

Artisans of Peace Overcoming Poverty

Volume 3: *Understanding the Violence of Poverty*



by Diana Faujour Skelton

with Eugen Brand, Fabienne Carbonnel, Dave Meyer, and Jean Venard



This is Volume 3 of three volumes of *Artisans of Peace Overcoming Poverty*

- Volume 1: A People-Centered Movement
- Volume 2: Defending Human Rights
- Volume 3: Understanding the Violence of Poverty

See page 211 for details about the contents of the other volumes.

Other publications by ATD Fourth World:

- *The Roles We Play: Recognising the Contribution of People in Poverty*, featuring photography by Eva Sajovic. (London, UK: 2014)
- *Challenge 2015: Towards Sustainable Development That Leaves No One Behind*, edited by Brendan Coyne, Xavier Godinot, Quyen Tran, and Thierry Viard. (Paris, France: 2014)
- *Not Meant to Live Like This: Weathering the Storm of Our Lives in New Orleans*, edited by M.G. Olsen, Karen Stornelli, and Maria Victoire, and with a foreword by William Julius Wilson. (Washington, DC: 2012)
- *Extreme Poverty Is Violence — Breaking the Silence — Searching for Peace*, by Anne-Claire Brand and Beatriz Monje Barón. (Vauréal, France: 2012)
- *Come With Us: Let's Make the World a Better Place*, a DVD by children from the Taporí Movement. (Geneva, Switzerland: 2009)
- *Unleashing Hidden Potential: How Parents, Teachers, Community Workers, and Academics Came Together to Improve Learning for Children in Poverty*, a CD-ROM by Carl Egner, Denis Cretinon, Jill Cunningham, Colette Jay, and Haruko Yamauchi. (Landover, MD: 2007)
- *How Poverty Separates Parents and Children: A Challenge to Human Rights*, edited by Diana Skelton and Valérie Brunner. (Méry-sur-Oise, France: 2004)

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VOLUME 3

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Published by ATD Fourth World: All Together in Dignity

Cover photos: In the Central African Republic, young people carry art material for cultural activities in the emergency camp near the Bangui airport where, after civil war broke out in 2013, some 70,000 people took refuge.

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Introduction

“Poverty is the worst form of violence.”

— Mahatma Gandhi

For almost sixty years, ATD Fourth World has sought out people in the most serious situations of extreme poverty. In low-income communities, we coordinate projects such as Street Libraries, the People’s University, and fair-trade workshops. Over the years, in many parts of the world, we have witnessed the violence wrought by poverty. First in post-war Europe, and then in Africa, the Americas, and Asia, ATD has brought together people who live in poverty, making it possible for them to end the silence about this violence and reinforcing their efforts to create peace in their communities.

While the violence of poverty takes different forms in each country, people living in poverty recognise challenges they have in common.

- In Guatemala, Doña Ada Maritza Orosco Aguilar, says, “Due to the violence in my country, I lost my 15-year-old son and we never found his body. If I had just stayed at home, crying about what had happened to me, maybe today I would already be dead. In my opinion, staying alone, with just your grief and without talking about it with anyone, is the worst thing to do.”
- In the United Kingdom, many families in poverty lose their children, not to street violence, but to a social service system that is quick to terminate parental custody. Silence in this context is sometimes imposed by agencies that censor the letters parents write to their children in foster care. Also, parents’ own words may be used against them in custody proceedings. Moraene Roberts says, “When you can’t even say what you think and feel, it damages you. It hurts you. And damaged people living together become a damaged community, become a damaged society.”

The first three chapters of this volume explore the violence of poverty and the different ways that members of ATD Fourth World resist it:

- In the United Kingdom, where a public campaign against welfare fraud distorts the truth and reinforces vitriolic stereotypes about people in poverty;
- In the Central African Republic, where decades of political instability and the armed conflict that began in 2012 have cost lives and shuttered schools for months on end;
- In France and Belgium, where the increasing ethnic diversity of low-income communities pits people against one another to compete for scarce jobs, housing, and support.

The final three chapters explore how people in poverty are able to make their voices heard, ending the silence about the violence of poverty. When families have been trapped for generations in a struggle to find food and shelter, they often feel powerless and afraid, and lose hope. When people know that their words are likely to be ignored or even used against them, they can feel trapped in silence about the violence of poverty. People who grow up seeing their parents treated like dirt may come to believe that this is normal and only what their family deserves. When they get to know others with similar experiences in different contexts, they can begin to believe in themselves, and then to hone a collective intelligence about how to resist the violence of poverty and build the solidarity that can bring peace to their communities. These later chapters address:

- Examples of courage and hope gleaned from the words of families in crisis. We can sharpen our comprehension of history by recording and understanding the thinking of homeless families, such as those living under a bridge in the Philippines or displaced by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. In Switzerland, families in poverty had their children removed from their care without their permission. Hearing about their experiences led the government in 2013 to acknowledge its culpability in this practice.
- Results of a participatory action research project on the violence of poverty and the search for peace. From 2009 to 2012, this research was carried out by more than a thousand people in twenty-eight

countries who have experienced the violence of poverty first-hand. They expressed their individual experiences and thoughts, framing the research and later analysing the results. This undertaking brought to light the choices they make to work towards peace.

- Recommendation for organisational structures and methods that build communities where no one is left behind. Over its sixty years of existence, ATD Fourth World has fine-tuned a way of working together inclusively and effectively. In all aspects of decision-making, our governance involves people who live in poverty so that our work remains rooted in their experiences, ideas, and aspirations. These insights can be applied to public decision-making to encourage co-responsibility, intercultural intelligence, and an ethical, productive approach to confrontation.

Understanding the violence of poverty and finding ways to stop it are critical for improving individual lives and broader communities. When people in poverty are mistakenly viewed as violent and undeserving of help, the cost is steep. This stereotype foments needless fear and isolation and inflicts immeasurable harm. Many parents fear for the safety of their sons, knowing that even while they are still children, other people often view them as a threat simply because of their appearance. In every country, walls and guards isolate gated communities. Children born into poverty grow up being told “Keep out” and knowing that they and their parents are unwanted. In fact, this prejudice *about* violence and poverty exacerbates violence *against* people in poverty. Sometimes the violence of poverty is direct, as when a homeless person is attacked. Sometimes it occurs as institutional violence when prejudice leads to policies that do more harm than good.

Drawing on the experience and intelligence of people who live in poverty has already begun to transform our understanding of poverty and of peace. The challenge that remains is to understand fully that poverty in and of itself is a form of violence. It is not enough to eradicate material privation; we must also end the systematic denial of the dignity of people in poverty if we want to overcome the violence of poverty and to create genuine peace.

Resistance to Stigmatisation in the United Kingdom

The Roles We Play

The woman in the photo on a poster looks ordinary. Leaving a house and advancing towards the camera, she could be anyone's neighbour — except for the fact that the image shows her heart as a target in the middle of a bulls-eye. The text, in dramatic red-on-black, blares: "We're closing in". The woman is being hunted. The text continues, "We're closing in on benefit thieves with the help of hundreds of calls to our hotline". This poster is part of a UK government advertising campaign urging people to report even their faintest suspicion that acquaintances might be receiving more welfare benefits than they should. Other photos in the same campaign show people holding a sign in front of their torso in the style of a police mug shot. The signs read, for example, "Benefit thief", or "Made to pay back the benefit I stole".

Launched by the Department for Work and Pensions in 2002 and amped up with dramatic graphic designs in 2009, the "Targeting Benefit Thieves" campaign offers rewards for tips — made anonymously — that lead to ending another person's benefit payments. The campaign also included a website inviting anyone to customise its posters and press releases and to publicise its radio and television ads. The bulls-eye posters have been used on bus shelters, billboards, and phone kiosks throughout England, Scotland, and Wales. They have also inspired myriad tabloid headlines denouncing "Mansions for Scroungers", condemning "Four Million Scrounging Families in Britain", or describing an offer for "A Bounty to Trap Cheats".

Beginning in 2009, ATD Fourth World's members decided to push back against this campaign and its distortions, which have been devastating to families living in poverty. One effect of the campaign has been to convince the general public that welfare fraud is much more widespread than it actually is. A survey by the Trades Union Congress found that,



Posters from the UK's "Targeting Benefit Thieves" campaign. Here, we've pixelated the faces of people in their sights.



“On average, people think that 27 percent of the welfare budget is claimed fraudulently, while the government’s own figure is 0.7 percent.”¹

The 2013 British Social Attitudes Survey shows hardened views towards recipients of unemployment benefits, who are “certainly viewed less favourably now than they were 30 years ago [...] and] 81 percent agree that ‘large numbers of people these days falsely claim benefits’, up from 67 percent in 1,87. [...] Attitudes towards the unemployed and the role of government in providing support to them are, across a range of measures, far less supportive now than they were three decades ago — suggesting the public have indeed become less ‘collectivist’ in their attitudes towards this group.”²

1. Trades Union Congress, “Support for benefit cuts dependent on ignorance, TUC-commissioned poll finds”, 2 January 2013.
2. Alison Park et al (eds.), *British Social Attitudes: the 30th Report*, London: NatCen Social Research, 2013.

Several voices have publicly criticised the “Targeting Benefit Thieves” campaign. Prof. Stuart Connor of the University of Wolverhampton has examined this campaign and writes that it “[...] portrays those who commit fraud as a threatening other, whose presence necessitates and legitimates the government’s increased use of technical, legislative, and punitive mechanisms for managing ‘problem populations.’”³ Prof. Fran Bennett of the University of Oxford notes, “There have always been the deserving and undeserving, especially in countries such as the UK, which has tended to see people living in poverty as ‘them’ who are different from ‘us’. But recently the stereotypes seem to have been getting stronger, and the language of politicians and the media more negative. Even under the previous [Labour] government, many politicians found it difficult to see the positives. They too often saw people living in poverty as passive. I remember in particular my anger about a speech by Tony Blair along these lines.”

Journalist James Bloodworth denounces the campaign as “purely political: the government believes there are votes in ‘cracking down’ on benefit fraud.”⁴ Dr John Jewell of Cardiff University writes, “The weakest and most disenfranchised in society shoulder the blame for the UK’s wider economic woes. They become the targets for our hate and resentment. [...] Unbalanced, vitriolic, and unsympathetic coverage [...] causes] the denigration of the poor.”⁵ Dr Daniel Newman, also of Cardiff University, writes:

[...] despite the facts, large swaths of the population are coming to resent the poorer in society. [...] Desperate people look for others to blame. [...] The coalition government is playing a neat trick in deflecting this ire away from them and their cuts and onto weaker sections of society less able to defend themselves, such as benefit claimants; the opposition is keen to do the same in a pre-emptive strike. [...] The public reaction to the new Channel 4 series, Benefits Street, which started this week, offers but a glimpse of the

3. Stuart Connor, “We’re onto you: A critical examination of the Department for Work and Pensions’ ‘Targeting Benefit Fraud’ campaign”, May 2007, *Critical Social Policy*, volume 27.

4. “Another ‘crackdown’ on benefit fraud, yet it accounts for just 0.7 per cent of welfare budget”, *ThinkProgress*, 16 September 2013.

5. John Jewell, “Hatred, envy fear — it’s all in a day’s work for British tabloids”, 17 January 2014, *The Conversation*, United Kingdom edition.



Targeting ordinary people: ATD Fourth World members countered the government's mug-shot posters by inviting people of all backgrounds to write down their own roles and share the images on social media.

potential hatred that may accompany this demonising of the poor. The show focused on a Birmingham street with a supposedly large proportion of social security claimants [...]. In true tabloid style, the programme depicted benefit claimants (who claim they were tricked into appearing) as lazy scroungers, stigmatising the local population as an exploitative detritus choosing to live off the taxes of others. The Twitter response was phenomenal, with the show trending for the whole of the next day, carrying with it a torrent of abuse aimed at residents on the street. This went beyond mere vitriol and onto inciting violence, even including death threats, or as one charming Tweeter professed: "I want to walk down #BenefitsStreet

with a baseball bat and brain a few of these scumbags.” [...] The anger and disdain displayed by so many at what was so clearly a sensationalised narrative exaggerating specific examples to suit a ratings-driven agenda highlights how readily ordinary people will be persuaded to turn on their peers in times of austerity.⁶

Resisting Stigmatisation

Since the beginning of this campaign, ATD Fourth World’s members in the United Kingdom have felt hurt and angry by the highly publicised flood of negative messages and images accusing people in poverty of laziness and fraud. We wanted to respond together to this grossly misleading picture of benefit recipients. This led us to develop a project called *The Roles We Play: Recognising the Contribution of People in Poverty*. Published both in book form and as a [multimedia website](#) in 2014, the project also includes a short film and a travelling exhibition.

Moraene Roberts, who lives in poverty and who is a member of ATD Fourth World–UK’s national coordination team, recalls how hard it has been for people in poverty to see everyone with a low income repeatedly targeted and stigmatised in this way:

We wanted to react to the really terrible things that Parliament and the press were saying about people in poverty. You never even heard the word “poverty” without hearing attached to it words like “scroungers, feckless, lazy”. And the media reported only on extremes. One day, they’d write about a man getting a huge excess of benefits, and the next article would be about someone scrounging to get by on almost nothing. Everything said publicly about people in poverty amounted to verbal abuse. It was disrespectful, and a lot of it was downright lies. [...] Hardly anyone spoke up for us publicly. There was another campaign, too, called “Rat on a rat”! What a vile, terrible image of people living off the waste of the land. It was the beginning of the war on the poor. I call it that because I feel there has been a concentrated war of verbal attacks to build discrimination against people caught in this awful trap.

6. Daniel Newman, “How a Hollywood B-movie sent shivers down my spine over demonisation of the poor”, 8 January 2014, *The Conversation*, United Kingdom edition.



To challenge the widespread negative stereotypes about poverty, “The Roles We Play” project developed a photo-essay book, a website, pages on social media, and an interactive, multimedia travelling exhibition.

Talking about it with our members, people said it was getting to them emotionally. So we spent a weekend when we decided to talk to each other about our lives outside of what we do together as a group. And we discovered all kinds of things about each other and the many ways we contribute to society. It might be helping a neighbour, or caring for an elderly relative, or raising children. And we decided we needed to get the general public to realise that most of us don't fit those extremes the media talks about.

Those conversations among our members resulted in the project “The Roles We Play”, evolving in 2009 with discussions and workshops that used positive imagery to challenge the widespread negative stereotypes about poverty. The project grew organically over several years. It yielded an exhibition of professional portrait photographs that toured the country in 2010 and a participatory film project in 2012. By 2014, we had expanded the photo exhibition to include autobiographical essays focused on what participants do to overcome poverty and the types of social exclusion they experience in their lives and throughout their communities. These activities range from working in a local charity shop to helping a terminally ill friend.

In the *The Roles We Play* photo-essay book (close-up of the cover shown here), Ms Georgina expresses her role as Poet. Participants worked with professional photographer Ms Eva Sajovic.



To raise awareness of social discrimination against people living in poverty, we continue to run interactive community workshops focusing on the photo exhibition and book. In addition to this outreach, our members who created the book have been travelling around the country to run creative workshops at festivals and galleries and to take part in academic panel discussions. Using drama, poetry, and music, they focus on stimulating creative responses in disadvantaged communities to highlight contributions of people in poverty.

Professional artist and photographer Eva Sajovic offered her talent to the project, and people in poverty were involved in all aspects of the collaboration. This included writing, editing, choosing the photos, and honing their public-speaking skills to launch the book during a tour of the expanded exhibition. Moraene explains why they chose a photo-album format for the book:

You can make a statement, but it's more powerful if you put a face to the words. You have to be very courageous to do that. The participants have dared to put their heads above the parapet. [...] Once your face is in a book that's distributed or online, you've exposed yourself, not just given your opinion. But putting a face to the words is important. It's harder for the public to look at the photo and imagine a scrounging monster. Instead, they realise, "That could be my sister." It shows that we're normal. We may experience poverty,



Putting a face to words:
Ms Moraene Roberts, Anti-Poverty
Campaigner in *The Roles We Play:
Recognising the Contribution of
People in Poverty*.

some of us may not have work, but we're normal people. Showing our faces takes away the illusion that we're less than human. It brings more of our full identity into the world. Now, whenever "The Roles We Play" exhibition is shown, one or more of us whose faces are in the book go along with it to run the workshops. [...]

People ask so many questions — not aggressive ones, but challenging questions. They really want to understand where and why and how this project was done. Those viewing the exhibition are very impressed that it wasn't just a few people planning it and then asking others to take part. It's our own collective work and our own ideas in the book. There's a very strong ownership of the book by all of us. At every event, some of us whose photos are in the book are there to speak. We make a point of saying that we came up with this idea together. We were able to go through every single photograph and text to decide what we wanted to have published or not. [...] Hopefully actions like these will, in the short term, begin to erase the stigma imposed on people living in poverty and, in the long term, build a unified front to eradicate poverty for all — with those who live through it leading the way.

“The Roles We Play” project combined two main themes. First, it encouraged participants to be aware of and value the ways in which they were active in their families and neighbourhoods. The project also built participants’ confidence to speak publicly about how they contribute to their communities. Beginning in 2011, a core group of key ATD

members expanded the project to involve more of our long-term active members, young people involved in our European project, and other friends and supporters. They began by talking about how they see the roles they have played, both in ATD Fourth World's work and in their neighbourhoods. Each person acknowledged the importance of other participants' contributions to their communities. At the same time as they were preparing to speak publicly, many participants were also coping with various stressful issues their families faced, with help from ATD Fourth World.

One workshop that focused on sharing skills and building confidence to speak publicly also examined the words, phrases, and slogans used in advertising, as well as those used to talk about ATD Fourth World: Why do we choose certain words? What impact do they have? One participant commented, "The language of politicians is lots of hot air, and desensitised. We should do it our way. What we did today — the use of role-playing — stops people from switching off. It's a new language." With these exercises fresh in mind, participants at the following workshop were videotaped by a local film-maker so they could get used to being filmed in different situations, from playing games and quizzes to speaking at a lectern on a subject of their choosing. During the next video workshop in 2012, participants spoke about poverty and dignity, and what those words meant to them. This work resulted in a four-minute film, *Our Voices*. Later that same year, through weekly workshops, a small group of participants learned how to set up and use film equipment, record sounds and images, and create storyboards for scenes and narratives. They examined the varying impacts suggested by different camera angles. Eventually, they selected the stories and final footage for a ten-minute film: *The Roles We Play*.

Photographer Eva Sajovic says about the project:

I hope it's [helped] to create a bond — a common bond of humanity. When [others] have edited your stories, that doesn't come across so much. [...] People reveal themselves; it's not always easy to do that when you're being photographed [and] have experienced a lot of prejudice and are vulnerable. They are reaching out. [...] The project was not only conceived together with everybody, it was shaped together. I was behind the camera, but we decided together how people wanted to present themselves. The collaborative aspect comes



During video workshops, participants worked with producer Ms Mihaal Danziger of Film for Social Change (above, at left). They spoke about what the words “poverty” and “dignity” mean to them and learned how to use film equipment and create storyboards for scenes and narratives.





Ms Kathy Kelly, as she appears in *The Roles We Play: Recognising the Contribution of People in Poverty*. She defines her role as “human rights activist” and adds, “I am a mum and a carer. I love reading books and cooking. When you live in long-term poverty, you have to depend on services that are delivered with suspicion and disdain. They make you feel humiliated.”

from the production and continues through the dissemination: people finding new ways and forms of making known [who they are].

Derek is a long-term member of ATD Fourth World who agreed to have his image and voice included in the book and on the project’s website. He says, “It makes a difference to other people around us when you’re not just focusing on what a mess you’re in, but on what you can do for others around you.” Kathy Kelly, another contributor to the book, says:

When I first heard of the title “The Roles We Play”, I had a job to relate to it because, to me, the wording created some imagery of having decision, choice, and control. I thought, “Well, what decision, choice, and control have we got?” [...] It’s quite dehumanising and demoralising how we are portrayed. [...]

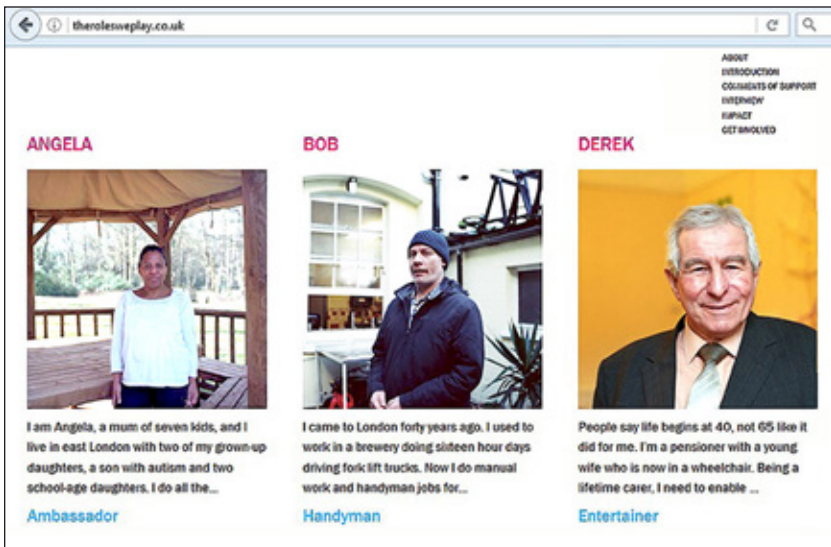
There’s no value given to our human skills and capacities. [...] The only value is on formal education. It’s so easy to feel ashamed, lose confidence, lose self-esteem. People end up believing that we are what they say we are. [...] We do spend our time building up and giving confidence to young people, only to have it destroyed time and again by the system. [...] Those attitudes are getting much harder and nastier. It makes me worry for future generations, for our children and grandchildren, and what sort of life they’re going to have. [...]

I feel that people don't know enough about the mental, psychological, and emotional toll of years of poverty and the impact that can have on you [...] There's a tendency to talk about us, but not to us. [...]

This project is a celebration of who we are. This project is very important to me because it means I am not invisible any more; I am recognised as a human being with thoughts, feelings, and aspirations. I feel respected. It helps me define myself more positively and feel I have a valuable part to play in society.

Comments from other participants include the following:

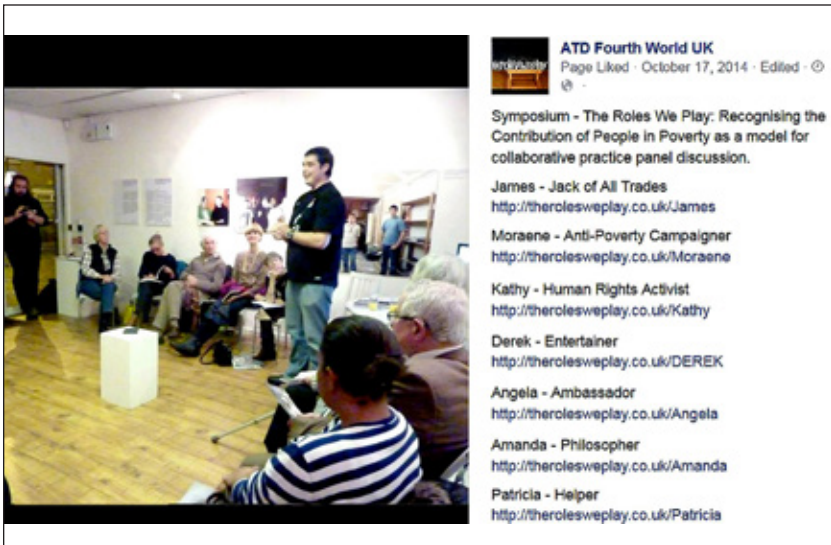
- “I felt really rough and bogged down until I got here today. Discrimination deadens you. You forget what it's like to meet up with people. When I got here, it took a lot of stress off. After meetings like this, I can go back to my environment and feel completely different. It alters my perspective.”
- “It's one of the best things I've ever been involved in. It shows ordinary people with ordinary lives who go that extra mile to help other people. Being part of the new exhibition shows



The website www.therolesweplay.co.uk shows the roles participants see themselves playing, such as Ambassador, Handyman, and Entertainer, as shown in this screen shot.

people there is a lot more to ATD Fourth World's work than they think. I feel I can speak out more now, and when the exhibition goes around the country I feel proud to be associated with it."

