefully terraces and tills, hand planting rice twice a year, planting cassava and fruit trees along its margins. Regularly flooding and filling his plot with goldfish bring three undeniable advantages: natural fertilizer, pest control and, eventually, dinner. Yet Saeful represents far more than the industrious peasant farmer in a lush landscape of glimmering steppes of water and emerald carpets of young rice. He is also an example of the inventiveness, optimism and altruism of the poor. He promotes the use of organic fertilizers among local peasant farmers and, after gathering information from the elders in his village, has concocted an organic pesticide. He has even invented a simple system for pumping water up from lower fields to higher ones, three pipes and a faucet that cost a few dollars to buy and don't need a motor to work. This invention, too, he wants to give away to other peasants like himself. The fact that he doesn't do this as just an individual, but as a member of a thriving social movement, is what lends him and his inventiveness heightened relevance in the global struggle for economic and

social justice. Saeful joined the SPI, he said, “because I felt that the rights of peasants were being frequently violated and that we were powerless if we didn’t organize.”

Such transformations are also at the root of the natural growth of new solutions within these movements. The MNFRT cooperatives, for example, pour part of their earnings into solidarity funds that provide financial backing to new cooperatives. Some are formulating projects to educate other workers and involve surrounding communities that supported them through the often fraught and difficult period of taking over the workplace and re-starting production. In Indonesia, the SPI emphasizes solidarity with earthquake and tsunami victims, education and community empowerment, as well as gender equality. The Indian Alliance has made the establishment of savings circles and community-managed micro-finance the bedrock of its organizing and spread both method and solidarity across the Global South by co-founding Shack/Slum Dwellers International. In Brazil, what began as a solution to a straightforward problem has evolved into a movement that fights for agrarian reform for all rural workers and the eventual transformation of society. And in every case, these actions, decisions and innovations come from the grassroots.

Through their participation in La Vía Campesina, both the MST and the SPI embrace the wider agenda of defending smallholding peasants from the depredations of global agribusiness and unfair agricultural trade practices. By linking up peasant farmer groups from eighty-seven countries, including Canada, La Vía Campesina has become a bulwark against the juggernaut of factory farming and the very extinction of small, family-run farms around the world. So while some scholars of social movements consider them successful when they achieve their initial goals and thus lose their reason for being, by acknowledging and taking on an ongoing series of connected problems in the lives of the poor, the ones on which I focus remain active.

The achievements of these social movements suggest noteworthy and potentially far-reaching conclusions. One is the importance of independence, of preserving and protecting autonomous bases within communities of the organized poor. The four social movements studied here have all derived strength from their autonomy from precisely those organizations long considered traditional allies of the poor, such as organized labour and progressive political parties. This infers a new way of thinking about the nature of social change and of the politics that purports or seeks to bring about social change. When the dispossessed encounter and embrace forms of organization and struggle that make sense to them, when they don’t abandon a movement once they’ve won what they set out to win but stay to fight for others, there are, aside from inspiration, a number of political lessons to learn.

Likewise, the idea that localized activity can accomplish more for the

poor than a change in government at the national level, even to a popular government, is amply demonstrated here. Even with certain basic rights enshrined in law, too many governments simply ignore them while economic elites throw up new or different forms of the same old problems. In the end, poverty and injustice remain, and the only way to deal with them effectively is through sustained grassroots activity by movements of the poor and oppressed.

There are also, of course, crucial lessons here for organizations involved in poverty-alleviation programs. We need to ask why international institutions disburse funding through local governments or their own outside experts rather than organizations of the poor themselves, and why they are the ones to devise programs and provide so-called expertise. While they may collaborate with international development agencies, progressive political parties and organized labour, vast numbers of hugely disadvantaged people are making it clear that sustainable solutions are only possible through partnership with them. By proposing, managing and carrying out projects themselves, they are demanding — not pleading — to be heard.

Yet rather than welcoming the sense of initiative displayed by movements of the disenfranchised in their struggles for justice, governments ignore them at best and persecute them at worst. In all of the examples in this book, the state has made use of its two main weapons, the police and bureaucracy, to stop change and maintain the status quo. As a result, even though their movements are, without exception, based on the concept of non-violence, the gains the poor have made have not come without many deaths — a fact which only serves to underline their courage and tenacity.

And for the disbursers of overseas development aid, the poor by and large remain “target groups,” grateful recipients rather than discerning participants. Most aid organizations, certainly official development agencies, are loathe to work with movements that make no bones about their opposition to sitting governments and their reliance on direct-action strategies. It is ironic that while aid organizations also have a problem with the frequent lack of accountability in those same governments’ use of their grants and loans, it is combative social movements that attempt to hold their governments to account.

These movements prove that helplessness and poverty do not make an inescapable equation, that hardship can actually be the matrix from which the poor themselves find the strength and determination to build something successful. By organizing and unleashing their strength and their creativity, millions have already transformed themselves from victims into protagonists and millions more will. Against staggering odds, they are building a vital new definition of success: not the accumulation of wealth and power but the defiance of a socially and economically mandated destiny.

The potential impact of these movements also touches on crucial themes

that concern the future of our world. The Landless Rural Workers Movement and the Peasant Union of Indonesia may have found effective and most importantly, sustainable, methods to save our ravaged environment by bringing the issue down to daily-life fundamentals. As an estimated 85 percent of the developing world's urban population is being shoehorned into slums of soul-destroying proportions, slum dwellers' movements may be the key to mitigating their hellish conditions or even transforming them into decent sub-communities within large but liveable cities. The National Movement of Factories Recovered by Workers offers a glimpse of what democratic worker self-management looks like, in not one but a network of such places, challenging the logic of profit-based production. While economic growth waxes and wanes, decreasing and then increasing poverty, its cooperatives serve as a beacon for others who now see running their own workplace as an alternative to unemployment and destitution. They all seem to offer evidence of this wonderful quotation from veteran socialist Tony Benn: "All progress comes from underneath. All real achievements are collective."

All of the stories in this book are ultimately indicative of a new way of thinking about the poor and working class. They bring us to a more profound understanding of the importance of human rights and human ingenuity when we talk about the alleviation of poverty. And while no one is able to foresee the future, I will take a leaf from the optimism of the many poor who have shared their stories with me and assert this: in the struggle against poverty, their success is a blueprint for the better world in which so many of us aspire to live someday.

Part 1



Brazil