- "Working on the film has given me more confidence, and with that confidence I can challenge myself more. I'm more confident in what I'm doing and how I speak to people, and the film gives us another avenue to put our points across."
- "We've done the ATD thing of writing exactly what the person says. [...] It's not paraphrased. It's lovely that when you're reading it, you can hear them."
- "It's not preachy. [...] It's polished, but the people haven't been polished. [...] What you see is what you get."
- "The word 'poverty' puts a lot of people off, but reading people's stories makes [them] understand, especially people from our housing estate who are afraid of the stigma that comes with that word. [...] People just don't want to be treated differently from anyone else."



ATD Fourth World-UK's [Facebook page](#) and other [social media pages](#) follow the project's progression, showing how "The Roles We Play" participants continue to raise awareness of poverty and social discrimination.

Feedback and reviews about the exhibition have been positive.⁷ Prof. Robert Walker of Oxford University spoke at an event held in 2014 to launch the book:

It's a celebration about life itself. While it's created by groups of individuals, I think that what we find in the achievements of the group is replicated globally. Individuals in this community [have] global resonance [because] the experiences that you are going through and the way that you are contributing to other people's lives has occurred with other people in poverty around the world. It's a small project, but its implications are enormous. [...]

The lives revealed in the photographs challenge the derogatory language so often used in popular debate. Labels such as "the poor" deny people their individuality. Words like "scrounger" impugn the character of millions of our fellow citizens. These words drive a wedge through society, creating myths and false differences. [...]

The people in the photographs are not "poor people". They are in many ways successful people coping with challenges and events that might bring the rest of us to our knees.

Moraene Roberts said: "I gave a copy of the book to my doctor. Then he asked for another to put in his surgery [waiting room] so people would have something more interesting to read than the magazines. Then he wanted one for his brother as well, who's a barrister-at-law. He made contributions to pay for the books. And he said, 'This is so interesting because it's not what's in the news at all; it leads me to a different way of accepting or not accepting what I hear on the news or read in the paper that's supposed to be about *all* the people on the dole. The media says "scroungers" or "claimants" to the point where you lose track of the word "people". There are people being attacked.' The doctor told me that he does know plenty of his patients who are on the dole, and who also care for an elderly parent or for children. But it had never before occurred to him

7. Fiona Elsted, "The role of p.o.v.e.r.t.y in the roles we play", *Fielsted: Thoughts about the things that matter*, October 2014; "The Richness in Poverty", *Brixton Bugle*, November 2014; and Gary Grattan, "[Belfast exhibition highlights the hard truth of poverty across the UK](#)", *Belfast Telegraph*, 29 January 2016.



From *The Roles We Play: Recognising the Contributions of People in Poverty*:
“Eric, Freedom Fighter”, “Amanda, Kids’ Club Worker”, “Gwen, Poverty Defender”,
and young people of “iiChild, Community Development Project”.

to think, when the media talks about ‘lazy, idle dole-scroungers’, that it is his patients they’re attacking. He had thought those were some other ‘lazy, idle dole-scroungers’. But now he sees that they have been talking about people he knows who are not like that.”

Groups facing prejudice know that being constantly stigmatised is damaging and disheartening. Humanity has made progress towards recognising the inalienable dignity of each person, regardless of gender, skin colour, and ethnic origin; yet because of prejudice and indifference, people in poverty continue to be regarded and treated as though they are worth less than others. Together, our members in the United



Following the launch of “The Roles We Play” exhibition, people said that it led them to question the validity of media stereotypes.

Kingdom were able to stand up to the disparagement and banish “the illusion that we’re less than human”. Their courage in telling their stories helps people from all walks of life to rethink the way we treat one another.

2

Courage Amid Conflict in the Central African Republic

Poverty is the rope tying us to one another. Before, we didn't know that we were tied up. ATD Fourth World showed us the rope. Now it's up to all of us to work to untie it. If we choose to do this work, we can leave poverty behind and go towards peace.

— Louise Mokonou, a Fourth World activist⁸ in Bangui

1. Central African Republic: 1988 to 2011

Bangui — The Courtyard gate is ajar, so that passers-by can see everything that goes on. The first thing you see is a mural showing young people doing different kinds of work. Decades after it was painted, the Courtyard still preserves the memory of these young people and their efforts. From the streets of the city centre and other bustling districts, they would converge on the Courtyard, rising above the insults whispered or blurted at them as they passed: “Godobés! Godobés!”⁹ With the help



Bangui, Central African Republic: The entrance to the ATD Fourth World Courtyard.

8. Fourth World activists, who grew up in extreme poverty, make efforts to defend others and work to claim their collective human rights.

9. A pejorative term for children living in the streets.



The mural at the ATD Fourth World Courtyard in Bangui.

of adults who looked at these young people as part of their family, they built the Courtyard, a place of reprieve from the harshness of their lives, where they felt safe enough to drop the vigilance they needed in the street. Here they could think about their future and imagine renewing ties with their relatives. The projects they worked on together gave the young people a chance to show they could be of use to their country. This is why they said of this Courtyard: “Finally, we have a place where we don’t have to watch our backs and we can think quietly, in peace.”

The Central African Republic (CAR) is a landlocked country of fertile savannah grasslands. It is one of the least densely populated nations in the world, with only 7.1 people per square kilometre. Its economy is mainly agricultural, growing staple crops, cotton, and coffee. The unregistered sale of diamonds and ivory has also been part of the economy. The Human Development Index, which measures education, health, and other standards of well-being, ranks the CAR 187th out of 188 countries assessed.¹⁰

Since the 1980s, the CAR has been troubled by upheavals. At certain times, Bangui has been plagued by riots, violence, and looting. Despite this, the Fourth World Courtyard has never been ransacked. One of the

10. United Nations Development Programme. *Human Development Report, 2015*, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/HDI>

A marketplace in the Moukassa district of Bangui.



A land-locked country, the Central African Republic is bordered by Chad, Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Congo, and Cameroon.



neighbours who helped paint a mural there speaks of it as a “national heritage site”.

In late 2012, national power once again changed hands, plunging the country into chaos.¹¹ The death toll between December 2012 and December 2014 has been estimated at more than five thousand. According to the UN Refugee Agency, “The current humanitarian emergency follows [...] instability and widespread violence perpetrated by two opposing groups. Approximately 25 per cent of the CAR’s population has been internally displaced by the conflict, which has divided the country

11. UN Refugee Agency. 2015 *UNHCR Country Operations Profile – Central African Republic*, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e45c156.html>

along ethno-religious lines. At the peak of the unrest in early 2014, more than 930,000 people were displaced. More than half of the population is still in need of humanitarian assistance.”

A daily newspaper in another African country called the CAR “an object of horror and disgust”. A few years ago, Monsignor Joachim Ndayen, the archbishop emeritus of Bangui, described his country by quoting Psalm 79: “We are objects of contempt to our neighbours, of scorn and derision to those around us.” He called for his country’s rebirth. The national anthem affirms, “Oh Central Africa, oh land of the Bantus, reclaim your right to respect.”

“We must build a new country,” says Gisèle Lamassi, a mother raising her family in an outlying district of the capital. She recounts her life: “Hiding — that is how I lived when I was in deep poverty. After my husband’s death, the children and I suffered greatly. We were all rejected, even by my own relatives. I told the children that we must stay together, and if we die, it will be together.” For several years now, Gisèle has been an activist with ATD Fourth World. She and her compatriots know only too well the adversity afflicting their country. But they say with a common voice, “We love our country.” They praise its natural beauty, its language, and its values of solidarity, as well as its capacity to recover from its trials. “I love my country, because we’ve had to go through very harsh times and we’re still here,” says Gisèle.

“We’re here” — the words echo those of millions of people crushed by great poverty, whose whole strength seems pushed to the limit “to be here”.

“We’re here”, they say, even as others do their utmost for them to cease to exist — or at least for them to be unseen, to the point where they are often no longer recognised as human.

People here speak forcefully of the national motto, “Zo kwe zo”¹² — “Every man is a man”, in the words of the nation’s founder Barthélémy Boganda.¹³ The meaning of Boganda’s words is rooted in the colonial era prior to 1958 when the native people were subjects of France, not citizens of their own country. “Zo kwe zo” reaffirmed the dignity of every human

12. In the Sango language.

13. Barthélémy Boganda died in an accident in 1959, before Central Africa became independent.

Ms Gisèle Lamassi says that poverty means being rejected by others and having to hide.



The ATD Fourth World Courtyard is “a place where we don't have to watch our backs and we can think quietly, in peace”, as one member says. This painting of it is by Fourth World Volunteer Corps member Ms Jacqueline Page.



In 2010, as part of a community construction project at the Courtyard, the motto of national hero Barthélémy Boganda was painted on the wall to be displayed together with a quote from ATD's founder.

being, putting people at the centre of the nation. After more than half a century of independence, when our members reflect on the current situation, they speak of isolation, ignorance, a lack of perspective, humiliation, and violence, all grinding the country down for decades. Together, they agree: “Zo kwe zo’ has been pushed aside.” The violation of these words has made their meaning even more significant for Central Africans as an ideal towards which everyone should strive.

ATD and the Central African Republic, Both Born from a Land of Suffering and Courage

Our name, “All Together in Dignity”, links us to this country whose second motto is “Unity – Dignity – Work”. People in the CAR, despite the country’s suffering and the scorn of the international community, aspire to put humanity at the heart of their nation through their resistance and courage. In 1988, Joseph Wresinski wrote to a volunteer¹⁴ who was about to join the team here: “Experience has shown us that getting to know one

14. Fourth World Volunteer Corps members choose to link their lives over the long term to those of people living in poverty.

another in an atmosphere of friendship and freedom can open the hearts of young people and adults.” Our first Volunteer Corps members in the CAR spent two years in a rural community to learn about the country’s deep-seated identity. Then they got to know the children and young people in the streets of the capital. The relationships they formed in both places made it possible for them to develop a “Courtyard of a Hundred Trades”.

The children living in the streets, whose existence in the heart of the city had been seen by other residents as a wound, began little by little to rise up as a source of hope for the community. For several years, a volunteer and an ally¹⁵ had been visiting children who spent most of their time at the rubbish dump near the airport. After they had taught the children to use scrap materials from the dump to make radios, the University of Bangui invited these children to its Science Week to present one of the models they had built.

In its first decade, the Courtyard opened its doors to children living in the streets so they could participate in cultural workshops. While many of the young people succumbed to the dangers of street life, dozens of them made regular visits to the Courtyard and joined in projects to contribute to the future. They built a playground for the “Centre for Mothers and Children” and worked on a construction project with a forest community of Aka people; and in so doing, they discovered their capacity for solidarity. One of these young people, looking back years later, says:

When my father died and then my mother died, people cast me out, and I had to live in the street. When I met the Aka people, I said to myself that they were suffering just as I had. So I can’t turn them away. I have to get close to them and share their suffering with them.

In the 1990s, while our team in the capital continued cultural projects with children and young people in certain outlying districts, one volunteer was living in the forest alongside this Aka community.¹⁶ His presence made it possible for some of our members from Bangui to get to know a population that has suffered generations of systematic discrimination and rejection, and to discover their own sense of responsibility. One of

15. Fourth World allies are people of all walks of life acting in solidarity with people living in poverty.

16. Alain Génin, *Mossangué, le vieux pygmée*. Paris: Editions L’Harmattan, 1999.



Photos from the early years of activities at the Courtyard, arranged around the logo of the World Day for Overcoming Poverty, have remained on display as a connection with previous generations of young people.

our members¹⁷, Joël Karpandji, said, “This is how I learned that there are others for whom we must make room. We must give them the freedom to integrate into society as whole people who have knowledge that could help us more.”

When the country was engulfed in conflict from 1997 to 2002 and ATD volunteers were forced to leave, several Central African associations continued the work we had begun with children and young people living in the streets. Joël was one of the allies who maintained the Courtyard during those five years. So that the children living in the streets would not be isolated, Joël and a few others continued to visit them. During those years, on the annual World Day for Overcoming Poverty, the children exchanged messages with people observing the day in other countries.

When our volunteers were able to return to Bangui in 2002, we started to develop new projects that allowed us to get to know entire families living in extreme poverty. For example, through a health education initiative in 2006–07, our members launched a community-wide project to protect the entire district from frequent floods. Because all the drainage ditches are connected, if a single portion remains clogged, none of the

¹⁷ Members of ATD Fourth World include activists, allies, and the Volunteer Corps.



In 2007, our members launched a community project to clear drainage ditches.



Ms Louise Mokonou (centre) works with her neighbours to protect every home in the area from floods.

water can drain away. Our members spoke with everyone to convince the community as a whole to invest in flushing the ditches to clear blockages, so that everyone could benefit. The quality of the relationships that ATD had fostered in this neighbourhood created a unity of purpose that resulted in all the ditches being cleared.

It was after this project that some of the mothers we knew pointed out that their children suffered not only from malaria and other illnesses, but also from a lack of access to school. In 2007 at an event marking the World Day for Overcoming Poverty, parents from several communities delivered a message explaining how poverty was impacting their children's education:

Poverty beats all the records because it pits us against our own ideas and hopes for our children. As parents, we are overwhelmed. We need to think about how, together, we can help our children have something good for tomorrow. Society needs to know this. We have to come together, to think, to unite, so that every person, wherever he is, will share his money, his knowledge, and his power — and so that God, who is before everything, can give us the strength to struggle against the misery of poverty, in peace for all of humankind.

Supporting Young People in Their Commitment to Peace

The appeal in that 2007 message inspired young people to act. For the previous five years, some thirty people between 17 and 30 years old had already been volunteering in their own low-income communities to run cultural and educational activities with about three hundred children aged 3 to 12. In many cases, the children were the younger sisters and brothers of the facilitators. The young people's motivation stemmed from wanting to be useful and to convey the values and skills they had learned to the most disadvantaged children in their neighbourhoods. They said, "Because of this movement, I discovered that I could share what I know." And, "In my neighbourhood, we gather children of different ethnic groups, religions, and social backgrounds. Now their parents are thinking about this. They see their children together, and they say that they, too, could come together. That's peace."



ATD member Ms Flore Nodjikomo, shown here in 2009, volunteers in her own low-income community to bring children together for cultural and educational activities.

Most of these young people live with very little security. But when they take children by the hand, they give hope to their community. By publicly sharing responsibility for children's well-being, they are encouraging their neighbours to follow suit. By leading their communities to come together to support people in the deepest poverty, they contribute to building peace.

The strength and clarity of their commitment shows us new ways forward: ways where people in poverty are not presented with expensive, complicated "solutions" that are overwhelming; ways where people in poverty are considered as the sisters and brothers of others. These young people did not wait until they had means to decide to volunteer their time. Their example is a grand challenge: what should each of us do with our strength, our minds, and our knowledge? What should we do with what has been given to us? If we have the chance to study, what should we do with our education? If we happen to have a way with words, what should we do with that talent? Will we use our words to seek power or to promote



“Together for Others”: This 2011 seminar gathered sixty young people from nine countries for training relevant to the cultural activities they run for children.

freedom? Will we know when to remain silent so that others can find their voices?

The young people pay a price for their commitment. They are sometimes teased or criticised for what they do. Because they are known to be linked to an international organisation, they are suspected of hiding money and benefits for their personal use. When their critics understand that their activities are completely voluntary, they call the young people fools for wasting their time.

In 2011, these young people involved with ATD helped our team to organise an international meeting called “Together for Others”. The goal of the meeting was to support their commitment to children, and to mark the 2010–11 International Year of Youth. Over six months of preparations, three major aspirations emerged: for the young people to break out of their isolation and be in touch with people in other countries; to gain more access to knowledge; and to live in peace. During one of the planning meetings, a young man said, “The international meeting must engage us on a deep level to relieve the anxiety of our country’s young people. We must be able to speak of the things that strangle us, so that we can make a fresh start.”

That 2011 international meeting, held in Bangui, gathered sixty young people from nine countries. Their conclusion was:

Not all of us are strong. If we turn our backs on those who are weak, will they be able to move forward without us? If you are strong,

educated, and rich but you do not share, who are you in front of someone who has never set foot in school? There is no message in your life. If you don't want to share, there's no meaning. We can do good; we can do evil. Our future is first of all inside of us. We young people have hands and hearts to build the world.

The closing ceremony took place in the University of Bangui. For many of the young people, it was the first time they had ever entered an institution of higher learning. One of them said, “A university is where you discover the universe. The universe is not just for university students. Everyone else, including the people of the Fourth World, is also part of the universe. Being able to discover what happens there is also a pathway to peace.”

One of the Central African participants in the international meeting, Geoffroy Ngana, said he took strength from this meeting. Like the other young people, he had been frustrated when peers criticised him for spending his free time to help children. He felt his motivation renewed when he had the chance to think with others about the “message in each person’s life”. He said, “Finally I understood that this adventure hasn’t been in vain;



During the “Together for Others” gathering, participants sing lyrics they wrote together. Mr Geoffroy Ngana leads with guitar.



Children and young people who helped record the DVD “Child of the World, Give Me Your Hand”, at the ATD Courtyard in November 2012.



The “Singing Against Poverty” project produced this DVD, entitled “Child of the World, Give Me Your Hand”.



Children paint the artwork for the cover of their DVD during the “Singing Against Poverty” project.

I haven't been wasting my time." As a musician, Geoffroy offered his talent for a project called "Singing Against Poverty". Parents had been asking for support to help their children learn new things. The young people noted the children's love of singing and began a music project with Geoffroy. For more than a year, the children rehearsed songs and performed in public. They had the opportunity to record the songs in a studio, and also to be filmed singing in their neighbourhoods. These efforts led to a DVD being made in 2012.¹⁸

2. Central African Republic: 2012

Extreme Poverty Is Violence – Breaking the Silence – Searching for Peace

The Central African Republic, battered by so many conflicts, is the victim of a "silent crisis".¹⁹ The nation carries the scars of repeated atrocities committed by armed factions. These upheavals have displaced hundreds of thousands of people and caused tens of thousands of people to go hungry despite living on highly fertile land.

In 2011 and 2012, our members in this country played an active role in the participatory action research project called "Extreme Poverty Is Violence – Breaking the Silence – Searching for Peace". Central African participants contributed to this project at a seminar we held in Dakar, Senegal, in 2011 and later in the final colloquium organised at UNESCO headquarters in Paris in 2012. Here are a few excerpts:

There is no peace unless we seek out whoever is isolated because of poverty. If people group themselves together by separate categories, there's a division. If the world is already divided, there will never be peace. When people live in poverty, there are many setbacks, so they are anxious. They feel pushed aside and can't live in peace. It's like

18. Not commercially available, but the "Child of the World" DVD can be requested from ATD Fourth World.

19. A term used by Doctors Without Borders to describe the CAR's "chronic medical emergency" due to "massive prevalence, incidence, and mortality of preventable and treatable diseases, crisis, conflict and displacement which disrupts people's lives and livelihoods, [and] a phantom healthcare system." *Central African Republic: A State of Silent Crisis*, November 2011.



The Street Library “leads to a kind of disarmament. Because of the children, the adults make peace too.”

one problem piled on another, and that's why people are on the defensive. But when they feel that other human beings just like them are with them, that brings peace. Conflict multiplies our poverty. In our situation, as people living in poverty, we have no rest because we have nothing saved. Every day, we have to go out to find a way to feed the children. Otherwise, the home would collapse in decay. If there are conflicts, it's hard to go outside because of the gunshots. You don't dare go to the fields. And in these conflicts, the rebels use the poor like donkeys to carry their gear. Sometimes it's so heavy that you just can't — but if you refuse, they kill you. During conflicts, the richest people use the poorest to do evil, with only a pittance as compensation. But the evil they are made to do is colossal. It's the deep poverty that leads to many conflicts in our country. If someone has no work and he'll be paid to take up arms, he'll do it. If I had a job, why would I take a gun to go kill anyone? If people had work to earn a living, the problem with the rebels would not continue.

Parfait Nguinindji spoke of the regular activities that young people run for children in the outlying districts of Bangui and in neighbouring villages:

Members of the steering group for the 2012 evaluation (left to right): Mr Joël Karpandji, Mr Guillaume Depaha, and Ms Gisèle Lamassi.



Mr Timoléon Kokongo, Mr Joachim Kobende, and Mr Parfait Nguinindji (left to right). Timoléon and Parfait were also members of the evaluation steering group and Joachim is part of the Fourth World Volunteer Corps.

Our movement wants people to be reconciled with one another. This Street Library work leads to a kind of disarmament. Because of the children, the adults make peace too. Because, I could have an enemy, but if our children are learning together in the Library, if they are in solidarity, if my child is having fun with my enemy's child, I can't want to kill him. I return to a family feeling with him. [...] Anyone who angers quickly is not trying to learn what happened. Our movement refreshes the hearts of people who are often angry.

Looking Towards the Future, Against All Odds

Even at a time when the country was again plunged into a crisis that made the future impossible to envisage, our members began evaluating and planning ATD's work. When our international movement was developing a new set of Common Ambitions, our members in the CAR were strongly motivated to help identify the mission and choose the priorities that would influence our work in every country. Gisèle was already sure: "Our movement's mission is peace."

The steering group for evaluating ATD's work in the CAR, launched in November 2012, was composed of people from diverse backgrounds. Parfait and Gisèle, who left home each morning without knowing what they would be able to bring home to their families that evening, were part of this team, which also included Guillaume Depaha, a civil servant; Joël, an educator; and Timoléon Kokongo, a lawyer. In this group, as in any of ATD's meetings, someone who has had no formal education can teach something to someone who has earned several diplomas.

Their evaluation and planning, conducted both in week-long meetings at the Courtyard and in visits to the neighbourhoods and villages where we have members, gradually took shape around five aims:

- from isolation to gathering together;
- from ignorance to knowledge;
- from a lack of hope to a positive perspective on the future;
- from humiliation to respect;
- from violence to peace.

Béatrice Epaye is the director of the Heartfelt Voices Centre, which continued work ATD had begun with children living in the streets. This centre is open to all children, both Christian and Muslim. Mrs Epaye has seen how cultural projects like the Street Library we run in her centre can help children there to begin imagining a better future for themselves. When children living in the streets are asked what they will do in life, most of them mention informal jobs like selling cigarettes or helping a taxi driver find customers. But she points out that the children who participate in the Street Library have different ambitions: many of them say they wish they could go to school. This project allows children to widen their horizons in thinking about their options in life.



During the evaluation work, members look over a timeline of photos retracing the history of their actions with ATD Fourth World over more than twenty years.



Ms Béatrice Epaye (centre) with participants at the Heartfelt Voices Centre, which welcomes both Muslim and Christian children living in the streets.

Mr Ghislin Dana, an ATD member, helps facilitate a weekly Street Library at the Heartfelt Voices Centre.





Children perform songs from their “Singing Against Poverty” project for parents and friends at a 2012 event at the ATD Courtyard.

When people — especially those in the deepest poverty — have no hope of being able to change their destiny, they feel it as a weight, and this burden was a constant refrain in interviews conducted in December 2012:

- “So often, you work for people who end up not even paying you.”
- “In this country, you can find yourself facing someone who in the blink of an eye can wipe out what you tried to build for your whole life.”
- “It’s so discouraging. You take time to grow vegetables and take them to market — but no one buys. You bring them back home, but you have no refrigerator, so you throw them away. When you do this once or twice, it’s bearable; but after that, you give up.”
- “There are strikes in school, so our kids might spend three or four weeks at home. How can they make up the work? What future can our country have like this?”

To combat this discouragement, we propose projects that generate a positive and specific outcome, such as running the workshop to make

radios, or producing the DVD of the children singing. When people have new perspectives like these, they can change how they see their own efforts and potential — and it can also change how others view them. Gatherings like those for the World Day for Overcoming Poverty are opportunities for this change of perspective:

- “It makes people consider our labour and our suffering.”
- “In our gatherings, we make it possible for disadvantaged families to speak of the efforts they make. Our mothers’ efforts touch hearts. Recognising these efforts and showing that they matter is what’s important.”

Gisèle says:

I speak of peace when I speak of my poverty. Bearing witness is one of the things we can do, wherever we find peace. With our movement, I learned to leave poverty behind to go towards peace. I also learned knowledge with my friends, with the volunteers, all together. Knowledge is the root of the world. Success means living in peace. And I share this peace with others around the whole world.



Mr Geoffroy Ngana with children “Singing Against Poverty” in May 2012.

3. Central African Republic: During the Civil War Following 10 December 2012

After the start of the unrest in late 2012, many Central Africans were living in terror. In Bangui, gunshots could be heard regularly. As civil war broke out, schools shut down for a full year. Many administrative services were also closed for weeks after their offices were ransacked.

Like most of their compatriots, the young people committed to ATD Fourth World have witnessed — or endured — situations of brutal violence. After undergoing a harrowing experience, one of the young people, Y.,²⁰ spent several days shut up in his neighbourhood before he ventured outdoors to return to the Courtyard. He was overwhelmed, traumatised, with fear still in his eyes. The Volunteer Corps members there, who had gone to visit him at home a few days earlier, showed him the messages of support pouring in from ATD members abroad. Seeing the messages, having people to talk to, and discovering that other young people had resumed running cultural activities for children — all this helped Y. to recover from his trauma rather than succumb to fear.

Several of the young people had, in fact, resumed their usual meeting times with children despite the dangers forcing most Bangui residents to stay indoors as much as possible, and despite the arrival of the rainy season, which made regular activities more challenging. The project that young people were running with the children in early 2013 was based on a comic strip designed in drawing workshops over the previous months: “Tolis and the children of Taporì Village.”²¹ A volunteer wrote:

Today we saw G. and Y. return, drenched to the bone despite the sheet of plastic they held over their heads. They were singing at the top of their lungs: “We’ll go to the end of the world! The Street Library will not fail!” They told us how they had surprised a taxi driver by telling him, “We’re building peace!” Together, we drank hot coffee while they showed us messages from children who say

20. In this chapter, several names have been changed or omitted out of concern for the safety of all CAR residents.

21. Taporì is a worldwide children’s network, coordinated by ATD Fourth World. To learn more: <http://en.tapori.org/>



Creating “Tolis and the Children of Taporì Village”.

they hope for peace so they can go back to school. Grinning as they remembered joyful moments of storytelling and colouring with the children, they had come in from the downpour as though returning from war, with all the strength that comes from knowing themselves still alive, and from having passed by men carrying automatic weapons, while they were carrying only their drawing case. [...]

The following Thursday, they arrived looking tense. Their first words were about armed men who had interrupted their activity with the children. The children had been panicking, but several of the young people asked them not to give in to fear, saying, “You’re messengers of peace; your joy must show. A few gunshots can’t replace your joy.” So the children continued drawing. Seeing the confusion of the armed men, the young people explained what they were doing. They showed them the comic strip, and when the armed men asked, gave them two copies of it.”

Even though the civil war made Y. feel sick at heart, he did not remain shut in at home. Several times he insisted, “We have to do something; we have to do something for peace.” He and the others were aware that their time running the Street Library allowed the children to believe in peace and “not to keep evil in them”. Then Y. and G. showed the volunteer a picture, made by a little girl, of two people in a dugout canoe, paddling towards a tree. The caption carefully written in the margin explained that the people are going “to pick the fruit of peace”.



In another neighbourhood, when activities resumed after the upheavals following a coup d'état in March 2013, several young people who had sometimes participated in the children's projects got more actively involved. Working with children offered a chance to build a small haven of peace in a stricken land. They said, "If we keep talking about the past, we'll never move ahead. Talking about the past only sows seeds of hatred."

Linked in Hope as in Suffering

One of Gisèle's neighbours spoke of the indivisibility of human rights by quoting Boganda's "Five Verbs":²² to nourish, to heal, to teach, to house, and to clothe. She compared them to the five fingers on a hand, saying: "If one finger hurts, the whole hand is in pain." Throughout the evaluation and planning process launched in November 2012, people speaking in interviews, gatherings, and meetings often referred to this interdependence:

What turns the world on end is when some people ignore others and are always ready to destroy. Violence is being ignorant of how to live

22. The "Five Verbs" (also called the "Verbs of MESAN") crystallised the political programme of the Movement for the Social Evolution of Black Africa, founded by Barthélémy Boganda.

alongside one another. Isolated people are considered ignorant, but they aren't. We say that people who are isolated are people too.

Joseph Wresinski spoke of the millions of people who have been victimised by the ignorance of others, “despised and disgraced”, looked down on, and locked into isolation by disdain.²³ This relationship between ignorance and isolation is explained by Parfait, who lives in a village twenty kilometres from Bangui where he repairs oil lamps and then walks far and wide to find buyers for them. He says:

The rich don't know what we call a “difficult” difficulty. We need to approach them to give them thoughtful advice. We have to bring the rich to an understanding of the suffering of others. We have to help them to understand what the world is. When you don't go to look for a poor person, it's like you're trying to waste his mind. When people live in poverty, they feel cast aside, and it's difficult to be in peace.

From this reflection, he outlined the mission of ATD Fourth World:

We are here to bring isolated people out of the bush and to return them to the assembly so they can help us with their intelligence, and so they don't see themselves as being alone. Then they will know that someone else knows who they are, so they can consider themselves people who matter.

To explain humiliation, many Central Africans cite a question often barked at them: “Do you know who I am?” The words are hammered out with all the authority of those who feel powerful because of their social position, their connections, their money, or their weapons. They are words that inspire fear and reduce others to silence. Guillaume and others of our members contrast this experience with the same words used differently: “In our movement, when you ask, ‘Do you know who I am?’ you're inviting the others, saying that you want to move forward together.” Many members speak of our movement as a place of respect, where people reach out to others without feelings of superiority, a place where “knowing who

23. Joseph Wresinski, “Verses to the Glory of the Poor of All Times”, speech made in Paris on 17 October 1987. (https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Je_témoigne_de_vous and <http://www.joseph-wresinski.org/I-bear-witness-to-you.html>)

someone is” is not a tool for power, but instead comes from getting to know them. Guillaume adds, “Our movement doesn’t give away money; instead it gives people who are concerned for others.”

Another of our members says, “The worst suffering is that of lacking knowledge. We don’t know what to say or do; we just say anything, we act in any old way, we don’t think enough, we don’t get out enough, we don’t see enough. We are isolated among ourselves in our country.” Joseph Wresinski, who knew what it was like to grow up this way, once said:

*The injustice of material deprivation is terrible, but that of ignorance is surely the greatest evil that can be done to anyone. It is an extreme injustice because it deprives people of the chance to participate in life, to learn about people, things, events — everything.*²⁴

And in 1979, he wrote:

*Knowledge is first of all being aware of being someone, being able to give meaning to what we live and do, being able to express oneself. It’s having a place in the world, knowing one’s roots. Knowledge is sharing with others and having experiences that make a person proud, not humiliated.*²⁵

Since 1988, we have proposed educational activities for sharing knowledge in Bangui because its people’s thirst for training and for learning about worldwide issues is a remarkable contrast with the lack of communications infrastructure in this landlocked country. Our projects have varied over time, depending on the means at hand and on people’s talents: painting workshops, training with artisans, storytelling for children, and more recently computer training. Parfait notes the importance of learning not only technical skills but also values: “If you don’t know, you’ll have no respect. When my child tries to learn what knowledge is, he respects people, he respects his mother.” Gisèle agrees, noting the importance “of knowing the difference between good and evil, and after that you will know how to build a new country”.

People in poverty often feel that they don’t matter to anyone and that the world ignores them. In order to matter to people elsewhere, you

24. From a 1987 interview by Claudine Faure.

25. “L’enfant du Quart Monde en quête du savoir”, *Igloos* magazine, 1979, issue #105-106.



Street Library activities include books as well as storytelling and creative workshops. Here, a Street Library takes place on the island of Mbongossou, accessible only by canoe.

need to have links to those people, through visits, letters, and sharing information. “When no one ever visits you,” says Gisèle’s neighbour, “you end up thinking that you are so poor you interest no one.” Another of our members, who works for a non-profit development agency, explains what he learned from ATD Fourth World: “I work as a professional, but on Saturdays and Sundays when I’m free, I visit people. They are surprised, and their neighbours are surprised. It makes us like family.” In this family, everyone matters to everyone else. When the armed conflict made it dangerous to set foot outdoors, Gisèle and Louise risked walking six kilometres from their homes to the Courtyard to make sure that the volunteers were all right. A few weeks later, it was again Gisèle who returned to visit them, laden down with bananas and cassava to offer them, just in case the crisis had prevented them from getting food.

During a workshop in the Courtyard, a group of women were learning to weave bags from strips of recycled plastic. They decided to offer two of these bags to the young members of ATD in Haiti. Like the young people in the CAR, the teenagers in Haiti, despite the hardship of their lives in poverty, responded to the 2010 earthquake in their country by



“Small Bridge”, a painting from the Central African Republic
by Ms Jacqueline Page.

redoubling their efforts to hike over broken hillside pathways to bring the joy and learning of books to children.

Facilitating this spirit of community among people in low-income areas on different continents is a priority for ATD Fourth World. Just as our members in the CAR kept the victims of the Haitian earthquake in their thoughts, our members in many countries sent messages to Central Africans in 2013. For example, André Abdoul Diagne, a member of ATD in Senegal, wrote: “Do not give up, because your country is Africa’s heart. And when a heart stops beating, the body dies. Especially, do not lose hope because ‘Zo kwe zo.’”²⁶

Eric: So how are we going to rebuild?

Vanessa: For now, we smell the smoke of peace, but we do not see the flames yet. We will all have to come together and talk it over. Everyone has rights and responsibilities.

26. “Every man is a man”, the national motto of the Central African Republic.

Paul: *It has become a question between Christians and Muslims. That requires working from the heart and having forgiveness and patience, so that there is no more hatred.*

Catherine: *It will take a Mandela to get us out of this crisis and hatred.*

Béatrice Epaye: *But there are Mandelas in every village. A huge reconciliation will do nothing. What we need is to find and support all those Mandelas in the villages.*

Faced with violence and turmoil since December 2012, the people of the Central African Republic continue to work for peace. Across religious boundaries, everyday acts of courage give hope for the future of this war-torn nation. The ATD Fourth World team — in the CAR since 1988 and remaining there continuously throughout the current conflict — bears witness to these acts of solidarity. Neighbours lend clothing to one another so that they will not be easily recognised as Muslim or Christian by violent crowds roaming the capital. Strangers help each other cross a river to safety, putting their own lives at risk to save someone else. A young girl stands up to an angry group to save the life of her aunt who is hiding in the room next door. Throughout Bangui, similar signs of commitment exist, such as officials continuing to perform their public service duties even though their salaries have not been paid for months. Thanks to them, water and electricity networks functioned despite the chaos in the city. “When the time comes for reconstruction, all these small things will matter,” says Michel Besse, a member of ATD Fourth World’s team in Bangui. “The human wealth of this country should be taken into account.”

When the violence is at its worst, residents must flee their homes or remain inside, living in constant anxiety and making room for others who fled even more dangerous areas. For several months in late 2013 and early 2014, the ATD Fourth World Courtyard became home for a few dozen displaced parents, children, and young people. To get through each day in this improvised community, everyone would pitch in, some going in search of corn or cassava, others finding a place to grind it, and others drying it. One of the displaced fathers, whose home was occupied for weeks by a militia group, spoke about how he found the courage to keep going: “Courage comes from those who were even more destitute than

I, even before. Those who are still here and do not have the strength to flee — it is their courage, their bearing witness, that gives me the strength to stay.”

Joël has been involved with ATD Fourth World since 1988, when some children living in the streets brought him to our “Courtyard of a Hundred Trades” to show him what they were working on. Their enthusiasm led him to get involved in working with children who live on the streets, and he started projects with them at a nearby community centre. Following the coup d’état, his house was looted and his family needed help, but in spite of his own troubles, he continued to go out of his way to assist others. In January 2014, a group of young people brought the body of a young man to the community centre, where hundreds of children and young people had sought refuge. Joël spent the day looking for the young man’s family and completing the administrative work necessary for the burial. He found the family, but he also wanted to find out the truth about their son’s death. Someone had said that the young man was shot because he had been looting. But “someone said” was not enough for Joël. He wanted to learn more. Because of his long-term involvement with children and young people, he knew that some young men do loot, but he said, “Their families, too, have the right to the truth.”

Joël discovered the truth: the boy had been shot but not accused of any looting. He tried to calm the man’s friends, but it was not easy — their friend had been killed — and some of them went off and ransacked the house of the merchant who had been responsible for his death. Joël told us that this only renewed his determination to do what he could “so that all these young people can one day have a future that is different from the violence they have endured”.

“We’re All the Same”

One day, a young mother, Geena, returned home trembling and crying. She told one of our members that she had gone out on foot to grind corn at a community mortar a few kilometres away. When she had almost reached her usual spot, she saw a young girl surrounded by a threatening crowd. Fortunately, an acquaintance of the girl interceded, and the crowd let the girl go. Geena continued towards the mortar and ground her corn. She thought about the best way to get home to avoid the kind

Mr Joël Karpandji, involved with ATD since 1988, is shown at right in a 2007 painting by Ms Jacqueline Page, and below during a 2015 Street Library in a community centre for children who live in the streets.



of situation she had just seen. Carrying her large basin on her head, she changed her route, but on the way home she came across another crowd just as menacing as the first.

A woman in the area beckoned to Geena, saying, “Come here, my daughter, I will help you. There is something wrong with your basin. Let me help you fix it.” This was the woman’s ruse to protect Geena from the crowd. The woman guided her out of the neighbourhood to a paved



This painting, set in the Central African Republic, is by Mr D'Ange Rambelo, a Malagasy artist who was part of the ATD Fourth World team in Bangui in 2011–12.

road where she was safe and could take a taxi home. The woman told Geena, “I’ve seen you before. You’re a mother who is working and who just wants to feed her family. I don’t want anyone to bother you.” When she got home, Geena said, with tears streaming down her face:

How can I not go out when I need to feed my family? I have to go out, but I need to find a new place to grind corn. We can’t move around or sell things in the marketplace like we could before. It’s even more difficult now. You know, I’m Christian, and it was a Muslim woman who protected me. How can we do so much wrong in our country? They’re just like us. We’re all the same.

Asking for Forgiveness

After visiting the CAR in April 2014, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said:

Nothing could have prepared me for my arrival last week in Bangui. More than 70,000 people are crammed in horrendous conditions on the airport grounds. The lucky ones are living under weather-beaten tarps just yards from the runway. Others sleep in the open.[...] They are exposed to disease, malnutrition, and untold horrors beyond the gates. Food is scarce. Malaria could spread. The rainy season will only



Children gather to admire a painting they did on a large tarpaulin at the Street Library started by young ATD members at a camp beside the Bangui airport.

multiply the problems. [...] One mother told me how young children have suddenly begun imitating adults with weapons. “What will happen to our kids,” she asked, “if they don’t know how to play?”²⁷

As this mother says, hope for a peaceful future in the CAR depends on today’s children having the chance to experience something positive. This is why in December 2013 members of ATD Fourth World began running a Street Library at the airport, where many people had moved to seek refuge.²⁸ The Street Library is an anchor for everyone in the camp. Through the Street Library, we provide cultural activities and, equally important, a place where children can make friends and play together. As families streamed into the airport, a group of young people came together to run the Street Libraries and to help manage daily life in this makeshift sanctuary where two or three people each day must be buried. Many of the dead are teenagers, who more often run errands outside the camp and so are more vulnerable to the armed conflict.

27. Ban Ki-moon, “Central African Republic needs immediate help”, *The Washington Post*, 14 April 2014.

28. At the time of publication, in July 2016, families still live at the airport, and the Street Library continues to take place there.

Herbert, one of the young people who run the Street Library, explains:

There are a few of us who help out. We point people in the right direction and help them get oriented. We support mothers so that they have water. When they have to take medicine, we help them understand how to do it. Seeing us, people say: "But who are you? What organisation do you work for? Are you getting paid?" And we say, "No, we're ATD Fourth World." Mothers participate too, and the way they support us helps other mothers to get involved as well. We have a strong base so we can keep going. What we're doing, we have no idea if it will lead to bigger things. But it shows that everyone needs us — everyone needs ATD Fourth World's approach.

Pierre, then 11 years old, took part in the Street Library at the airport. One day he went back to his neighbourhood to look for wood for heating and to run errands for his family. Many of the displaced people in the camp do this — return to their homes during the day to show that the homes are not abandoned and to check on the local situation, then spend nights in the safety of the airport camp. On his way back to the camp that evening, Pierre realised he had forgotten something his mother had asked him to do, so he turned around. By the time he finished the last errand, it was getting late. As Pierre was hurrying back to the airport grounds, a young man attacked him with a whip and left him at the roadside with a broken foot, bleeding badly. Eventually a man passing by heard Pierre crying and carried him back to the camp.

Daniel, who helps run the Street Library, said, "In the camp, everyone knows that when a child is lost, you have to go to ATD. If your child is sick and you want to take him to the hospital, you bring him to ATD because people at the hospital know us." So Pierre was brought to the ATD Fourth World members. They asked Pierre who his family was and where they slept, but he was too weak to respond. Daniel took him to the camp infirmary. By morning, Pierre's foot was in a cast and he had recovered enough to say where his family was, so they could be reunited.

The next day, Daniel was talking with a group of anti-balaka, the militia group most present in the city. Because he knew some of its members, he spoke with them often, encouraging them to pursue peace. It was risky work, but he felt that since they knew each other well, he would be safe. He told them what happened to Pierre, saying, "This kind of

thing is dangerous. Hurting children will bring about so much hatred.” The anti-balaka said they would see amongst themselves if it was one of them who had attacked Pierre. Soon they found the perpetrator, Vianney. According to Vianney, when he and Pierre had lived in the same neighbourhood before the outbreak of violence, Pierre had insulted him, using words he could never forget, so when he saw Pierre on the streets that night he beat him up.

Daniel suggested that Vianney ask forgiveness of Pierre’s family “so that this hatred does not continue”. They went to see Pierre’s family together. Vianney presented himself before Pierre’s mother and spoke in simple words, telling his story and asking forgiveness. Pierre’s grandmother said, “I wanted revenge for the blood of my grandchild. But since you have come and spoken with me, I will not do anything now.” Pierre’s family says that Vianney’s apology made it possible for them to let go of their anger. The hatred had begun with Pierre’s hurtful words, causing him to get beaten, and then leading to his family’s desire for revenge. No military force can end this damaging cycle. Breaking that cycle requires the daring of ordinary people like Daniel and Vianney and the generosity of people like Pierre’s family. Once people meet face-to-face to talk and to listen, forgiveness becomes possible.

Children Making Peace Albums

Because of Herbert’s enthusiasm and his experience running Street Libraries, in 2014 UNICEF designated him as the trainer for most of a day-long session about working with children in the airport camp. In addition to showing others the games and books he

Mr Herbert Ngarafu, who runs Street Libraries in several emergency camps, says, “Mothers participate too, and the way they support us helps other mothers to get involved.”





During a Street Library in one of the camps for people displaced by the civil war, Mr Herbert Ngarafa acts out a story.

uses to spark children's curiosity and dreams, Herbert emphasised the importance of activities taking place where the whole community can see what is going on and in such a way that any child can join in. When the United Nations Refugee Agency learned about ATD Fourth World's activities in the refugee camp near the airport, it donated three packs of tarpaulins for the Street Libraries there. Herbert also took the initiative of offering drawings made by the children to decorate the field hospital that Doctors Without Borders (MSF) built at the camp. The director was delighted and said, "It's the first time someone has come to us to suggest something for that space." All the children went together to decorate the hospital, and the director joined them in song and dance. Herbert and others like Firmin and Chancell, who also run the Street Libraries, guarantee a regular time of laughter and joy for more than three hundred children — and for their families, because the songs the children learn together spread around the camp. Herbert says, "With ATD Fourth World, we've learned to make do without a lot of material, but with ideas and imagination. ATD is skilled. Here, I'm putting into practice the evaluation and planning that we did together."



Children at the Street Library in the airport camp paint the tarpaulin that would later decorate the field hospital there.

Beginning in March 2013 when schools closed down²⁹ for eleven months, Street Libraries were one of the rare places that fostered joy and provided education. However, in certain areas of the city, the civil war made it unsafe for large numbers of children to gather. Hervé and Rufin had run large Street Libraries with many children in their own neighbourhood, but now they could work only with smaller groups, especially as many people had fled the area. This is why they were enthusiastic, just a few weeks after schools began reopening in 2014, about joining a Franciscan youth group who were going to start visiting a school. Relishing the chance to work with a large group again, Hervé and Rufin began making regular visits to twelve classrooms of children 8 or 9 years old. Before the armed conflict broke out, one of these classes had sixty-eight students registered. When the school reopened, only thirty students returned, but little by little the rows began filling up, and sixty children were present on the first day of the young people's visit. Among the absent were three

29. "Children Bear Brunt of CAR Crisis", IRIN humanitarian news and analysis, 25 April 2013.



In Street Library activities, children throughout Bangui contributed drawings and messages to create Peace Albums. Here, Ms Gisèle Balekouzou and her brother Mr Rufin Balekouzou prepare children’s work to be added to one of the albums.

students whose families had left the country, fleeing to Morocco and Cameroon. The five other absentees had remained in Bangui but were still too scared to come to school.

Among the students, Emery stood out: he was bigger than all the others and more expressive, even if his words were not always clear. Emery has a disability, though that didn’t keep him from being understood. His fellow students accepted him and his teacher particularly appreciated him. When Hervé and Rufin first visited, he and the other students joined in drawing maps of the CAR with the theme “Things I love about my country”. They decorated the maps with flowers, aeroplanes, flags, and schools. ATD Fourth World members later added these drawings, along with messages written by the children, to a “Fourth World Peace Album”. The atmosphere in the class was relaxed. The children laughed as they saw the beautiful umbrella that Emery had proudly drawn above “his” Central Africa. “What a beautiful drawing! And he did it all by himself,” the teacher said with a wink. She had been patiently guiding the young artist’s hand all the while.

At the end of the activity, Hervé, Rufin, and the other young people thanked the children and their teacher. As they were heading to the door,

they were surprised when the children suddenly stood up together to recite a poem written by their teacher, Liliane:

*Peace is very important for the country
Because it is priceless.
I beg you, brothers and sisters and politicians,
It is time to come and build our country
To save the future of our children.
Lower your arms, your machetes.
Stop discrimination.
We want peace,
Nothing but peace in Central Africa.*

The children had clearly taken to heart the words of the poem, which echoed the meaning behind their own creations for the Peace Albums. For the young people — who constantly take risks to run activities for children in the streets even during the most chaotic times — hearing this poem was an eloquent affirmation of what continues to motivate them all.

During a Street Library on Mbongossoua Island, Ms Gisèle Balekouzou (at right) shows children the Peace Albums.



World Day for Overcoming Poverty, October 2013: Ms Louise Mokonou emcees as children speak about the Peace Albums they made.



On Humanitarian Aid

As foreign humanitarian aid to the CAR increased, most of the press focused on promises made by foreign governments, on where the aid was most needed, and on the lack of financial and logistical support for the aid effort. Mainstream news reports lacked the perspective of Central Africans who witnessed first-hand the impact of the humanitarian response. A member of ATD Fourth World works in a community centre that became a shelter for children fleeing violence. Having seen many waves of humanitarian organisations come through the centre to offer help, he wrote this reflection on their impact:³⁰

I have noticed that everyone wants to intervene in every way for the good of those who are suffering during this difficult time. But the young people who have nowhere to go and who have been brought to the centre where I work need support that is moral and physical and human. When humanitarian organisations pass by, they make promises, but it is discouraging because some of them never come back. There is also the way they organise the distributions. It's like



The emergency camp at the Bangui airport where some 70,000 people took refuge.

30. Some details have been omitted to protect the privacy of this man and that of the organisations on which he is commenting.



Mr Firmin Tadjima, at an emergency camp in the Moukassa district of Bangui, leads Street Library participants in theatre.

we are not there, like there is no pre-existing structure. They do what they want without following the advice of the people who are responsible for the community centre.

A typical example is of a humanitarian group that wanted to give cooking oil and rice, but that brought about serious problems among the children here. Instead of letting our team take care of the distribution, the humanitarian staff wanted to do it without us. They made individual packets for each child. This took a long time, and was frustrating for the children and young people who were obliged to wait. We were the ones who had to cope with their frustration. But it seemed as though what was most important for the humanitarian group was to be able to take photos of each child receiving his package. The children finally received their packages but, living in the streets as they did, they had nowhere to cook the rice, so instead they left right away to sell it at the market. Because it was late in the day and few customers were still at the market, the children got very little money for their packets of rice.

Humanitarian aid should support people so that there can be meaningful progress in their lives. Why is it that every time there is this political and military crisis, we do not look for a sustainable



Painting a mural on a tarpaulin during a Street Library at the Bangui airport camp.

solution even though we know that [a crisis] will recur? To come up with solutions, we need to sit down all together: the government, the humanitarian organisations, and the rest of society. Our goal should no longer be about giving food and clothing, but about sitting down together to talk and build partnerships and find a solution. Unless these humanitarian groups sit down with the local population to reflect on this together, we will not make it. Sometimes we see that they are moved and support us, but the way they make donations is discouraging. Everything that has been donated so far can be found afterwards being resold at the markets. Today we give rice and soap, but what do we do tomorrow? [...] Humanitarian groups are all acting on their own, doing the same things, and not listening. Humanitarian aid must be not an act of charity but support for a sustainable solution.

This man's frustrations with the way aid workers treated the children were felt on a larger scale in June 2014, when the World Food Programme declared that their warehouses in Bangui were vulnerable to looting. After that, the supplies meant to help people in the Central African Republic were moved to the capital of Cameroon, almost 1,500 kilometres away, with no regard to how they could be donated to residents of the CAR.

When humanitarian approaches are not thought out with input from those they are meant to help, people survive mainly because of their own resilience. When the majority of the population left home for temporary places of refuge, many of the women immediately started organising themselves in these new places. They prepared drinks, pounded corn into flour, or kept up their small businesses, all with the few tools they managed to carry away in their flight. Independent of international relief efforts, they have re-built their social and economic networks, and this small-scale economy has allowed them to survive. After having fled their homes, fathers and sons often return to make sure the houses are not pillaged or burned. Taking turns, they stand guard. Sometimes they have to change where they keep watch every night, depending on where the latest fighting has broken out. It is through efforts like these, not through disaster relief, that families in the CAR manage to cope. Even when emergency humanitarian aid is sufficient, it is often distributed in ways that do not help people and may sometimes harm them.

Thinking About the Elders

The chaos of the armed conflict has been especially hard on older people. Numerous families live confined in small spaces, struggling to get food and afraid to go out and share news with others. Joël recalled an 80-year-old neighbour in Bangui who was robbed. “During the night four men came and stole everything from him. He spent the night curled up and terrified in a corner of his room watching everything go, even his stools and cooking pot. The other neighbours and I helped to find some utensils and a stool for him. We repaired his door with some nails and pieces of scrap wood we found. Even the Congolese peacekeepers brought hinges and nails to help.”

A month later, the neighbour died. Joël spent that night in mourning at the man’s home, praying, singing, reading, and talking with other neighbours. No family members were able to be there. The old man’s sons lived sixty kilometres away and there was no way to send them the news. The week the man died, a convoy of Chadian repatriation vehicles was leaving the city, so communication was even more difficult than usual. News of the neighbour’s death was aired over the local radio in the hope that the sons would hear the broadcast. Joël told the others, “We buried

the body in a beautiful spot in the courtyard behind the house. Nobody can manage to bury the dead in graveyards any more because of all the problems. To find a vehicle to take you there, to be safe from violence, to find the tools, to dig the hole — everything is a problem.”

Joël and other neighbours remembered that this man had contributed to establishing the neighbourhood. Because it is located in a flood zone, this man and three of his neighbours had built terraces to raise homes above flood levels. To help build the foundations of the local school, he and a few others carried stones a long distance on their backs and heads, using carriers they created from wood, cloth, and leaves. Among those who designed the neighbourhood, he was also the one who planted trees wherever communal areas needed to be laid out: the football field, the youth centre, and the health clinic.

Joël contrasted this man’s determination to create and define his neighbourhood’s common spaces with the fear and worry the man had felt when he was robbed. Listening to Joël, Gisèle added, “He died from thinking. Being robbed and seeing everything broken — that did not kill him right away. But thinking about it, seeing his goods broken or stolen, it was also his story that was stolen, the respect that he deserved as an elder. And then he died from thinking so much about that.” When people are part of a looting mob, they are rarely thinking at all. Gisèle, Joël, and others feel that remembering the elders in every community is a crucial way to cherish a sense of history and to refuse to accept violence.

Advice from the Ivory Coast

One of our Bangui members, who organises activities for children at the airport, said, “We’re only human; life is tiring. But when we come together for others, their presence gives us strength.” During a gathering that ATD Fourth World organised to remember friends and family members lost during the recent violence, he added:

There are populations that lived together for fifty years and that are now fighting. We have to ask ourselves: What did we do yesterday to make this happen? What can we do today? What can we do tomorrow? Muslims and Christians should be able to communicate.

Wherever we are, wherever we live, we can do something — talk, create. We are doing this now and it means a lot.

The next day, some of our members in Bangui spoke by video conference with ATD members in Bouaké (Ivory Coast). More than three hours flew by, hours filled with conversation, poetry written by children, and even dancing in both places as an Ivorian friend played the djembé drum. One friend in Bangui said, “No matter where we are, it is up to us to get closer to the poorest and most vulnerable so that they do not feel isolated.”

Reflecting on the recent experience of the Ivory Coast, one Ivorian said, “For us, the conflict lasted ten years. But we came together to help one another and we have recovered.”

These words hit home for the group in Bangui: “They are right. We should find new ways to help one another. If not, how will we recover? How will the country advance? We have to do something to calm the atmosphere.” The video conference offered a time for sharing strength and hope for what is to come. Although the future remains uncertain, one young friend in Bangui said, “We have been through hard times, but we are still here. We are alive.”



Bouaké, Ivory Coast: Members of ATD Fourth World speak via video conference with members in Bangui.

Learning from Rwanda: “Towards Citizenship Through Peace”

In June 2014, fifty people, young and old, from different neighbourhoods, organisations, places of worship, and schools, convened at the ATD Courtyard in Bangui where the Rwandan association Umuseke had come to run a training workshop, “Towards citizenship through peace”. The workshop began with participants making simple drawings of everyday life as a way to raise questions that might be hard to express in words alone. To create a free and open conversation, they used other techniques such as singing, role-playing, and debates. In the “barometer game”, participants were asked their opinion about the statement, “Political stooges are manipulating Central African young people”. Everyone separated into three groups: those who agreed, those who disagreed, and those who were unsure. Next, each group had time to try to change the minds of the others. At the end of a very animated debate, not a single person had switched groups — not even those who were unsure when they began. One participant said, “We had to admit that we are just as



An organiser from the Rwandan association Umuseke speaks during the workshop “Towards citizenship through peace”.

polarised as the country around us. Changing sides would feel like a betrayal of the group.”

This interactive approach made it possible for participants to be creative. Roger, who runs a literacy programme for eighty women in rural communities, and Diane, who works with people who have disabilities, spontaneously acted out a skit showing a fable they had just invented about stopping violence:

One night, a house-cat found a snake. The cat called on his big sister, the Axe, to kill the snake. The cat also asked Mama Stew-Pot to get ready to cook the snake. But instead, Mama Stew-Pot spoke to the snake. She said, “Your venomous bite causes burning. I use heat too, but I use it to cook good things for people to eat. Why don’t you use your venom to help people instead? Go outside to the field. There, you can be useful killing the rats that eat the harvest. And in return, I’ll bring you good food, just as I do for all the workers.”

Participants studied the causes of the armed conflict, focusing in particular on perceptions, generalisations, prejudice, and rumours.



Mr Roger Nguinon in a theatre exercise during the workshop
“Towards citizenship through peace”.



Participants in the training workshop are awarded certificates by the Rwandan association Umuseke. The word *umuseke* means “dawn” in the Kinyarwanda language.

Dieudonné, a participant who works with children living in the streets, appreciated the chance to challenge stereotypes. He said:

There are falsehoods. People say that one ethnic group are all thieves, or that the women of another ethnic group are all unfaithful. They say that all Muslims are armed, or that all Christians carry machetes. It's the same with children living in the street: they are called thieves and bandits. All of these are falsehoods. The person speaking is not objective and is not respecting others. He is judging individuals because they belong to a certain group. And the people who are judged this way lose their dignity as unique individuals, which can make them want revenge. This leads us to conflict.

Together, the participants thought about human rights, obligations, and the need to commit to making change.

This training workshop gave participants skills and tools to use in their own community or village to organise citizens for peace. After completing the workshop, participants immediately started sharing the “path towards peace” philosophy and skills in every setting — at work, at places



To thank the organisers from the Rwandan association Umuseke, Mr Geoffroy Ngana (left) offers them the DVD made with children, “Child of the World, Give Me Your Hand”.

of worship, and at home. Geoffroy, who lives in a village twenty-two kilometres from Bangui, said, “Right now in our country, everyone has to do their part to promote peace. Having taken part in this workshop, each of us has a responsibility to share what we learned in our own districts, so I’ll do my best to train others in my community.”

Participating in the workshop reinforced the civic commitment of young people and adults who have been involved with ATD Fourth World for a long time and who are now helping to transform relationships in the community. Louise Mokonou was among the participants. She said, “I work with young orphaned girls whose families are gone because of what’s happening in our country. I am also a mother and a grandmother, and I am moved because this training gave me tools to cultivate peace everywhere. Those who are fighting have got into our children’s minds. Now when children play, they pretend to be using real weapons. But the tools that this training has given us will help us bring children to their senses.”

Hearing the Rwandans explain how young people in their country today are leaders in bridging divisions in society inspired the Central

Africans. One said, “Just as they have brought the message of peace here, we know that one day it will be our turn to bring the light of peace to others who need it.” That “one day” came in 2015, when ATD Fourth World organised a second training session on peace education, which qualified seven of the 2014 participants to become trainers for others. They are strongly motivated to encourage everyone to become engaged citizens helping their country.

Acts of Resistance Carry Hope

Every life lost is a source of suffering — suffering worsened because each violent death deepens the gulf between compatriots. But many Central Africans’ highest aspiration is to end the conflict, heal wounds, and work towards reconciliation. Solidarity does exist. Bravely, if discreetly, people of different religions do find ways to support one another, refusing to be overcome by fear of “the other”. Despite shouldering worry for their own families, they continue to reach out to those who are the most vulnerable.



In an act of resistance, ATD members sing together at our Courtyard in Bangui at the height of the armed conflict in 2013.

For example, on a riverbank just outside Bangui, a group of boys with a dug-out canoe took on board a man being chased by a mob that mistook him for a militia member. Everyone demanded that the boys hand the man over, but the boys refused and rowed the man to safety across the river. Even when they have apparently lost everything, many Central Africans have been risking their lives to stand against hatred between communities. All these acts of resistance, dedication, and brotherhood — however isolated or fragile — carry hope. But as long as “all those Mandelas in the villages” remain unrecognised and without support, paths towards reconciliation will remain hard to find.

In 2013, Mr Tekpa left home in Bangui to do agricultural work around eighty kilometres away. The fighting around Bangui intensified when he was deep in the bush. This made it impossible for him to get back home or even communicate with anyone for nearly seven months. Meanwhile, in Bangui, our members often asked, “And how is ‘Papa’ Tekpa?” No one could answer. Finally Mr Tekpa was able to return, and he joined in the training to promote peace. When everyone was contributing ideas



During the World Day for Overcoming Poverty: “Because we’re still alive, we can meet together, to carry on the fight against poverty.”



Having been trained in the “Towards citizenship through peace” workshop, members of ATD Fourth World, the Heartfelt Voices Centre, and PIJCA (a Central African inter-religious youth network) continue to collaborate on running peace education workshops.

for how to mark the World Day for Overcoming Poverty, ‘Papa’ Tekpa said, “Because we’re still alive, we can meet together, to carry on the fight against poverty.”

One of our Central African members said, “What’s truly important for our country is wiping the spirit of destruction from the souls of our young people.” To this end, we depend on the young people who already know that this is how disarmament must begin. By their sheer determination to bring people together in almost impossible circumstances, our members in Central Africa are not only striving to rebuild their country; from the depth of their experience, along with the experience of their entire country, they are also proposing to the world a path towards peace.

3

Diversity and Exclusion in France and Belgium *Building a Sense of Belonging*

It is often the way we look at other people that imprisons them within their own narrowest allegiances. And it is also the way we look at them that may set them free.

— Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity:
Violence and the Need to Belong*

Terrorist attacks in Belgium, France, Kenya, Lebanon, and elsewhere in recent years have shocked the world. These acts of hatred throw into stark relief the difficulties of unifying society without leaving anyone behind. In 2015, massive marches and rallies in 141 cities on every continent honoured the victims of the January shootings in France. This showed how strongly people everywhere thirst for fellowship with one another as well as for better ways to ensure safety. But adding security measures that



Young people at an ATD Fourth World People's University in Paris.



At the People's University, people in persistent poverty and people from other backgrounds cultivate solidarity and mutual understanding.

isolate and exclude people is not the way to end the hatred that fuels such terrorism. Rather, we can best protect one another by individually and collectively renewing our efforts to build a community that is accepting and unafraid of diversity.

This chapter will describe ATD Fourth World's approach to fostering a sense of belonging among people of different cultures, social backgrounds, beliefs, and religions. The promise implicit in a national motto such as France's *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* has long been denied to people in persistent poverty, who suffer as outcasts. They are frequently treated as less than human and thus come to believe that they do not belong among "normal" people. Despite this — or perhaps because of it — we see that people in poverty are often the ones reaching out in solidarity to one another, trying to live with respect for others who are different from themselves, and demonstrating a generosity of spirit that reveals the true meaning of "peace".

Pathways to fellowship and community exist, but the road map to discover them is little known. One of our approaches to recognising and increasing this solidarity is the ATD Fourth World People's University. This is a forum that brings together people in persistent poverty and people from other backgrounds, all from different ethnic origins, to cultivate

Ms Laurence Abotchi, at the Paris People's University, describes how a crisis brought her neighbours together.



mutual understanding and solidarity.³¹ While ATD runs this project in many countries, we focus here on France and Belgium. As these countries become more diverse, native-born Europeans who participate in the People's University are joined by immigrants from Algeria, Angola, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Germany, Guadeloupe, Haiti, Italy, Mauritius, Morocco, Niger, the Republic of Cabo Verde, the Republic of the Congo, Senegal, Serbia, Spain, Tunisia, and Vietnam, as well as by members of the itinerant Roma population.

In a context of rising diversity, tension, and misunderstandings, it can become hard to perform the everyday acts that create fellowship. Yet, some people in poverty use their own experience of hardship to reach out to people of different ethnicities. In a People's University in Brussels, one unemployed Belgian man described how passengers make fun of his clothes when he takes the bus. Because of this he prefers to walk, and every day he passes a North African man whose job is sweeping the street. The Belgian said,

*I decided to greet him. But when I said 'hello', he didn't answer.
I could have done what some people do and blame foreigners for*

31. Diana Skelton, Eugen Brand, David Lockwood, and Jacqueline Plaisir, *Artisans of Peace Overcoming Poverty – Volume 1*, ATD Fourth World, Pierrelaye, France: 2014, pages 75–79.

taking jobs that I wish I had. He didn't even answer me. But then I realised that sometimes I don't feel like answering my own children. Maybe the man is having a bad day. Maybe that very morning, he learned that he would soon be out of work, or he was insulted by his boss, or a passer-by was rude to him; so that's that. It happens to me too. When someone treats me that way, at home I just can't treat my kids well. They're asking for attention, and I don't answer. So I won't judge him for it.

Society aspires to fellowship, but to reach it requires everyday acts like that of this father. He tried to connect with a neighbour, and then thought carefully about why his greeting remained unanswered. The harshness in his own life has led him to close himself off sometimes too, but also to understand that others do the same. By not judging the street sweeper, he keeps open the possibility of connecting with him in the future.

Many people living in poverty reach out to others by providing them with material support despite their own daily struggles and tense living conditions. Such acts of solidarity are rarely recognised. It is striking that on any given night in France, tens of thousands of homeless people are taken in by friends who themselves struggle in overcrowded conditions.³² By offering informal shelter, people often incur risks by violating their own rental agreements, struggling to stretch meals, and adding stress to their own family relationships. And yet, many people offer this form of solidarity because they know first-hand how hard it is to be homeless. In eastern France, a woman whose family has always been in deep poverty was dying of cancer. When she needed a place to live, a family already giving one of her sons space in their home took her in. Then they found her an apartment and vouched for her ability to pay, but their own credit was bad. In the end, the landlord, an immigrant from Turkey, decided to overlook the question of bad credit. Knowing what it means to be threatened with homelessness, many families help one another out in this way even if their resources are meagre.

32. Pierre Briant and Nathalie Donzeau, "Being Homeless or in Very Hard Conditions: the Situation in 2000–2010", INSEE (the French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies).

Poverty and Diversity in Fractured Communities

Despite frequent acts of solidarity, when life is hard and everything is lacking, it can be particularly difficult to summon up feelings of fellowship. Poverty hammers away at people's physical health. It makes it hard to find a safe home, succeed in school, and find decent work that pays a living wage. In addition, poverty erodes people's relationships with their neighbours and relatives, their freedom to express their thoughts, and their very sense of self.

In 1980, Joseph Wresinski, the founder of ATD Fourth World, organised a conference about immigration. Speaking to people in poverty from across Europe, he addressed the antagonism and hostility that can occur when people live in such difficult conditions:

Traps are set to prevent us from acting in solidarity. We are crushed by overcrowding in underserved and run-down housing. Worn out, we end up distrusting one another — even preventing our children from playing together. We're jealous of the person who moved to a flat, the person who took our sanitation job. [...] We can end up hating one another. Because of the misfortune weighing us down, we are caught in the infernal cycle of distrust and jealousy that gives rise to fear within us: fear of the stranger whose flat is in fact on the very same landing as our own, who endures the same conditions, the same threats of eviction. He is looked down on just as much as we are. There are so very many obstacles to brotherhood.³³

These obstacles can be compounded by misguided attempts to help. In the main train station of Brussels, a non-profit organisation separated homeless people by ethnicity for food distributions. On most days there was not enough food for everyone. The organisation would invite native-born Belgians to line up to be served before immigrants “on the pretext that, otherwise, homeless people would be elbowed out of the way by young undocumented workers who are strong and numerous”, said Georges de Kerchove, a member of ATD Fourth World. He added, “When

33. Joseph Wresinski, “About Brotherhood With Immigrants”, 15 November 1980, a speech made at the Mutualité Conference Centre in Paris, France.



Mr Georges de Kerchove has seen aid programmes that pit one group of people against another.

people are hungry, an unfortunate fellow inevitably becomes perceived as a rival taking your bread.” The way the food was given out created bitterness and resentment along ethnic lines in this group of homeless people. Georges continued, “Another case of discrimination that divided the poor occurred when the court ordered the federal agency responsible for asylum-seekers to provide housing for them. This became a source of tension between low-income asylum-seekers and Belgian homeless people, who asked, ‘Why do they have a right to housing when we don’t?’”

People put into situations like this sometimes hold racist views that are rooted in pain, insecurity, and fear. In February 2015, the Council of Europe released a report that condemned “rising intolerance in France [that] has spawned systematic problems with racism and hate speech and acts threatening ethnic and religious minorities in the country”.³⁴ People are driven apart by anti-poverty programmes that offer support to people who can differentiate themselves from their neighbours by proving that they are “more deserving” of assistance. Increasing immigration to Europe has been accompanied by political manipulation and by racial and poverty-based discrimination. This in turn feeds stereotypes and misunderstandings among neighbours. Europeans are often told that immigrants are to blame for high unemployment rates, low wages, and housing shortages. Immigrants from developing countries are often shocked to

34. Lucy Westcott, “Human Rights Report Slams France for Racism”, *Newsweek*, 17 February 2015.

Ms Nadia Chafi:
“When you’ve been
bashed around
by life too much,
no matter how
much you want to
open doors, they
just stay shut.”



discover that poverty exists in Europe. In addition to their disappointment, they discover that European regulations create obstacles to the informal work that is possible in their home countries. As they try to adjust, they can find it hard to fathom that in a place where schooling is free, some families get caught in a multi-generational cycle of failure.

In addition to competing for resources and a place to live, residents in low-income housing endure crowded and noisy conditions and appalling disrepair that can wear on everyone’s patience. They say:

- “You get too tired to keep making the effort to get along with neighbours.”
- “You’ve got to feel up to it, because when you’re not, you just want to keep to yourself.”
- “I know our kids are noisy, and that’s why the others are always angry at us.”
- “Because my budget is managed by a caseworker, people look down on me. They act like it’s a contagious disease.”
- “Solidarity is risky: you can run out of strength for yourself.”
- “In my neighbourhood, people look right through me.”

Nadia Chafi, a woman living in poverty in the Paris area, says: “It sounds good to say we live in a ‘neighbourhood’, but really we just live alongside one another with no sense of community. When you’re

homeless, you don't necessarily feel like meeting others stuck in the same boat. And even if we do meet them, they push us away and ignore us. And that's just among ourselves! When you've been bashed around by life too much, when your body is too ruined, no matter how much you want to open doors, they just stay shut." Chantal Consolini, an ATD Fourth World volunteer in Paris, notes: "Many people feel that poverty reinforces racism. One of our participants pointed out that when bulldozers destroyed the trailers in a Roma community, 'They were treated that way not just because they are Roma, but also because they are poor. If the trailers had been new, they would have been left alone.' Another participant in the People's University told us, 'They call our neighbourhood diverse. But I don't see what's so diverse about it — all of us are poor!'"

An activist in Alsace, Cécile Reinhardt, describes her experience with discrimination:

The way that others, who aren't Manouche,³⁵ look at us, is often as though we are thieves or parasites. Some of them romanticise us, imagining that all of us are musicians, always on the road, and free — so much ignorance! For us, going to school means entering their world. Personally, I was lucky. I liked school, despite the suffering we endured there. I was enriched by a new culture. But unfortunately, this isn't always what happens. The common experience is that your car breaks down, right in an intersection, and as you're pushing it to the roadside, you get called "dirty gypsy" for slowing down other drivers. We are violently discriminated against. When my daughter was 10, a head teacher refused to register her, saying, "No, we don't admit children of Travellers."³⁶ I had to justify myself and to explain that I live settled in one place. Being both Manouche and poor locks us into a trap. And in the end, I truly believe that all the poor live in the same misery. It is being poor that determines our fate, not the fact that we come from different backgrounds.

35. The Manouches are a Romani people who are originally nomadic and have lived in Western Europe for hundreds of years.

36. A term that includes Manouches and other Romani.

The People's University **“Getting to Know One Another with Our Hearts”**

In this context of fear and distrust, the Fourth World People's University offers a framework for beginning to overcome both racism and poverty by providing a forum where neighbours can discover what their struggles have in common. Dialogue helps break through the prejudice and resentment that may be fed by public discourse or by the unintended consequences of attempts to distribute aid. When people who know how hard it is to struggle with poverty come together in a People's University session, the most valuable thing that they offer one another is a high quality of listening. When people have experienced humiliation and the denial of their human dignity, it is all the more important that others listen to them and engage them in respectful dialogue.

What differentiates the People's University from other discussion groups is that sessions are planned by people who “have been bashed around by life too much”, as Nadia Chafi put it. At each session, participants meet to speak freely, exchange ideas with a guest speaker, and study themes they choose, such as:

- “Facing the same difficulties — supporting one another for a world without racism”
- “How do we live together in our neighbourhoods?”
- “How do I try to make life fairer for everyone?”
- “Europe today: All together, all of us are foreigners somewhere”

Participants prepare each session over several weeks by meeting in small groups to explore the theme. Both the small-group meetings and the larger sessions begin with a time for sharing news on any topic, because participants who live in the stress and chaos of poverty often face challenges that they need to talk about immediately. After this exchange of news, participants focus on the topic at hand, often recounting personal experiences that have a bearing on public policy. All participants agree to refrain from interpreting anyone else's words. In the People's University, if a person's words are not understood, that person is asked to restate them differently. This helps people who are not accustomed to



The People's University: dialogue, enriched by other techniques, helps break through the prejudice often fed by public discourse.

speaking in public to clarify their meaning. This approach contrasts with some academic research, which treats people in poverty as objects to be analysed and manipulates their words by reframing them according to the researcher's lens — even when the research is well-intentioned and aims to 'give voice' to marginalised people.

Dialogue is often enriched by other techniques like those used by the Theatre of the Oppressed.³⁷ In Belgium, for instance, participants in the People's University acted out a scene where an argument broke out on a bus among passengers, some of whom used racist slurs. The scene was then replayed several times so that other participants could take the place of passengers to try to change the outcome of the situation.

Of course, the challenges are many. Because poverty and exclusion erode trust, newcomers may hesitate to join the People's University even after many invitations, sometimes over years. It takes persistence to reach people. One man explained his reluctance, saying, "When you're out of work, you're nothing. I don't interest anyone. People look right through me." What may seem like indifference or animosity often masks a strong sense of isolation and despair that can be overcome only with mutual respect.

37. Developed in the 1960s and '70s by Augusto Boal, this technique empowers the disenfranchised to initiate change.

In Belgium, some of our People's University activities have taken place in this centre for asylum seekers.



Elsa Dauchet de Calignon, the volunteer who runs our Belgian French-language People's University, writes:

The People's University is a good place for people to try describing in words things they want to understand — situations of injustice, but also positive experiences of solidarity. We try to challenge prejudice with reality. It does not always work perfectly, but each participant expresses thoughts and is challenged by others, and we try to move forward from there. Often the asylum-seekers who participate are living in deep poverty here, but in fact do not come from a background of poverty in their country. Many of the West Africans have more education than low-income Belgians and speak better French. [...] Economically, immigrants may be making do with as little as low-income Belgians, but they have a very different wealth of community support. [...]

What brings families together is acts of solidarity — acts mainly carried out by people in extreme poverty. Some are foreign-born, some are not. My impression is that racism is no longer a factor for people living in deep poverty, because they recognise one another. I'm thinking of M. from Niger. He has lived in the street. He has risked losing custody of his children. He is no longer in touch with his relatives, and it took him a long time to be accepted by his compatriots. For several years now, he has participated in the People's University in a small group with Belgians who live

in poverty. He recognises himself in them, and they recognise themselves in him. People do test one another. But despite recurring arguments, there's a lot of solidarity among them.

Struggling with poverty matters more than the fact that people are not from the same country. [...] When a man from Cameroon explained that he knows no one here [in Belgium] and has nothing to do on the weekends, a Belgian woman invited him to spend Saturday with her family. [...] One participant said, "When we get to know each other with our hearts, no one is a foreigner any more."

Imane El Mokhtari, who helps organise the Belgian People's University, explains how dialogue can counteract potential cultural misunderstandings and tensions:

The struggle to overcome poverty brings them together, beyond differences in skin colour. As people speak out, they gain self-confidence, which makes it possible for them to speak to "the other", who gradually becomes less of a foreigner on whom we can project fears, and more of a familiar face. When asylum-seekers reacted to political-party platforms, other participants said, "Hey, we're facing the same problems as you are." People suffer from prejudices fed by racism in society, but here they begin working on their own prejudice.

Indirectly, this work is part of overcoming racism with people of very different backgrounds. Each one has a legitimate place in the dialogue. [...] Participants debate, exchange ideas, put themselves in one another's place, and try to understand the others. [...] In preparation groups, they take strength because they've found a place for talking and making plans. One example of this is in the Molenbeek neighbourhood. The ATD Fourth World Street Library project in that community has ended, so the people there who prepare the People's University are looking for a new project. To do this, they've been reaching out to individual residents [...] of different backgrounds, cultures, and beliefs. To me, this is a sign. We're building a project where each person has a place, where people can speak about their own religion and culture and can be questioned by others. That's how we struggle against racism. In Molenbeek, people were able to talk about [the attack in] Paris without taboos and to hear points of view that are different from those of the media.

The regular outdoor reading and art activities of the Street Library, shown here in the Molenbeek neighbourhood of Brussels, build connections among residents of all ages.



Moreover, as participants get to know one another in the People’s University, the quality of the connections creates powerful bonds among people of all races and ethnicities. For example, when a Roma woman in Belgium was struggling with homelessness and discrimination, her entire preparation group joined forces to help her find housing. Evelyne Du-bois, Sandra Francisco, and Meriem Zeggai prepared to speak at the Paris People’s University, where they said, “Prejudice can be an obstacle for meeting one another. But when we have mutual respect, dialogue, and time together — that builds a sense of community. We can share what we

know — like at the community centre, we started a garden. We're all from different backgrounds and we get along very well.” Similarly, Laurence Abotchi described relationships in her community where “neighbours ignored one another; but then after a fire everyone came together to help out a woman who lost her belongings. Ever since, people have been chatting and helping one another more.”

Long before people come together in a People's University, ATD develops relationships of trust through our daily presence in low-income communities. Véronique Morzelle, of the Fourth World Volunteer Corps, gives an example from Marseille involving her neighbour, Lisette Delapeyre, an immigrant from the Comoro Islands off the coast of Africa:

The Street Library we had organised was already a place of peace for all the children. But parents wanted to form a tenants' association as well, to know their rights and to be able to speak to the landlords together. For a long time, however, it never got off the ground. Then there was a very tense time, with a lot of robberies. More and more young people were arrested. For Comoran parents, this was unbearable. One mother collapsed in the street when she heard of her child's arrest.

Looking for solutions, some adults invited an imam to bring them together as a sign to young people that the adults refused to accept what was happening. This grew into the tenants' association. It began with parents praying for the young people. Sometimes that was misunderstood. Other neighbours wondered if the prayers were meant to help the young people or to banish them. Lisette shook things up, insisting that the young people be invited to join in the prayers. It remained hard for people of different origins to speak to one another in public. Connections were made more often in stairwells or in one another's homes. This led many mothers from Comoro and a few from North Africa to become active for the first time in the Street Library Festival, joining others to help plan cultural activities for the children.

Lisette adds, “They ended up creating forms of solidarity that neither Véronique nor I had imagined. The families had been isolated from one another before, but they had the same concerns. When Véronique and I went together to listen to them and to read the Quran, they became open

At a Street Library Festival in Marseille, led by Ms Lisette Delapeyre (centre), Comoran mothers show children how to apply traditional sandalwood make-up. Ms Véronique Morzelle is at right.



to listening to us, too. Véronique is Catholic, and they accepted her. They were ready to be open; it just needed to happen with specific people.” Together, Lisette and Véronique created a context where people could live up to their aspirations for themselves and for their neighbourhood.

Racism, Forgiveness, and Searching for Ways Forward

Doris Mary is a regular participant in our People’s University in Rhône-Alpes, France. She lives in a small housing shelter. At one People’s University session, a French woman was called a racist for referring to someone else as “an Arab” after having previously apologised to him for a different comment. Reflecting on this exchange afterwards, Doris said, “It’s too easy to apologise if you’ve already categorised a person. It allows you to start again as soon as you’re forgiven. Here in this shelter, I’m often insulted for no reason. It happened again the other day. I hadn’t done anything; we were just passing in the hallway. Later, the person apologised to me. I said to him, ‘Listen, whenever you apologise, it allows you to do the same thing again.’ It’s like with people who drink and then hit you and say, ‘Sorry, darling, I won’t do it again.’ There are times when there are no more excuses, no more forgiveness. What you need is to talk to one another. There are treatments for alcoholism. To treat



Ms Doris Mary at a People's University in France's Rhône-Alpes region: "It's too easy to apologise if you've already categorised a person."

xenophobia, you have to open your spirit. The French are not the only ones in the world. The French won't evolve if we keep to ourselves. The world's richness comes from our cultures."

Guendouz Bensidhoum got involved in ATD Fourth World through a youth group when he was a teenager and is now part of our Volunteer Corps. Hearing Doris's reflection led Guendouz to express his own thoughts about racism, forgiveness, and lashing out:

It's true that the word "sorry" is never enough if there aren't acts behind it. I don't like to use the word "racist"; it's a serious accusation. That's why it took me a long time to name the way one of my bosses behaved to me. He would speak to me in a violent way, but then the next day would invite me out for a drink. Every time, I believed he would change; but every time, I was wrong. People go through that all the time: being treated unfairly; then being led to believe that they're like anyone else; but then injustice happens again. People in poverty store up so much of that kind of abuse. When it was happening to me, with the limited means I had, I was sure that I'd end up fighting with my boss. I knew that wouldn't help. But I felt so much violence building up, I thought I wouldn't be able to hold it in. It was the kind of "choice" you make when you have no option to choose to do anything else. But nothing is gained that way. Today, I advise young people not to act in a way that could be held against them. Some people

Mr Guendouz Bensidhoum, at right, at an ATD Fourth World youth assembly in Munich in 1983. Today he speaks to young people about racism, forgiveness, and lashing out.



use the word “racist” all the time, to express rage about anything. That can also be a way for young people to lash out with the anger inside them, pushing others to react. It’s what you do when you have no other way to resist.

Another participant in the Rhône-Alpes People’s University, Zoulikha Rahmouni, stresses the importance of dialogue as the way towards understanding and peace. When Zoulikha had just been released from a hospital, she joined in preparations for a People’s University session on the theme “How do I try to make life fairer for everyone?” She answered the question this way:

I listen to people a lot. I ask a lot of questions. I explain a little about our differences. In the hospital, people were asking a lot about [the terrorist attacks in Paris]. So I explained the differences in our religious customs, and they explained their religious customs to me. That’s all I can do; it’s my way of participating. Sometimes I stay silent, just asking myself questions about it. [...]

There are people who don’t like to talk or share much. They’d rather say a quick “hello–goodbye”, but I take the risk. Sometimes it annoys people; they have the impression that it’s a way of being sure of oneself. But it isn’t — it’s complicated. [...] It’s my way of feeling that I matter in society. I have no other solution. I’m ill, so I can’t participate in much. I don’t understand everything, but this is my little way of



Ms Zoulikha Rahmouni, for whom dialogue “builds a life with more justice”.

being present. And it builds a life with more justice, because when we talk, our dialogue can open doors. We're opening the room and space for thinking, so that things don't stay stuck this way.

Later Jean-Marie Anglade, a Volunteer Corps member, spoke about what she had said: “Zoulikha says she’s ill and ‘can’t do much’, but she talks with people. She says that this helps build a world with more fairness because it opens doors. This is true. Poverty, racism, and injustice exist in the world. Facing this, it is possible to get to know one another, to understand, to share our thoughts, to share what each of us carries inside. Zoulikha, as powerless as she said she feels, has gone right to the heart of what is essential and is putting it into practice.”

Every day poor and rich people alike lash out in anger, or they make apologies that stop short of changing their behaviour. And yet, while grappling with prejudice and despair, our members continue to open doors with dialogue and to look for ways to build a sense of community around them. A white woman who lives in poverty and participates in the People’s University in Rouen (France) explains that she made a choice to stop spending time with people who constantly expressed negative and racist attitudes: “I no longer visit one of my friends because she’s so critical of people. It hurts. She talks about ‘scroungers’. She criticises black people. One day, when I was recovering from my illness, a light went on

for me. I decided I was tired of listening to people talk that way. I realised that it got me nowhere. [...] My next-door neighbours are from Senegal. Sainabou and I chat and help each other out. They never criticise people; they don't talk the way we do. They might say, 'So-and-so is angry', but they won't say, 'She's mean'."

Like Guendouz, a man living in poverty in Paris also emphasised the importance of overcoming anger. He said, "I didn't used to talk at all. Talking is important because if I keep everything inside, I'll explode. Words have to come out. Now I've been going to the People's University for twenty years, and I'm starting to talk. The People's University pumps me up; it puts me in a good mood for the whole week."

Religious Diversity and the Fourth World Volunteer Corps

Many of the people quoted in this chapter — Véronique, Guendouz, Jean-Marie, and others — are part of our long-term Volunteer Corps. To join forces in overcoming poverty, volunteers form a diverse community. Some do not believe in God or practise any religion; others have different beliefs and practices. The Volunteer Corps has a unique kind of religious diversity. Its founder, Joseph Wresinski, was a Catholic priest, and yet he did not found a religious organisation. Among the first people who joined him in the Volunteer Corps were atheists, Protestants, and Jews. As vital as Catholicism was to him personally, his conviction was that overcoming poverty was a project for everyone to join in together. He believed that people in poverty deserved to be reinforced in their efforts by people of every background and belief. Today, the president of ATD Fourth World is Cassam Uteem, former president of the Republic of Mauritius, and a practising Muslim.

Saandia Soufiane, a volunteer, is also Muslim. Born near Madagascar, in the French overseas department of Mayotte, she now lives in a low-income housing complex in the Paris region where she organises cultural enrichment projects and welcomes unemployed adults preparing to work in our fair-trade workshop. She writes:

Where I grew up, 95 to 97 percent of us are Muslim. Even those who don't practise believe in God. That touches everything we do. But

here, the word 'religion' puts people on their guard. When I speak about religion, I feel something change in their attitude. I have a hard time understanding why it's so difficult. But just as some people don't understand that I believe in God, I don't understand that others don't. I was just as much on my guard when I discovered that there were people who don't believe. For me, that's like not knowing where you come from or what you're doing here. And if I talk about religion, either people are uninterested, or maybe they're afraid I'm trying to indoctrinate them. Unfortunately, the things that people hear the most about my religion are the things that represent it the least. People think of extremism because it's all they hear about. [...] Helping the poorest person is at the heart of my faith. One must not turn one's back to anyone in need, whoever they are. It can be even more important than religious practice. That's why I joined ATD Fourth World.

But it's not easy to be Muslim in France right now. [...] Here, men and women greet each other by kissing a cheek. Do I find that appropriate, or not? It's out of the question for me to change who



Ms Saandia Soufiane (left, during a Theatre of the Oppressed exercise about solidarity): “People think of extremism because it’s all they hear about. Helping the poorest person is at the heart of my faith.”

I am; but I don't want to be closed off. In my religion, the intention is what matters. My intention is not to create barriers between me and others. So here, I decided that I would cover my head in front of people I don't know, but not in front of people I do know. The veil is to prevent ambiguous relationships. That means that once a relationship is established in a certain way, the veil is no longer necessary. I didn't like realising that the way I lived my religion before put me on my guard and so made it impossible for me to meet others. At the same time, I was convinced that I want and need to meet people who are different.

People often criticise me for "acting white". They're afraid that being open to any differences could completely overwhelm me. They can't believe that I have white room-mates but have never had alcohol or pork. I think what's important is to learn about proportion. It's so hard for young people who have never left their community or their religion to arrive suddenly in a radically different universe where they don't recognise anything. There's nothing to guide their discovery, and they can end up losing their sense of self without gaining any sense of proportion. They've never had the chance to say, "Here's who I am. And without closing myself off completely, there's no need for me to get swallowed up by the other. I can remain myself, the other can remain himself, and in the middle, we can meet."

While Saandia has a strong motivation to meet people who are different from herself, she also notes that it is hard to be Muslim in France. The French ideal of secularism strives to protect freedom of religion for all. But one of the consequences of laws about public order is that religion remains mainly in the private sphere. This can create a particular challenge for immigrants arriving from countries where religious observance is a vital part of everyday life. With no public funding for mosques, a congregation may be too large to fit inside its place of worship; and yet if congregants overflow and want to pray in the street, the ideal and tradition of secularism is violated. Another challenge is maintaining each person's sensitivity to the multifaceted identity of the other.

Guendouz's current responsibility for ATD Fourth World involves painting works of art as a way to reach out to the general public and to share his knowledge about the history of poverty and exclusion. Reflecting

on questions of poverty among Muslim immigrants in French public housing where he grew up, Guendouz spoke about a man who was told by administrators, “You have no legal existence.” This man had come to France from Algeria as a child, but he later had his residence card revoked after his French employer kept him out of the country too long for a construction project in Saudi Arabia. On his return to France, in the hope of regaining his legal status, the man submitted notarised statements from his mail carrier, his grocer, a lawyer, and every school he had attended, but it was not enough. Demoralised, he gave up trying, and he has been living with no legal identity for most of his life. Thinking more broadly about the many people who struggle with both their legal and their cultural identities, Guendouz said:

Personally, I'm not religious. But I've had the chance to see North Africans in France who became religious, and this really helped them grow. I think that part of our role in ATD Fourth World is to be seekers, to learn from those experiences. People are often of two minds: they know they can be criticised; they know things are hard



Mr Guendouz Bensidhoum (left, at a 2009 international seminar on creativity) says, “Pushing others to react is what you do when you have no other way to resist.”

in their home country. But they also have a lot of hope; and they do things that lead them to grow.

In North African culture, the sense of community is so important. That has good sides and bad sides — that's how it is. But people need to be able to recognise themselves in the community. You either belong or you don't. And that means it's important to understand the richness inside these communities. That means recognising that some people return to religion and study it. Lots of Muslims don't know much about religion. They might not read or write much. They share oral traditions with their children. That doesn't mean that oral traditions are unimportant, but they have limits.

And the rise of fundamentalism has led to more people learning to read and write. I've seen young people publicly humiliate older ones over this: an older man will say, "Here's what's in the Quran", only to have a young man contradict him, saying, "You can't read; you don't know." But I've also seen young people who learned to study because of Islam, and who turned their studies into a way for their whole community to achieve more. [...] With the question of being veiled, it's true that some women are humiliated. But it's also a real choice for others. I'm thinking of five sisters. Four don't wear a veil. But the fifth, who decided to wear one, is also the one who is the most determined to make something of her life. Being religious can be negative, but it can also be positive. In returning to Islam, people can feel they belong to a community.

For a person who is not religious, like Guendouz, to go out of his way to understand what religious practice can mean to people in poverty is unusual; just as it is striking that someone as devout as Saandia says that not turning one's back to anyone in need "can be even more important than religious practice".

ATD Fourth World is not an interfaith organisation specialising in dialogues among religious leaders. Nor are we a secular organisation where a focus only on policy goals could prevent us from speaking also about our beliefs. The questions carried by people living in persistent poverty constantly centre us on the search for meaning: "Why do all my efforts to help my children come to nothing? Is God himself against me?" We all listen to questions like these, and try to think about them together.

Volunteer Corps members, because they make themselves available to move from one country to another according to our needs, learn to listen to people whose beliefs are different from their own. This is uncharted territory, significantly different from the practices of clergy and of community organisers. People in poverty know that they are sometimes seen only as beggars on the steps of a place of worship. Whatever their beliefs, they deserve to be recognised as people looking for meaning. This is one of the areas where we try to blaze a new trail towards fellowship.

The Road Towards Fellowship

Wresinski's 1980 speech concluded:

We've learned not to be naive, to stop letting others break down our solidarity and manipulate us. The suffering that touches us all, immigrants and people in poverty, has awakened the hope that was sleeping in our hearts: the hope that we will all be able to stand, recognised as people in our own right. Beyond bitterness, we have found hope in brotherhood. Because we have lacked friendship and love, we know that no one can live without them, and we can invent a world of solidarity and love. [...] We can understand, respect, and love one another. By coming together, we have awakened our internal sense of solidarity, a solidarity that exists among all people in poverty, whether immigrants or French. [...] Now that we've begun, we will never stop. The movement we form together will be unforgettable.

While the suffering of poverty can cause people to lash out, as Wresinski said, it can also be a source of compassion. To give a tragic example, people in poverty know how hard it is to grow up in foster care — as did the Kouachi brothers who attacked the Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris in January 2015. Following the attacks, a French woman who lives in poverty reacted, saying, “What hurts me the most is that they were French, too. They grew up here, just like us. They're like my son, who was put in foster care, who was also part of a rap group. But they were unlucky; they were led to do wrong.” Michel Brogniez, a Belgian People's University participant who grew up in foster care, said: “It's hard when you've been



Some ATD Fourth World full-time Volunteer Corps members: a diverse community, neither interfaith nor secular, that holds the conviction that overcoming poverty is a project for everyone.

badly treated from a young age. We're in the dark, but we want to see the light. Peace will begin the day you realise that the person in front of you is exactly the same as you: a person to be respected." They and many others who express similar sentiments do not hesitate to condemn all acts of terrorism. But their fervent wish is that the two brothers had met people who could have prevented these acts by showing them the care and respect that promote a sense of fellowship with all people.

In the face of terrorist attacks, the world is building more and more walls, both literal and figurative. People who are always suspected wherever they go of being a danger to others are frisked and searched, harassed and fenced out, treated with disrespect, indignity, and worse. Some parents feel they have to warn their children, even before they reach adolescence: "Be careful; you will be suspected of every crime because of the way



Ms Elsa Dauchet de Calignon (left) with People's University delegates from Belgium at the European Parliament. She says, "Struggling with poverty matters more than the fact that people are not from the same country."

other people look at us." But barbed wire and gated communities make all of us less safe. Every tool designed to protect the security of some at the expense of others ends up eroding the human relationships that are our world's greatest treasure. Yves Doutriaux, a member of France's Council of State and of its national anti-discrimination council, has known ATD Fourth World since 1998. He says:

Following the media every day leads us to despair because our societies have increasing inequality. Personally, I worry that this insecurity is exploited by extremists on the right and on the left, throughout Europe. Because ATD Fourth World is firmly anchored in poor and extremely poor communities, we need ten or a hundred more ATDs in the field showing the human dignity of the poor countering the extremist ideas that feed on extreme poverty, for example those against immigrant populations or the Roma. The message of ATD Fourth World is one of hope. We need that hope amid the concern crossing Europe, given its current economic, social, and moral crisis today.

Extremism, racism, hate speech, and intolerance remain immense challenges in increasingly diverse European countries and elsewhere. Social exclusion and poverty-based discrimination are cousins of all forms of intolerance. In looking for ways to overcome prejudice and anger, we remain convinced that the road towards fellowship is a collective one, like that of the People's University. It is a road built with people of many backgrounds who live in persistent poverty. Their emotional intelligence and their experience of hardship can be a crucible for forging a new understanding of a single human race whose treasure lies in the many unique threads of our cultural identities. The spaces where excluded people can feel respected and begin to express their own voice are fragile. In order to thrive, these spaces need recognition, protection, and support. As we join together to create them, we are building a sense of belonging that can set all of us free.



Fostering a sense of fellowship by celebrating together at a People's University in Paris.

4

Understanding and Reclaiming the Past in the Philippines, the United States, and Switzerland

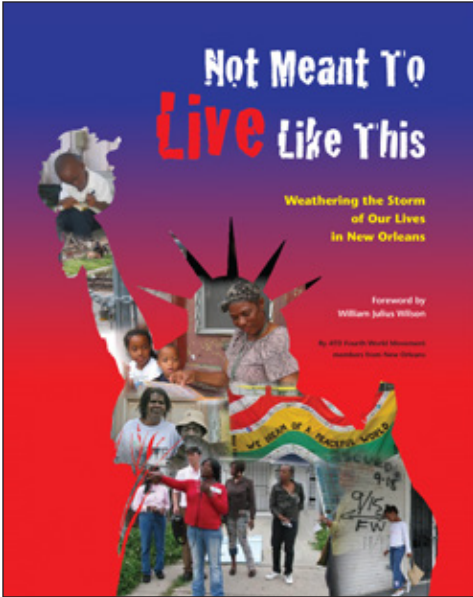
Darkness, not want, is the real scourge of poverty. [...] Those with broken lives are further insulted by history casting them into oblivion.

— Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*

How many people have died throughout history without leaving any trace of their lives? Entire families and communities are uprooted, deported, made homeless, and regarded as outsiders even in their own homeland. Places where families have lived and suffered are constantly razed to make way for development, erasing all memory of their struggles. When homes are destroyed and residents scattered, does anyone remember their intelligence, their pain, their courage, and their hopes? Joseph Wresinski asked:

Who will know? Who will bear witness? Who will share the words of this part of humanity, reduced to silence and a heroism with no glory? If we had not been there from day to day, one of the most painful pages of the poor would have been torn from the book of the history of humanity. People, having forgotten all that they had inflicted on their brethren, could believe themselves fair judges. [...] Any meaningful speech deserves to be recorded in writing; meaningful words deserve to become a message for others, particularly when these words come from the most disadvantaged. Being able to use the written word means going down in history.

Just as history has been written by the victors of wars, it has also been written by the world's most powerful voices, from the first people to become literate to today's highly educated and widely published academics. In academia, some history is only now being documented. In the United

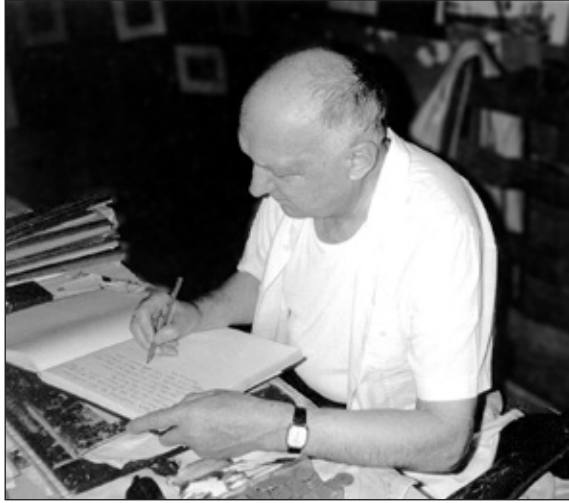


When people living in poverty become authors, they enhance our understanding of history, as did fifty ATD Fourth World members who wrote this book after being displaced from New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

States, new research into narratives about slavery is filling major gaps in previous histories of that era. Looking through archives, historians are discovering buried stories of women's achievements. But the lack of records means that some of this history will remain lost forever. Just as women and enslaved people rarely had opportunities to record their lives and thoughts, people in extreme poverty lack the means to document their own history. And even when professional writers go to great lengths to research the voices of people in poverty, any author's comprehension of history is necessarily shaped by his or her own experience and vantage point. When people enduring poverty can themselves become authors, they give us a more complete understanding of history.

For example, in the European economic recovery following the Second World War, France was widely considered to have one of the most dynamic economies. The French speak proudly of "the glorious thirty years" of constant growth they enjoyed between 1945 and the 1970s. And yet it was in 1957, just a few kilometres from Paris, that Joseph Wresinski discovered misery and destitution in the emergency housing camp where he founded ATD Fourth World. People who found out about this situation tended to consider it a small aberration, some isolated cases of families who had fallen through the social welfare net. In fact, a number

“Who will bear witness?": Fr Joseph Wresinski, in 1987, writes in the guest book at the House of Slaves on Gorée Island in Senegal.



The emergency housing camp of Noisy-le-Grand on the outskirts of Paris where Wresinski founded ATD in 1957.



of other communities like this existed in France and throughout Europe. Unaware of people elsewhere living in extreme poverty, social service agencies in those communities considered these families dysfunctional for not fitting in. The families themselves, seeing others succeed, could only think there was something wrong with them. Drawing on his own experience of poverty, Wresinski considered it crucial to identify the positive efforts people made and to connect them to the history of poverty. He immediately began making it possible for the families in the emergency housing camp to meet others enduring similar conditions. Together they came to realise that they shared a common history and a bond with one another that had never been understood or documented. It is time for us

to relearn the history of all our countries from scratch, by making it possible for those who know what it means to be outcast to become its authors.

Truth demands that people in poverty be able to record history, and this is also critical to efforts to overcome poverty. Anti-poverty literature often states that poverty is connected to low self-esteem. What is not recognised is how circumstances can rob people of their sense of self. All people are born with a unique family history linked to the community they live in. That history can keep a child afloat, connect that child to others, and launch him or her forward in life. It can be passed down proudly, through stories and songs, photographs and patchwork quilts. But when families are displaced, banished, or split apart, children are torn from their roots. They may spend their whole lives wondering where they come from and why they, unlike others, have no history to share proudly. Disconnected from and ignorant of their family history, seeing themselves only in the eyes of people who look down on them, these children cannot forge a confident identity.

Since ATD Fourth World was founded in 1957, its members have collected unique historical documentation of people living in poverty. Wresinski insisted that a vital part of ATD's work be recording families' daily lives and their efforts to escape their inhuman conditions. To ensure that nothing meaningful be forgotten, we have worked not only to write, but also to tape-record, photograph, film, draw, paint, and compose. These records safeguard the memory of injustices, and of struggles, progress, and commitments made by groups of people in extreme poverty and those working with them. The records bear witness to the hope and courage of all those who reject the inevitability of poverty.

We have collected this multi-faceted heritage from the past fifty-plus years into one place. In the past, ATD's archives were scattered across several continents, often in insecure, cramped conditions, vulnerable to dampness or fire. In 2007, we established the Joseph Wresinski Centre for History and Research³⁸ to ensure that these multi-media records be preserved for future generations. Gradually, we are opening the archives to people who want to learn about this buried part of our common heritage. The centre, which also includes a research institute, was profiled

38. Located in Baillet-en-France, a small town outside Paris, France.



The Joseph Wresinski Centre in Baillet-en-France is a repository for writings, photos, videos, audio recordings, and works of art, all documenting the history of people striving to overcome poverty.



This “Patchwork of Our Lives”, displayed at the Joseph Wresinski Centre, was made from fabric contributed by people in poverty around the world together with messages about meaningful moments in their history.

in *Le Monde* daily newspaper in 2013. Following are excerpts from the article, “The Treasure Trove of the Poor”, written by Catherine Rollot.³⁹

In official records, only a few traces remain of their lives. The world of the very poor has few faces, as if extreme poverty makes them invisible. To overcome that situation, a unique place in the town of Baillet-en-France has spent five years collecting the fragments of the existence of the people who are the most destitute. Two million photo prints and 800,000 digital photos, 10,000 hours of sound recordings in seventeen languages, two kilometres of archive boxes full of thousands of written records, and 4,000 pieces of artwork are preserved at the Joseph Wresinski Centre.

From Manila to the suburbs of Paris, in black and white or in colour, the daily lives of those who live with next to nothing flashes by here. One can see bundled-up children who live on a vacant lot in the middle of the winter. There is a father — a street vendor during the day — who joins his family under the pillars of a bridge as night falls. There are also peals of laughter, birthday parties, Christmas celebrations, and people swimming in the sea: like everyone else.

The existence of this collection, which is recognised as one of the most complete in the world, is the result of the painstaking work of some thirty full-time workers and volunteers who have inventoried, restored, and made thousands of documents accessible.

One of the objectives of ATD Fourth World has always been preserving traces of the injustices that people are subject to, the fight that they lead, and the progress they made. From the beginning Fr. Joseph Wresinski asked the members of his association to collect — in all possible media — the words of those who are seldom heard. [...]

“For years, all this content was spread out in twenty-nine countries where we are working,” explained Xavier Verzat, in charge of the Joseph Wresinski Centre. “The conditions in which these documents were preserved varied greatly according to where they were. Sometimes the documents were archived, but often they were kept in a jumbled mess, in dust and humidity. The oldest sound and audio-visual sources were on media that are now obsolete. Without

39. Translated from Catherine Rollot, “Au Trésor des Pauvres”, *Le Monde*, Paris, 6 March 2013.

Two kilometres of paper archives and nearly three million photos record the history and courage of some of the most excluded people.



preserving them digitally they would have disappeared,” continued Verzat, a graduate from the Ecole Polytechnique and Davis University (California, USA), who, together with his wife, has been committed full time for twenty years alongside people who struggle. Like the four hundred other members of the Fourth World Volunteer Corps, the couple has chosen to live a very modest life, in solidarity with the families they accompany. In France each Volunteer Corps member receives a monthly stipend of 550 euros per person, and lives in housing that belongs to ATD. [...]

Pierre Segondi, the most senior member of the centre at the age of 91, set up the first classification system. He studied computer technology, learned the art of developing photos, and in doing so discovered a real passion. “Archiving is giving the families’ history back to them, and making sure this history gets to be known in society. If you demolish a shanty town, no trace is left,” he explained.

A quarter of the photo documents have been scanned. Most of the negatives were taken by amateurs, or by professional



ATD members visiting from Latin America listen to Pierre Segondi (right) speak about his role curating the centre's photo library.

photographers who have either made a long-term commitment to ATD, or who are helping out, like Jacques-Henri Lartigue.

Imprinted on these negatives one finds the tenderness of a mother, with an arm full of flowers, in the middle of a shanty town in the suburbs of Paris; the mischievousness of a child in the doorway of a trailer; the bright smile of a Peruvian schoolgirl in uniform in the middle of a dump — all showing an alternative view of poverty, without trying to make the viewer feel pity for the people.

The archives serve mainly as a source for exhibitions, publications or research undertaken within the movement. Although it is still little known, the centre has started to receive visits from French and foreign researchers, but also from private individuals who are searching for their past, such as a father and his son who visited the centre. “He used to live in the shanty town at La Campa, which was erected in the 1950s in the town of La Courneuve,” says François Philiponeau. “He arrived and said: ‘You’ll most likely not find it, but I used to live in the camp, and I went to an overnight camp.’ We typed “holiday camp” and “Campa” and he recognised himself on the first

picture that came up on the computer screen. He had tears in his eyes.” The man left with a digital copy of the photo.

Michel (who wishes to remain anonymous) has his ears full of extreme poverty, literally. Every day he hears it for hours and hours, coming out of the mixing table, the sound improvement instruments, and the computers that furnish the audio library of the centre. There is, for instance, the story told by the woman who was 12 years old when she arrived in the shanty town of Noisy-le-Grand: “My first memory is seeing my mother cry. I remember also the piles of household rubbish that were huge [...] and all those babies who died.” With the passage of time she looked back, “You become what society says of us. If somebody doesn’t tell us that it’s not our fault — being poor — we stagnate, and don’t believe we can make any changes.”

Recently, after four years of work, the digitisation of the whole stock of 10,000 sound documents was completed. It was a huge undertaking, because 75 percent of the recordings needed to be restored. [...] Once the pieces have been cleaned up, they are stored on media of very high quality. There are “listening notes” made for the most interesting recordings: a detailed summary of key moments.

[...] ATD Fourth World intends to make the documents more available to researchers [but this is sensitive and complicated work]. “It’s our next challenge,” considers Michel and adds carefully, “Much in the archives is very personal. Some families have confided in ATD Fourth World under the condition that their words would never be made public. Sometimes, even if they haven’t set up such conditions, their lives are so hard that it is difficult to hear.”

For now, everything that ATD has collected over the years is preserved, even the sources that might be judged of little interest. It is a choice made out of respect for those who, while drowning in extreme poverty, one day held their head high in front of a lens or a microphone.

The centre’s archives include texts in a dozen languages, video and audio recordings and the corresponding transcripts in almost thirty languages (including Haitian Creole, Quechua, Mandarin, Sango, and Wolof), photographs and art objects, quilts and paintings. The centre has gathered and preserved these documents to establish a base of knowledge about



Ms Myriam Boulahia (left) wrote the story of her life growing up in poverty and entrusted her work to the centre. Here, Ms Véronique Davienne, the centre's director, holds the manuscript.



Over several years, Mr Gérard Lecointe (at left) visited the centre regularly to write his autobiography, *De pierre en pierre* [From Stone to Stone]. In it, he discloses how he was removed from his home by social services and later ran away to live hiding in the woods. He writes, “All people should be recognised by others.”

Each year, the centre organises a workshop called “Campus” for academic researchers and people in poverty.

These participants are from France, the United States, and Vietnam.



the daily lives, struggles, and reflections of people living in poverty; the effect of actions and policies on fighting poverty and building peace; and Wresinski’s life, action, and thinking.

The ATD team in this centre strives to showcase this exceptional heritage, and gradually to organise its physical and digital accessibility according to official archiving standards. The research institute at the centre initiates projects inspired by the Merging Knowledge approach. This work involves historians, researchers from other disciplines, and people with personal experience of extreme poverty, all working together as equals. The work done in the centre addresses the urgent need to make

known the injustices of poverty. Jeanne Fuhrmann, an activist in Alsace, France, explains:

One day, our history should be written and known to all. People need to know what we are living, and what other people like us are living. Others can't understand what it means to live outdoors. This life outside can't continue. If I'm saying all this, it's not for me; it's for my kids because they must have a better life than ours.

Guided by this compelling need for change, the centre was designed with a vision for the future. In addition to collecting and restoring historical archives, modern digital resources are used. The centre connects thinking to action by shaping our collective understanding of history and initiating new research. It embodies the slogan of UNESCO's Social and Human Sciences programme: "Food for thought, thought for action". The Joseph Wresinski Centre is a place for recounting life stories, because narratives enable people to develop pride in their roots, and to take action to resist discrimination and disparagement. Because a record is collected here about the lives of many unrecognised "artisans of peace" — their intelligence, their vision, and how they see their history — this centre is a place for resisting everything that threatens human dignity.

In the Philippines: from "Gold Under the Bridge" to the United Nations

The act of reclaiming untold history, while crucial in itself, is also essential for changing the present. Aling Tita Villarosa lives in a vast public cemetery of Metro Manila, and has been an activist for many years. She and thousands of others take shelter under the overhanging roofs of the mausoleums in the cemetery. She says, "I'm living with dead loved ones, together with thousands of families who are struggling to end extreme poverty. In a developing country like ours, it is possible to see poverty without actually knowing the poor. The very poorest families are the first to support one another. For fifteen years now, my family and I have lived in a cemetery. I've seen just how hard it is for my neighbours to make ends meet — and it's hard for me too."

In Manila:
a public cemetery
where families
live among the
mausoleums.



Aling Tita, her family, and their neighbours are among tens of thousands of people who lack a decent place to live. Many families live in makeshift dwellings in informal settlements. They live beside railroad tracks, at rubbish dumps, and under bridges. A Filipina ally, Cristina Lim-Yuson, describes how she visited one such community under a bridge: “We descended via a narrow wooden staircase and were immediately engulfed in this pitch-dark labyrinth with a distinctive smell of rubbish and human sweat. Here, families lived for years in tight quarters made from scavenged materials. It was difficult to breathe in this overcrowded place.”

Marilyn Gutierrez is another Filipina who was both shocked by the many hardships and dangers in these informal communities and impressed by the thirst of the children there “for something beautiful, for anything that would bring their imagination to life”. She noted many parents’ efforts, after repeated evictions, “to rebuild their lives, [...] to live, to weave their dreams and hopes [...] of a place where children can grow up, far from any danger”. A Volunteer Corps member since 1999, Marilyn spent many years running cultural activities with these families. In 2003, she began writing a history of the families she got to know in Manila. *Gold Under the Bridge: A Story of Life in the Slums*, published in 2006, is the result.⁴⁰ Based on her conversations with these families over several years, and written in close dialogue with them, the book recounts the experiences and thoughts of people whose lives are completely hidden

40. Marilyn Gutierrez, *Gold Under the Bridge: A Story of Life in the Slums*, Pasig, Philippines: Anvil Publishing, 2006.



Informal housing under a bridge in Manila.

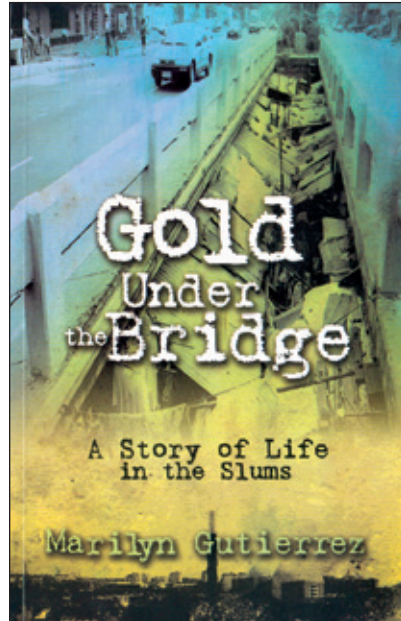
from view. The publication of the book, launched with a press conference, was an extraordinary opportunity for Aling Tita and others to be proud of their history and of what they had to say. The book has become a valuable tool for our Filipino members to explain what life is like in informal settlements and what efforts they make to survive. It describes how alone people can feel in the face of injustice and demonstrates the vital role of human connections.

In 2005, Aling Tita Villarosa was one of the ATD Fourth World delegates to meet with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in New York. This private meeting on the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty was a chance for a world leader to have a meaningful conversation with people living in extreme poverty, as happened in 1982 when ATD Fourth World met with Javier Pérez de Cuéllar to discuss human rights, and in 1996 when Boutros Boutros-Ghali hosted a seminar with ATD Fourth World to follow up on the World Summit for Social Development.

Aling Tita's experience as an activist alongside Marilyn, Nina, and many of our other members, had given her the confidence to represent others in front of the UN Secretary-General. Years of struggle had honed Aling Tita's sense of solidarity. Her neighbours rely on her in many ways. She often supports parents trying to enrol their children in school or applying for administrative papers. She plays a key role in enabling ATD

Fourth World to run a Street Library in her community. Marilyn says, “I know also how much Aling Tita dreams that all kids in her community can go to school at a young age and so she goes out of her way to make links with other non-profits and government organisations to see what programmes are available for the children living in her area. It is her way to show that they are part of a larger society and that these children have the same rights as any other children in the Philippines.” All these experiences prepared and inspired Aling Tita to tell one of the most influential leaders in the world about the realities of their lives and their common hopes for the future.

Aling Tita and the other delegates asked the Secretary-General for support concerning the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. This day, initiated by ATD Fourth World in 1987 and officially recognised by the United Nations in 1992, is an opportunity for the voices of people in poverty to be heard. In some places, however, it was beginning to be distorted into a day “about poverty” with no place for these voices. ATD Fourth World’s request to Kofi Annan was that he remind the world of the importance of listening directly to people actually living in poverty.



This book, published in 2006, became a valuable tool for Filipino members of ATD to explain what life is like in informal settlements and what efforts they make to survive.



Ms Marilyn Gutierrez reads to children during ATD's 2010 Festival of Learning in the cemetery.



Aling Tita Villarosa (front left, wearing glasses) with the facilitators of the Street Library that she helps to make possible in her community.



Aling Tita also facilitates an ATD literacy programme for children who are not enrolled in school or who need extra support to learn to read.



Children learning in the cemetery.

In April 2013, when asked about her meeting with Kofi Annan, Aling Tita decided to write down her own memory of that day in 2005 to let other people know what happened:

Everybody was happy, the meeting was finished, and we had a picture-taking in which I was beside Mr Kofi Annan — but before that, I challenged the Secretary-General. I planned it myself. Everybody had spoken about their experience in their country. In my turn, I sat beside the Secretary-General. We each had two minutes' time to tell the experience of poverty. Talking to Mr Annan, I held his hands and was looking straight into his eyes. I said: "Mr Secretary-General, many people think that the poor depend on institutions and governments for help. What they don't know is that in the poorest communities, people help one another every day. To overcome extreme poverty, the poor themselves have to be involved. Let us be partners together when you are working on security, development, and human rights for all. Let us put together our knowledge, yours and ours. Let us no longer work separately, but as one." Then when I stopped talking, he answered me: "Yes, you're right." Everybody was happy, and I told them going to New York was not a waste of time;



In [this video](http://www.Unheard-Voices.org) on www.Unheard-Voices.org, Aling Tita speaks about asking Mr Kofi Annan to consider people in poverty as partners of the United Nations.



UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan (seventh from left) hosts ATD Fourth World delegates. Aling Tita, holding the Secretary-General's arm, calls this day "an experience I can't forget".

instead it was a very successful time with us. This experience I can't forget in my life because a woman like me in a cemetery was able to meet people in other places of the world and learn a lot from them.

In response to this important request from someone accustomed to being either talked at or ignored, Mr Annan promised, "You can count on me and on the United Nations to launch a participatory evaluation of this day both with governments and with people living in poverty." He did not let Aling Tita down. Just as he promised, the United Nations carried out a participatory evaluation repositioning the day in a way that brings everyone together to strive towards peace. In the Secretary-General's 2006 report on this evaluation,⁴¹ he concluded:

The International Day has been observed around the world as a day to remember and honour the daily struggles of people living in poverty. 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 recognise that poor people are in the forefront in the fight against poverty.

41. Report of the UN Secretary-General, "Observance of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty", 2006. <http://www.un.org/en/events/povertyday/2006/sgreport.html>

Not Meant to Live Like This: Weathering the Storm of Our Lives in New Orleans

People in New Orleans suffered from the violence of Hurricane Katrina washing away their homes in 2005. They also suffered from humiliation when policymakers chose not to rebuild much of the destroyed low-income housing in the hope that the most disadvantaged people would not return after fleeing the city. While New Orleans has rebuilt its levees and its thriving tourist trade, many of the city's most vulnerable residents to this day remain scattered elsewhere, family members split apart wherever they managed to escape the chaos of the storm. Their lives and their lost communities represent a piece of New Orleans's soul that has been torn away.

ATD Fourth World has had a team in New Orleans since the 1980s. In the wake of the hurricane, the volunteers' first efforts were to track down the people they knew best. These families had been suddenly displaced across seven states in shelters and emergency housing from Arizona to Georgia to Kentucky. As the team began to make regular visits to these families, Eula Collins, an aide to the elderly and disabled, suggested that the volunteers write a book "about the Fourth World, about your work". Maria Victoire, an ATD volunteer, knew right away that the authors of such a book should be Eula and the other activists — now spread out over four thousand kilometres in places where they had been transported in



In New Orleans: A mural at the Ashé Cultural Arts Center.

Walls throughout the city were marked by search-and-rescue crews looking for victims of Hurricane Katrina.



the immediate aftermath of the hurricane. Eula had been relocated to Austin, Texas. Maria began interviewing Eula and fifty other current and former New Orleans residents for what would become a collective work called *Not Meant to Live Like This: Weathering the Storm of Our Lives in New Orleans*.⁴²

While an increasing number of authors and researchers do listen to people in poverty to inform their work, people in situations of the most persistent poverty rarely dare to express their thoughts without the right conditions. Literature documenting the words of people in poverty must be anchored in projects that create the conditions for them to choose exactly how they want their voices to emerge. Sometimes people say things they regret or feel that their words are twisted or taken out of context. When a person in extreme poverty is interviewed by researchers or journalists, the person may feel obliged to tell them what they want to hear.

Maria and her co-authors, however, had a long pre-existing commitment to one another before they ever began writing *Not Meant To Live*

42. Maria Victoire, M.G. Olson, and Karen Stornelli (editors), *Not Meant to Live Like This: Weathering the Storm of Our Lives in New Orleans*, Landover, MD: ATD Fourth World, 2012.



Ms Maria Victoire (at left) visits Ms Eula Collins (second from left) and members of her family in Arkansas, where they were sent after being displaced from New Orleans.

Like This. Their relationship of trust assured Eula and the other co-authors that they could speak openly and that they would choose together how to express themselves. This process shows the importance of “purposeful knowledge” in the Merging Knowledge approach.⁴³ When accounts of people in poverty are written, the subjects themselves must be allowed to shape the work in the context of solidarity and a common refusal to accept injustice.

What makes *Not Meant to Live Like This* unique, even more than the passages about the hurricane itself, are the descriptions of the shared history in neighbourhoods that have now been washed away forever. Time and again, very low-income neighbourhoods are erased, sometimes by natural disasters, and sometimes by public construction projects. This book bears witness to the fabric of those neighbourhoods in New Orleans: moments of joy and “letting the good times roll”⁴⁴ times of penury

43. The Merging Knowledge approach is introduced in *Artisans of Peace Overcoming Poverty – Volume 1*, Chapter 3.

44. “Let the good times roll” is an expression from Cajun Louisiana culture conveying a joyous approach to life.

and anguish, and layers of solidarity when neighbours came together to support one another.

Patricia Denson, who used to work at a supermarket, is one of the book's co-authors and the mother of seven children. While she was able to return to New Orleans after the hurricane, she says, "Since Katrina, we have more struggles." Following the storm, she lost her job and she and her husband have been struggling to get by on his earnings alone. Patricia babysits for many of her grandchildren to allow their parents to work long hours.

Another co-author, Barbara Risin, recalls struggles long before the hurricane, as well as the way that neighbourhood residents stuck by one another over the years: "All my life was a struggle. When my husband died, I didn't know how I was going to make it. The house that I was staying in at the time — the rent was high and I couldn't pay it. I had to look for another house. I told the people in the neighbourhood about it. Somebody was moving out of this cheaper house that night. Before those people could get their furniture out of that house, the people in the neighbourhood had that house ready for me to move into. They helped me to start all over again. That was how it was in that neighbourhood. Neighbours helped each other. That was how it was. If I had, you had. Sometimes someone couldn't pay their rent. We would get together, cook, and then we would sell food to the longshoremen to help that person pay the rent. [...] Some

Ms Sylvia Miller,
a co-author of
*Not Meant to
Live Like This*,
says, "Our book
is to let the world
know about our
struggles, our
suffering, and
the strength we
need to raise our
families."



people, they don't understand what the [ATD Fourth World] Movement is about. It is against poverty. It is about trying to get something started, but you have to get off your butt and get up and help. I have seen the changes in my life because, through the Movement, I found out that it is not only me. Being involved made me know more and more what it meant. So I am trying to tell other people: if you stop and listen, you learn, like I did. We want to go to the White House and tell the President what we need. Go sit across the table and tell him what is cooking in the pot, and tell him we want some of that too."

Co-author Thomas "Long Boy" Davis was born in 1949. He remembers how united his neighbourhood was at the time, and how his mother would cook and share meals with everyone passing by: "Everybody was like family. If one person cooked, everybody ate. When my momma cooked, she cooked for everybody. Anybody needed anything, she was there." Starting at age 15, he worked carrying the *flambeaux*⁴⁵ in Mardi Gras parades. He later worked in construction pouring cement, but explains, "It was up and down. There wasn't enough work. Not much work then, and none at all now. When your child would come to you and say, 'I want that', and you can't do that, it takes something out of you." A father of eight, Thomas has years of experience crabbing and catching shrimp, and has often shared the fruits of his labour with neighbours.

Maria Sandvik, an ATD volunteer and co-author, describes what she sees as one of the hardest parts of extreme poverty in New Orleans and elsewhere in the United States:

I've seen the parents I know here protect their families from violence around them [although] they are left powerless in so many ways. Living in constant fear for the well-being of your loved ones is an ongoing torment that people living in persistent poverty face. People recognise the risks and are at a loss for how to avoid the dangers. They have a sense of being powerless to avoid unnecessary hardships, able only to prepare to struggle through them. There is a saying here that "knowledge is power". But the injustice faced by those in persistent poverty is that they have the knowledge — about how to strengthen their community, about how to include others, and about

45. Heavy blazing torches carried as a beacon for parade-goers to better enjoy the spectacle of night-time festivities.

Ms Patricia Denson says, "Since Katrina, we have more struggles."



Ms Barbara Risin (at left) made sure that the book recounts the solidarity that existed in the neighbourhoods that Hurricane Katrina destroyed.

Mr Thomas Davis speaks of how bad it feels not to be able to provide well for one's children.



the fact that they are unfairly left at higher risks for hardship and danger than others in our society — but even having this knowledge and understanding of reality doesn't allow them to make the needed changes in their lives and in our society. The knowledge is there, but people remain powerless.

That is where ATD Fourth World plays a role. We continue to create safe spaces and trusting relationships where people who have an experience of persistent poverty learn and practise ways to express themselves. They speak about their knowledge, wisdom, hopes, and experiences. Then they discuss those ideas with others who are also looking for solutions. I've had people tell me they don't know what could stop the high rate of shootings in their communities. We can't leave it there. We can look for solutions together with the people who are the most at risk of being hurt. When they are involved, peace can come for them and for the wider community.

Not Meant to Live Like This illustrates the rich social fabric that existed within the most impoverished communities of New Orleans. We see the coin laundry, always a place where people could talk and laugh together, despite the heartache of everyday life. These were communities where neighbours still kept an eye on one another's children and cooked meals for a friend going through rough times. Mutual support that has become rare in well-to-do neighbourhoods was a bedrock of daily life as neighbours pitched in to raise money for funerals and to prevent evictions.

This close-knit New Orleans community and others like it are now gone forever. But Patricia, Barbara, Thomas, Maria, and their co-authors have brought the joys and hardships of their history to life for future generations. They spoke about their lives, not only to remember the past, but also to ensure that what they lived through and how they carried their burdens might inform choices we make tomorrow. The ways they built community against all odds can encourage others in their efforts to work towards a positive future. The book they wrote has already inspired our members in Haiti, who also experienced a natural disaster that devastated their efforts to build supportive neighbourhoods despite extreme poverty. They too are now writing collectively about their neighbourhoods before and since the 2010 earthquake. Even amid ruins, remembering people and places in this way can shape our common future.



Ms Maria Sandvik, centre, says that even with knowledge, people can remain powerless against poverty. Here, she brought songbooks on a visit to Ms Eula Collins and her family, who found shelter in Arkansas after the hurricane.



Part of the writing process for *Not Meant to Live Like This* involved the Playback Theater troupe interpreting and “playing back” the authors’ experiences to them.

Sharing a Common History Never Understood or Documented: Swiss Citizens Without Names

This is not just about victims and perpetrators. It involves every one of us, because looking away is also a way of taking action.

— Swiss Justice Minister Simonetta Sommaruga, speaking about the way Switzerland treated children in poverty

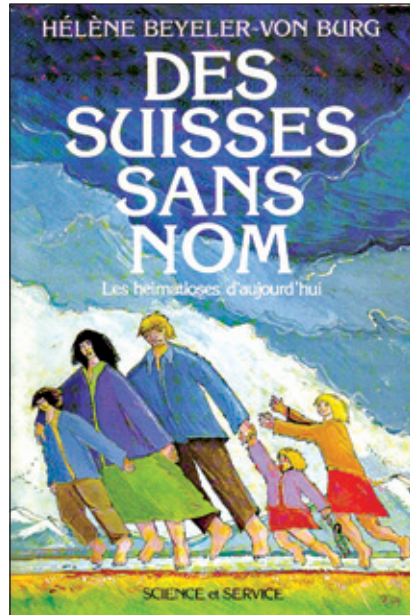
One of the many tragedies that can split families apart is when parents lose legal custody of their children for no reason other than their extreme poverty. This continues to be the case in many countries,⁴⁶ and is something for which the government of Switzerland has recently made an official apology. From the 1800s until 1981, tens of thousands of Swiss children put into foster care were required to work for a living, often on farms.⁴⁷ It was usually on Sundays, as soon as church services were over, that these children were auctioned off to whoever would house them for the lowest fostering allowance. A man who was auctioned like this says he spent his childhood working in a stable from 4 am to 10 pm every day. He adds, “I felt guilty for being alive. Whenever we were questioned, we were to answer only ‘yes’ or ‘no’ and if our answer was wrong, we knew we’d be whipped.”

One of the men who spoke about his experience being raised as a child labourer said, “There was a housemaid who always tried to protect me so that I would be hurt as little as possible. One day, she wasn’t there any more. I tried to find out where she had gone, and why. That’s when someone told me, ‘She was your mother.’ Because she had been an unwed mother, the church and the township made her sign a paper promising that she would never say she was my mother. That was the price she had to pay to be near me.” These people who were ripped from their parents, and whose childhoods were forever lost, were objectified in every sense of the word. Switzerland, which keeps a precise census of all its cattle, has no idea exactly how many children were auctioned off in this way.

46. See Diana Skelton and Valérie Brunner, *How Poverty Separates Parents and Children: A Challenge to Human Rights*, ATD Fourth World, 2004.

47. Isabelle Eichenberger, “Recognising Switzerland’s ‘Slave Children’”, *SwissInfo*, 9 April 2013.

In 1984, ATD Fourth World published *Des Suisses sans noms* [Swiss People Without Names] about the ways people in poverty were treated by social services.



A press release from the Swiss Department of Federal Justice and Police explains how this happened:

Until 1981, in Switzerland, children and young people were unilaterally placed in homes, institutions, or farms, without a court mandate, without their own or their parents' consent, and often with the agreement of churches. This was done because they were poor, born out of wedlock, living in difficult family circumstances, or considered to be "difficult", unruly, or uncooperative. Many of these young people were subjected to violence that continues to mark their lives today. Many children and young people who were unilaterally placed this way were exploited for farm labour, or abused physically and psychologically in homes and reform schools. Others were confined in psychiatric asylums or prisons with no possibility of legal recourse. Instances of forced sterilisation were also found, as well as situations of children forcibly removed from their parents to be given up for adoption.

In April 2013, the Swiss government apologised to the people victimised by these coercion policies. Justice Minister Simonetta Sommaruga

(who served as the nation's president in 2015) stated in a formal ceremony, "You are in no way at fault for what you underwent. [...] In the name of the Swiss government, sincerely and from the bottom of my heart, I ask your forgiveness for the suffering inflicted on you." What is striking in this apology is the acknowledgement that suffering abuse — whether from an individual or from institutionalised mistreatment — tends to make the victim feel responsible and at fault. The tragedy of coercive foster care placement was not acknowledged until its victims dared to speak up. Children whose sense of identity had been ravaged by officially sanctioned abuse eventually grew up and met others who had shared their fate. Finally understanding the scope of their treatment by social service agencies, they realised that they were not to blame and found the courage to protest this injustice.

For people to reclaim their identity and to ask for recognition of the injustice they were subjected to, a key element was their coming to understand their own history. Today Switzerland is considered an affluent country with a long history of democracy. However, there as elsewhere, historians have generally ignored the downtrodden and excluded. In fact, poverty, eviction, exile, and famine have been constant and little-known realities throughout Swiss history. Traces of people living in poverty are almost completely hidden, but they do exist. At least since the Middle Ages, there is evidence of devastating poverty and exclusion within the Swiss population; but because the most disadvantaged people have never had a voice, the memory of them exists only in descriptions left by their privileged contemporaries.

As a result of efforts to document the more recent experiences of extreme poverty in Switzerland, we now have historical records written by these people themselves. Augusta Savary, a member of ATD Fourth World, wrote:

I never knew my mother. I don't even know where I lived when I was a baby. I do know that my mother was in prison and that she killed herself. At the age of 35, she set fire to her bed and died of asphyxiation. I must have been 1 or 2 years old when it happened. I don't know why my mother was in prison. I don't want my child not to know where he comes from! I never met my father until 1973, just a month before he died. My father was in a hospice, already old

Mrs Augusta Savary,
shown here in 1985,
insisted that every child
deserves to know where
he or she came from.



and ill. He didn't talk much. I know so little about him: only that he was a servant in the countryside. I have two sisters and a brother. We were sent to live with farming families. There was a lot of work to do. When I left school, at age 15, I was sent to be a servant on another farm. [...] They sent me away as fast as possible when they found out I was pregnant. The father never recognised his son. He was killed in an accident soon after I gave birth. My son was born in 1956. After he was born, my legal guardian wanted me to go back to work. They didn't want to let me keep my child. He was sent to a family that took care of him but told him I was no good. Everything I earned was taken for them to raise him. [On another farm,] I had to do the housework and work in the fields too, from practically 6 am to 11 pm. I was doing two kinds of work at once: mucking out the manure of forty pigs, carting crates of potatoes that weighed thirty or forty kilos, making hay, and also washing the clothes, scrubbing the house, everything. I had to do men's work because the hired help didn't stay — they found it too hard. In the three years I spent there, a dozen of them came and went! The boss would beat us. We had to eat spoiled food. It wasn't good at all, but we had to eat it. The small salary I earned was sent directly to my guardian for my son. I had nothing. I couldn't go to a doctor or dentist, and I never

had time off. Yes, I did! Once I ran away, for two weeks, hitch-hiking! So the boss sent out a search party and when the police found me, they put me in jail. [...] People will hate us until the day we die.

When people do not know their personal and collective identity, their very lives have been denied. One historian has described Swiss people living in poverty as isolated cases on the margins of society. Blaming them for their suffering, he calls them “difficult social cases, hard to rehabilitate, offenders, unwilling to work, [and] drug addicts, who continue to rely on public and private assistance”.⁴⁸ Categorized in this way by everyone around them, how could people develop a strong sense of their own identity? Many of them came to believe what they had heard their whole lives: that they were hated and inferior to others.

In 1965, ATD Fourth World began working in Switzerland. This became an opportunity for people living in extreme poverty to come together to examine their past and demand recognition. Volunteers living among families in poverty wrote every day what they learned from them. As they shared moments of joy and of mourning, the families would ask: “Why were our parents poor? I don’t even know where they were buried. I don’t know where my children are; they were taken from me. It’s like a black hole eating up my life.”

Gradually, these people in poverty took on an active role in the process of discovering their personal history and examining their collective experiences. Previously, they had never been given recognition anywhere. This was what caused them the most pain: never being listened to, taken seriously, or understood. Building an understanding of who they were and where they came from became a collaborative project through which they overcame their isolation and loneliness. They came together for People’s University sessions. Those who knew how to write helped those who did not. Some ATD members visited people with limited mobility to interview them. Some of the people interviewed would immediately tear up notes about what they had said, insisting, “It’s pointless; no one will believe us. People will only judge us even more harshly.” They knew the risks: not only of being called liars, but also of losing any support from the very social services that had harmed their childhoods. Despite such doubts

48. Pierre Ducrey, *La Nouvelle histoire de la Suisse et des Suisses*, Lausanne: Payot-Lausanne Editions, 1986.



In 1985, at a People's University session held in a participant's kitchen, people speak about having been put in foster care because of poverty.



and fears, their collaboration continued. Some participants even contributed confidential reports that had been written about them. In 1984, their work was published as a book entitled *Des Suisses sans nom* [Swiss People Without Names].⁴⁹ The book used pseudonyms to protect each person who contributed. Augusta Savary, quoted above and now deceased, was one of the contributors, under the name “Rosemarie Chevalier”. More than thirty years later, her family is now proud of having her true name associated with this book.

Fears of disbelief and even of retribution were not unfounded. In fact, the first members of ATD Fourth World who spoke on television of their treatment were harassed and accused of lying and bringing shame on their communities. Some were evicted from their homes or confronted with petitions asking them to leave town. In 1974, one of those whose

49. Hélène Beyeler-von Burg, *Des Suisses sans nom: Les Heimatlosen d'aujourd'hui*, Pierrelaye, France: Editions Science et Service, 1984.



A sketch by Jeanpierre Beyeler from the book *Des Suisses sans nom* [Swiss People Without Names].

childhood was marked by this treatment, Arthur Honegger, published a book about his and other children's experiences: *Gestohlene Seelen* [Stolen Souls].⁵⁰ As a child, he was repeatedly beaten, prodded with a pitchfork, and locked for days in a pigsty. He says, however, "The hardest part wasn't all the beatings. It was the fact that no one ever spoke to me. If I asked a question, there was simply no response at all."⁵¹ Between 1979 and her death in 2004, Louise Buchard-Molteni went on repeated hunger strikes calling for the state to open the files kept about all these children so that researchers — and, most important, people whose family history had been sealed — could have access to this part of Swiss history. In 1995, she too published a book detailing the ways she and others were mistreated in different orphanages.⁵² She said: "The authorities massacred our childhoods and our youth. [...] I would sooner die of hunger than of silence." Her

50. Lotty Wohlwend with Arthur Honegger, *Gestohlene Seelen*, Frauenfeld, Switzerland: Oreli Füssli AG, 1974.

51. Renat Künzi, "La souffrance des enfants placés de force", *Swiss Info*, 28 February 2004.

52. Louise Buchard-Molteni, *Le tour de Suisse en cage: L'enfance volée de Louise*, Lausanne, Switzerland: Editions d'en bas, 2015 (reprint).

book, *Le Tour de Suisse en Cage* [Touring Switzerland in a Cage], helped other victims of mistreatment to feel less isolated. However, it was not until her death in 2004 that journalists and historians began looking into the issues she had raised. In 2009, the Stolen Childhoods organisation mounted an exhibition, “Swiss Contract Children Speak Out”, based on interviews with three hundred people who had been forcibly removed from their parents. Curated by Jacqueline Häusler, the exhibition toured the country. After years of protests, the publicity generated by this exhibition finally prompted formal apologies from the governments of five of the twenty-six Swiss administrative districts.

Through organisations, and echoed by historians and journalists, an increasing number of people have come forward to speak of their deeply buried memories. At the April 2013 ceremony in Berne, Rosemary Jost said:

I couldn't get rid of this time of horror. I couldn't speak to a soul about my past because I was in constant fear that it could all begin again. [...] The words I heard again and again, words forever drilled into me were, "No good will come of you, you're a good-for-nothing." [...] Of course I had to shut up or else I was beaten, but even when I kept my mouth shut, the blows were there. As children who were removed from our families this way, we were left to our suffering, deprived of dignity and of self-confidence even though others knew exactly what we went through. I've often wondered why no one helped us. So many people knew our fate and kept silent, but why? Were we really worse than everyone else?

Finally daring to speak out about their past, people named atrocities, crimes, torture, and slavery. They also spoke of their refusal to remain silent, of their long wait for the state to take action, and of the right to have their knowledge recognised so that this would never happen again.

Ms Sommaruga, who is a Swiss federal councillor in addition to being the justice minister, says:

No longer can we continue to look away. [...] I cannot forget one woman's testimony. She told us that still today she is seized by a feeling of being choked and oppressed whenever she passes through the village where so many things happened. Not because of the



Mr Jean-Marc Schafer shows his mother a photo album about his life. When she lost custody of him because of the Swiss policy of coercing parents to give up their children, he grew up being sent from one foster home to another.

suffering inflicted on her, but because no one in the entire village ever asked her what would become of her, because no one wanted to know how she was, how she felt. This is not just about victims and perpetrators. It involves every one of us, because looking away is also a way of taking action.

The formal apologies from the federal council and others — districts, cities, the Swiss farming union, social institutions, and churches — have been followed up by concrete commitments. People are now allowed access to files kept about them, and administrations are banned from destroying these files. An ombudsperson has been named to gather testimonies, grievances, and requests. And, finally, the government has initiated detailed historical work, proceedings towards reparations, and the drafting of new legal measures to prevent similar situations. These actions demonstrate a genuine determination to learn from history.

However, despite the Swiss authorities' real contrition and attempts at reform, we continue to see other forms of violence perpetrated against

the most disadvantaged people. A member of ATD Fourth World, Nelly Schenker, quotes a young mother she knows as saying: “I gave birth by caesarian section and before I even came out of the anaesthesia, they had found a foster family to place my baby with.” Nelly adds, “Still today, they take our children away only because we are poor.” While the foster-care system can be essential for protecting children in situations of crisis, in many cases children are removed from loving and responsible parents, as described by one woman:

Fourteen years of my life were destroyed because from age 7 to age 21, I was sent from one institution to another. [...] Treating me this way was just their revenge against my father who unfortunately drank. But he always fed us properly and sent us to school. [...] The final institution I lived in was a detention centre even though I had not committed a crime. We were never told we were guilty of any crime, and there was no court where we could appeal our internment. When girls in an institution get pregnant, they take away your children and force you to have your tubes tied. Taking a child from its mother is like stealing her soul. It's an abominable crime without a name, a crime against humanity.

She describes her youth as “destroyed” because of foster care.

A young man, age 22, expresses the same heartache at his situation. Put into foster care early in his childhood, he was given long-term treatment with psychiatric medications for hyperactivity. Today, because of what he thinks is the result of inappropriate medication, he has been placed in an institution for people with mental illness. They are required to do makeshift work and have no hope of getting training. He fears the future and is frustrated that no one has any ambition for him. He says, “I feel like I’m being treated more and more like a child each day.” Others say that medications they were given in foster care were not only inappropriate but were given specifically to test pharmaceuticals. Gerald Schmutz, who is researching the records about his past in coercive foster care, was one of the children used as subjects in medical experimentation.

In order to follow through on its promises of reform, the Swiss government needs to do more than change the policies described by those who finally spoke out. Social scientists and policymakers have analysed what went wrong and tried to fix it. However, people who live in extreme



President Simonetta Sommaruga, left, and Mrs Nelly Schenker in Berne in 2015. Mrs Schenker said, “You are the first president who is doing things not *for* us in poverty, but *with* us.”

poverty today are still victimised by unilateral decisions to remove custody of their children, even though their children are no longer required to work as farm labourers. One policy has changed, but to break the cycle of damaging family separations, people in poverty should be consulted directly.

Nelly Schenker is part of a group of ATD Fourth World members called “Researchers of History for Our Children’s Future”. In November 2015, this group met with Luzius Mader, deputy director of the Swiss federal justice department. Since 2013, Mr Mader has been coordinating a study about “the use of coercion” by social service agencies. The goal of the study is to assign responsibility for making reparations to victims of this coercion. ATD Fourth World told Mr Mader that in many cases poverty was — and continues to be — the only reason for children to be put in foster care. This question has also been raised by Olivier Baud, secretary-general of Geneva’s public department for youth. Speaking to adults who were victims of coercive foster care placements as children, he said: “You were in that situation only because your families were poor.

[...] I am wondering whether still today poverty is a reason for some foster care placements.”

A new page of history is being written in Switzerland, a country that has always taken great pride in its democracy. By taking responsibility for its past, the country is beginning to live up to the ideal stated in its Constitution: “The strength of the community is measured by the well-being of its weakest members.”

History books have generally ignored people in poverty, consigning their stories to oblivion. Even when records have been kept about what was done to people in poverty, their stories and their thoughts are usually missing. It is not easy to include the disenfranchised in writing history. It requires a commitment to consult people involved in that history, people whose lives are marked by the injustice of hunger, ignorance, and violence. All people should be able to talk freely about what they carry within them



Members of the ATD Fourth World group “Researchers of History for Our Children’s Future” stand outside Switzerland’s Federal Palace in Berne after a meeting with Mr Luzius Mader, coordinator of a study about the use of coercion by social service agencies.

and what they feel is most special. For this reason, ATD Fourth World has, since its founding, initiated projects not only about basic schooling, but also about more extensive knowledge and culture, especially in places that are most lacking in access to art and education. Like everyone else, people living in poverty aspire to learn, to acquire professional training, to study at universities, to create art and music, and to develop their means of expression. In fulfilling these aspirations, they can contribute to recording world history.

Incomplete historical memory can incite conflict and hatred, locking people into power struggles. The Joseph Wresinski Centre is a cornerstone in the work of enriching our understanding of history. Its archives enable people in different segments of society who know nothing of one another to strive towards peace by looking into one another's eyes and recognising the other person's inalienable dignity.

5

The Violence of Poverty and the Search for Peace

Insecurity and violence are overriding concerns for governments, international institutions, and civil society internationally. Our members in every part of the world share this vital concern: “Our lives are made up of violence: physical violence and that of being denied the fundamental rights of every human being. Material deprivation reduces us to mere survival; the extreme insecurity of poverty can cause our families to break apart; exploitation robs our children, and us as adults, of our potential to develop and work towards the future. Humiliation, exclusion, and contempt reach a point at which we are not even recognised as human beings.”⁵³

As statisticians and journalists debate whether violence is on the rise or not, people in poverty everywhere we work describe a hidden underbelly of violence that dominates their entire existence.

This is the violence of being born at high risk for ill health and with no access to health care.

This is the violence of telling a child on his first day at school that he is doomed to fail.

This is the violence of an employer abusing a woman in desperate need of work.

This is the violence of treating a man like an animal and telling him he is worthless.

This is the violence of myriad indignities and humiliations heaped upon homeless families who are reduced to scavenging from rubbish dumps to survive, their children often taken from them by the cruelty of street life, and their health ravaged by their circumstances.

This is the violence of enduring neglect or harassment from the police.

53. Anne-Claire Brand and Beatriz Monje Barón, *Extreme Poverty Is Violence – Breaking the Silence – Searching for Peace*, Vauréal, France: Revue Quart Monde Publications, 2012, Part 2.



“When terrible things happen, I must keep quiet. But deep in my guts, I am seething.” (Painting by Mr D’Ange Rambelo, an artist and a member of ATD Fourth World in Madagascar.)

This is the violence of having no recourse within criminal justice systems.

This is the violence of being repeatedly evicted from homes and having to raise families in places where no one chooses to live.

The many different ways in which people in poverty experience violence begin with its physical impact. Whether a country is war-torn or at peace, in low-income neighbourhoods violent deaths are more frequent. As the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States is highlighting, sometimes this violence may come from the authorities themselves, who are more likely to arrest and shoot people who live in low-income communities or who face racial discrimination. Another aspect is the violence that women suffer when unwanted sex is the only way to feed their children.

But when people in poverty say that “poverty is violence”, they are also speaking of the violent force they feel subjected to when they are caught in situations of humiliation and injustice. This is the violence of being humiliated by a school headmaster in South America who labelled a child

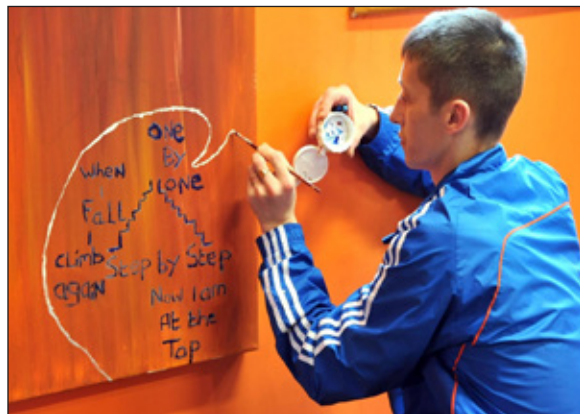
“slow” from day one, eventually telling the mother, “Your son will just be a drunkard like his father. He should drop out.” The violence of poverty is also the injustice of having no way to afford medical care for a loved one. In 2013, one of our members in the United States was working with a sanitation crew collecting rubbish from a hospital when he was accidentally stuck by a used syringe that infected him with a virus. When he became feverish, the same hospital turned him away because he had no health insurance. He died two days later.

People in poverty experience life as a constant assault that threatens to defeat them at every turn, leaving them traumatised and humiliated for not being able to protect their family members. While scars from this hidden violence are less visible than those left by physical violence, they can be equally damaging.

In poverty, there's no hope, and every morning when you wake up, it's the same thing again — worrying about today's meal. Then, you don't know where tomorrow's meal is coming from, and you're looking at your kids hungry and you're helpless to do anything for them. And then when the next day comes again, the whole thing just begins all over. I think that's why people in poverty die so young — it's every single day. You know that even if you get them through that day, the whole thing begins again the next day, and the next day and the next day. There's no hope at the end of it.

— Keith McAnaspie, Ireland

“When I fall, I climb again, step by step, one by one. Now I am at the top,” says Mr Keith McAnaspie of his painting at a 2011 ATD Fourth World seminar in the United Kingdom, “Poverty Is Violence: Speak Out for Peace”.





Mr Pape Beyrouba Diop (at right) describes how poverty can kill a person's spirit.

Nothing is safe where poor people live. Every day you come home, you see your child, and someone has thrown a stone at his head. You ask, "Who did this?" You fight, you shout insults. Imagine living like this: in poverty and insecurity and without peace. Well, you are already dead. All poor people are nearly the living dead. They walk around, but their spirits have died. That's what makes a lot of young people leave their homes. [...And] if you're living in the streets, you're not living in peace. People insult you and you are subjected to a lot of things. Out in the streets, it's difficult for a child to survive because the parents are always going to have in their minds that their child is homeless. The child will, too. There will be hate, a lot of hate, and little by little the hate is going to spread from the children to the parents and from the parents to the children.

— Pape Beyrouba Diop, Senegal

For centuries now, people in extreme poverty have been pushed aside or abandoned, both in times of crisis and in times of progress. Though crises can hit them the most harshly, they are often forgotten by relief efforts. Because the realities of their daily lives are not well known or understood, they are pushed aside. Even when a nation is not at war, people in poverty do not know peace.

In Guatemala, the Ivory Coast, Ireland, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Peru, and other nations that have ended civil wars or stopped terrorist practices, people living in poverty are survivors whose families

Ms Edilberta Bejar Huaman, who lives in poverty in Peru, says, “Other people look at us like enemies.” Even after a period of terrorism or armed conflict ends, people in poverty are still treated with suspicion.



were already oppressed by the burdens of daily life before their countries were torn apart. Even when weapons were laid down and peace agreements negotiated, the violence of extreme poverty continued. For them, life remains a fight against poverty that is as deadly as battles fought with guns. They feel that their countries are not yet at peace and that a hidden war continues.

A report by the World Health Organization concurs. It describes extreme poverty as “the world’s most ruthless killer and the greatest cause of suffering on earth”.⁵⁴ Even in countries that are considered to be at peace and well governed, the inequality between rich and poor is enormous. Do we consider a country to be at peace in the absence of armed conflict? Do we consider a neighbourhood to be at peace when crime rates drop? As much as any community might strive towards peace, our world knows very little about what true peace might look like.

During crises and amid fears of mounting violence, policymakers often ask experts to conduct studies. These studies abound: on the complexity of violence, on violence prevention, on urban violence, on violence and health, on violence and gender, on gang violence, and on violence in schools. These studies may be well researched and well intentioned, but they lack the expertise of people living in poverty. People who live amid daily violence know it intimately. They understand how and why certain situations can escalate. In addition to knowing what it is like to live with

54. World Health Organization, *The World Health Report 1995: Bridging the Gaps*.



“They Ignore Us” is one in a series of paintings by Mr Guillermo Diaz Linares, a Fourth World Volunteer Corps member. The series was inspired by ATD’s participatory research on the violence of poverty. About this painting, Guillermo says, “The simple fact of working in the fields and wearing traditional clothing makes people push us aside. They treat us like animals. You have to have courage and to stay together until you find the light to see a different world.”

violence every day, people in poverty know ways to resist violence and are on the front lines in the search for peace.

The one natural resource that has been continuously ignored is the unique knowledge of people who live in extreme poverty. This is both wrong and counterproductive, because people who are often judged to be “the problem” cannot identify with studies and policies that focus only on their perceived deficits and that fail to consider their aspirations and potential contributions. How can a person benefit from a “violence prevention” programme that was designed without taking that person’s experience and thinking into account? Studies that analyse problems and highlight what is lacking cannot foster solidarity between the poor and the non-poor. Solidarity and mutual recognition cannot be top-down. These studies lead to policies that end up creating programmes specifically for the poor, maintaining them in a category apart, and preventing them from imagining and building a future together with others.

People in Poverty Lead Research into Violence and Peace

In the most isolated and abandoned villages and in inner-city neighbourhoods, people everywhere ask:

- Why do the security measures meant to protect some people worsen the situation for others? Just what kind of security are others searching for?
- Why does no one see that it is despair that can push our teenagers to violence?
- Why does no one recognise how much we do to prevent young people from hardening their hearts on a path of revenge and hatred?

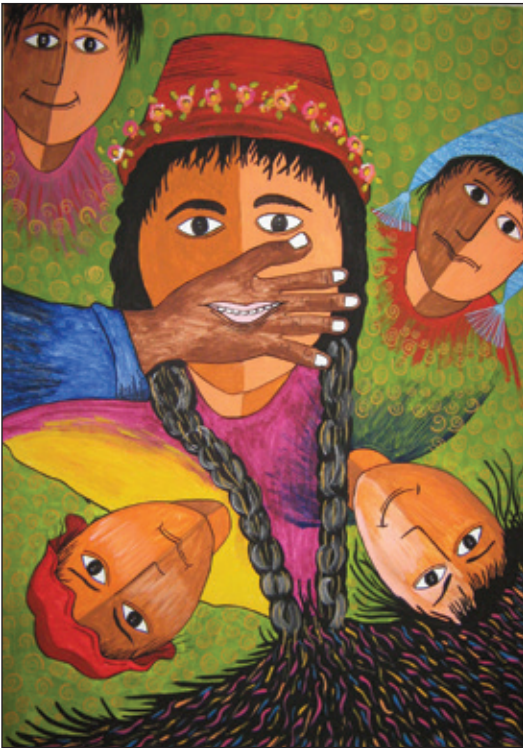
In 2007, for the 20th anniversary of the World Day for Overcoming Poverty, ATD Fourth World launched an international campaign called “Overcoming Poverty, a Path to Peace”. This campaign highlighted how important peace is to people living in extreme poverty in every country. We saw that they increasingly became the victims of violence; and we saw that other people considered this acceptable. That led us to recognise the urgent need to make a link between peace and the violence of extreme poverty, and we consequently developed a three-year participatory action

Atlanta, Georgia, in 2007: Ms Charmaine Russell (at left) collects signatures in support of the international campaign, “Overcoming Poverty, a Path to Peace”, during the United States Social Forum.





World Day for Overcoming Poverty in 2007 at Trocadero Plaza in Paris.



"Breaking the Silence", painted by Mr Guillermo Diaz Linares. He says, "The poorest people have no voice or vote. We do not know how to defend ourselves. We fear speaking with teachers and other people. If we speak Quechua, not Spanish, they look at us differently. They call us peasants and we can't answer back. We are always humiliated."

research project on this question. Before even naming the issue that the research would explore, we had to create conditions that would make it possible for people to speak about such a sensitive question, one that touches lives intimately. Many of the people who have endured the most painful situations have long been locked into silence. They know well that if their words displease people in authority, they risk eviction, dismissal from work, or other reprisals, for both themselves and their loved ones. People in poverty cannot end the silence alone. We needed a collective, sustained effort to enable each person to speak out.

From the beginning, a diverse group guided our research. Activists, allies, volunteers, and academics from five continents collaborated to design the project together. For once, people in poverty were not the subjects of other people's research, but the actors. On an equal footing, they helped determine which questions were important to explore; for example:

- What is violence? When does injustice feel like violence?
- How have we experienced violence? How does it affect us and our loved ones?
- What do we try to do to find solutions for the cycle of violence?

No one put anyone else under a microscope. It was up to each person — whether having had no formal education or years of academic training — to develop an analysis of their own experiences and knowledge, to make proposals, and to draw conclusions.

One of the first challenges the group faced was that people in poverty often felt locked into silence. To end this silence, the group determined that it was crucial to maintain a link between violence and peace. Speaking about peace without first having been able to give voice to violent suffering would ring hollow. Speaking about violence without also uncovering the many hidden ways that people in extreme poverty strive to create peace would continue to trap them in the stereotype of “the violent poor”.

The persistence of that stereotype blinds many people to reality. The very vocabulary often used to discuss poverty warps our thinking. Terms such as “thugs”, “gangs”, or “addicts” perniciously colour our thoughts by portraying human beings as one-dimensional walking dangers. This societal bias also makes it particularly challenging for people struggling to

resist poverty to speak about the violence they experience. They know that their very existence is considered a threat to the security and prosperity of others. Even the most well-intentioned world leaders have long used threats of violence by the poor to urge change, often referring to poverty as “a powder keg”. Sociologist Herbert Gans of Columbia University details a long history of social labelling of people in poverty as a “deviant, defiant, dangerous ‘underclass’ or [as] ‘undeserving poor’”:

The real fears that safety threats evoke easily spread to the non-criminal poor. Where homeless people and panhandlers proliferate, the better-off perceive begging and acting-out (misuses of their public space) as threats — even if the danger is often imagined, since the homeless are largely passive, and beggars rarely attack their benefactors. Since beggars generally outnumber criminals, a possible threat from the latter thus turns into a more visible imagined threat from the former. Vagabonds and tramps evoked similar responses in the rural communities of past centuries.⁵⁵

Even when young people and adults living in extreme poverty lack access to information and media, they know very well when they are feared. They also know that no one sees their efforts to reach out to one another, to build solidarity, and to search for peace. Every day, they see gated communities built to keep them at bay, public spaces from which they are banished, and police who may harass them based only on their appearance. They know that they are assumed to be a source of violence.

Designing Research Together

Because the leadership of our research group included people who knew first-hand what it means to be victimised by this stereotype, they named the project “Extreme Poverty Is Violence – Breaking the Silence – Searching for Peace”. These three declarations, inseparably linked, reflect the complexity of addressing this issue and the ways it touches every aspect of our lives together, poor and non-poor. We had to find an approach

55. Herbert J. Gans, “Violence and Poverty: Images and realities of the ‘underclass’”, excerpted from *The War Against the Poor: the Underclass and Antipoverty Policy*, New York: Basic Books, 1995.

Honduras: Doña Xiomara Mejía, shown here with some of her grandchildren in front of her home, was among a thousand people in twenty-five countries who contributed to ATD's work on the violence of poverty.



that would enable everyone to participate. The process we used to build an environment of trust and equality among participants was based on the principles of the Merging Knowledge method, which enables people whose knowledge is from personal experience to engage on an equal footing in long-term collaboration with people whose knowledge is academic.⁵⁶ Throughout the research project, participants had opportunities to express themselves through music and visual arts. In one of the research seminars, two participants who are talented musicians — Jason French and Dann Kenningham — kept their instruments handy. Whenever the participants fell into an emotionally heavy silence, the two played music until the others were ready to speak. After another of the research seminars, Guillermo Diaz Linares, who had been present, painted nine works depicting what others had said.

More than a thousand people participated in the project in Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Canada, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, France, Germany, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Ireland, the Ivory Coast, Kenya, Lebanon, Madagascar, Peru, the Philippines, the Republic of Mauritius, Rwanda, Senegal, Spain,

56. To learn more about Merging Knowledge, see *Volume 1 of Artisans of Peace Overcoming Poverty*, Part III.

Switzerland, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Vietnam. In open-ended interviews and small discussion groups, participants spoke to one another about specific acts of violence that victimised them or their loved ones, and about ways that they feel subjected to the violence of poverty. They spoke about how this affects them, and about how they try to cope with violence, to resist it, and to prevent it.

In Haiti, where this project began, the leadership group's main concern was the silence that imprisons people. A Haitian man living in poverty said, "When terrible things happen here, I must keep quiet. But deep in my guts, I am seething." In addition to fearing reprisals if they speak out, people in poverty sometimes also fear the harm their words may cause others. If accusing a neighbour of a violent crime meant that the neighbour's family would lose their breadwinner and go hungry, some of our members felt they could not in good conscience go to the authorities. In order to respect this choice, the leadership group went to great lengths to create a context that would reassure people that their words here would do no harm. Participants met in small groups or even in pairs. In order to avoid anyone feeling humiliated if a discussion were to grow confrontational, the speaking order was predetermined. No one was to judge anyone else's words. Everyone had several opportunities to speak, so they could add to the discussion after hearing what the others had to say.

This participatory action research, conducted from 2009 to 2011, concluded in January 2012 with a colloquium in three stages:

- First, fifty of the activists, allies, and volunteers who participated in this work in seventeen countries reviewed and explored the knowledge generated over three years.
- They were then joined by twenty-five academics and professionals from a variety of institutions for a dialogue on the relationship between extreme poverty, violence, and peace.
- The colloquium concluded with a day-long public event to disseminate the results to 450 people at UNESCO House in Paris. This event included an exhibition of artwork created by people living in poverty and others working closely with them. Some of these paintings, sculptures, and photographs, created on the theme "extreme poverty, violence, and peace", were also exhibited at the United Nations in New York in 2014.

Doña Rosalbina Pérez Borja co-coordinated the participatory research “Extreme Poverty Is Violence – Breaking the Silence – Searching for Peace”.



The methodology and full findings of the research — coordinated by Anne-Claire Chatton Brand, Gérard Bureau, Martine Le Corre, Beatriz Monje Barón, and Rosalbina Pérez Borja — are published under the title, *Extreme Poverty Is Violence – Breaking the Silence – Searching for Peace*.⁵⁷ A 26-minute video of the same name features people in poverty on several continents speaking about how they try to resist violence.⁵⁸

Research Findings

The violence of poverty dooms people to early death, inhumane treatment, institutional violence, and projects ill adapted to their needs

I lost three children because of extreme violence. One of my daughters was killed by a stray bullet, another daughter died in a fight, and my son was murdered. I've not stopped being scared, because I still have three younger children. When they go out, I ask myself if something's happened to them. You always give advice to your children and talk to them about the violence out there, but it's everywhere.

— Graciela Marín Cifuentes, Guatemala

57. Anne-Claire Brand and Beatriz Monje Barón, Vauréal, France: Revue Quart Monde Publications, 2012.

58. <http://www.atd-fourthworld.org/extreme-poverty-is-violence3030/>



Doña Graciela Marín Cifuentes has lost three of her children to street violence. Here, she places a [White Rose of Peace on the Guatemala Peace Monument](#).

This isn't living, it's surviving. We work constantly. Families from my neighbourhood often can't pay attention to their children, can't eat with them or take them to school. Parents say, "We don't have time to be with them. It's not that we want to neglect them." But we have to live like this; the situation makes it impossible. There are children who are bedraggled and dirty, and don't have clean clothes. Sometimes people give them a nasty look: "Those children are dirty." It isn't that parents don't care. It's because of their jobs. Every day, they leave in the morning when their children are still sleeping and arrive late at night when their children are already asleep. [People don't understand this situation.](#)

— Emma Poma Janco, Bolivia

What makes us human? We have intelligence and a voice, and can communicate through language. We have emotions. We have dignity and choice. Poor people are denied these intrinsically human traits; we are neither recognised nor treated as human beings. People living in poverty are not able or allowed to speak up. In situations of injustice, their words are misinterpreted and used against them. To complain is seen as non-cooperation, to protest as aggression, to explain as making excuses. To be frustrated at your own total powerlessness is seen as aggression. Those who do speak up are disbelieved, disregarded, or punished. Even those who speak up for others often face a backlash, being told things like, "If you lie down

with dogs you get fleas.” Well, people in poverty are not dogs. In the United Kingdom, the poorer a family is, the more likely it is that their child will be taken from their care by the local authorities and adopted against the will of the parents. And after that, all you do, say, or feel is controlled. Constantly the poor are treated and spoken to by authorities as though they are lesser human beings. [...] Poor people are reduced by authorities and services to a number; a case file; a label like “prisoner”, “runaway”, “homeless”, as though they had no identity. Sometimes the steps are quite subtle in the way that they do it; you don’t realise immediately that you’re being made into something other than what you should be. Then at some point you think about it and you think, “They wouldn’t do this to someone else, well why are they doing this to me? I am not a bad person; I am a poor person.”

— Moraene Roberts, United Kingdom

Ms Emma Poma Janco
of Bolivia is frustrated
that people judge
parents in poverty
without understanding
the challenges
they face.



My family and I struggled. I didn’t have any income. Men would come to me and ask me to do things. They asked certain things that I never wanted to do, but I needed to do it to pay the bills.

— A woman in the United States

I can give you the example of the school my little sister went to. She’s so shocked that she’s afraid to go to school because teachers tell her that she’s an incompetent girl and that she’ll never succeed in anything. They always make her sit in the back of the classroom.

— Mélanie Merle, Mauritius



Ms Mélanie Merle (centre) of Mauritius worries about the way her sister is treated in school.



“Education”, painted by Mr Guillermo Diaz Linares, was inspired by a parent who said, “I want my child to go to school. I do not want him to suffer like me.” Guillermo adds, “Slowly crumbling, this dream is like a lump of sugar in water running through your fingers.”

Mr Ricarl
Pierrelouis
(at right) of
Mauritius speaks
about many
adults he knows
who cannot read
or write: “When
they have to put
their thumbprint
without knowing
what was written
on the paper,
it’s violence.”



We lived in a very poor neighbourhood, but the majority of us managed to get work nearby. The neighbourhood was destroyed, and all the families have been rehoused in a so-called ‘model’ neighbourhood. We have homes, but many people have lost the bits of work that they had and we can’t live without money. I managed to get an article published in the newspaper saying that we needed help. Without consulting us, a truck came to the entrance to the neighbourhood and unloaded tons of clothes. There were photographers present to show the arrival of this aid, but this created discord among the residents. We needed help to get our children into school, to have our neighbourhood accepted by the rest of the city. Instead of helping us, this aid defeated us. [...]

Today 85 percent of the parents [here] do not know how to read or write. Someone always has to go with them to take care of administrative matters. When they have to put their thumbprint without knowing what was written on the paper, it’s violence.

— Ricarl Pierrelouis, Mauritius

They told us that we would be evicted because our presence was a blight on the town. The minister for population collaborated with the Madarail company, which encouraged him to drive the people away from the unused train tracks because it wanted to use them again.



Mr Jean-Pierre Rakotondrabe (at right) at one of the shanties in the marshland where he and his neighbours earn a living by salvaging material from the adjacent landfill.

They put us in a quarry. We spent over a year in that hole even though we were meant to stay for only three months. We did not even have the means to bury our dead. The sick had no one to care for them; the dead were without coffins. We asked ourselves what we should do. [...] And finally, we decided to leave. When we arrived at the landfill, the landowners of the village complained and told us we could not salvage material. But we were still allowed to build shanties in the marshland where the rice fields were. I never stopped defending the cause of these families to the village committee, saying that these people are human beings, not animals.

— Jean-Pierre Rakotondrabe, Madagascar

How People Working in Low-Income Communities Help End the Silence

There are fathers who, when night approaches, have heavy hearts because they know they will go home empty-handed. They suffer in silence in their family.

— Moïse Compaoré, Burkina Faso

Staying silent is also a way of resisting, a way of not falling into a cycle of violence. But silence hides violence.

— Léoncia Sánchez Ramos, Spain

To end the silence about the violence of poverty, people need to be able to speak about trauma and tragedy and, for that, they must have personal connections with people from other backgrounds. Our research was possible because many of these connections had already been created in ATD People's University sessions, Merging Knowledge projects, and other contexts with the right conditions. These connections are important both for people living in poverty, and for others. For example, professionals are often silent about poverty when speaking to the public because, having normalised its violence or being powerless against its dimensions, they do not protest it. Two allies doing professional work with low-income populations spoke about the relationships between their colleagues and these populations:



Ms Léoncia Sánchez Ramos of Spain warns that silence can hide violence.

In my workplace, a hostel for homeless people with complex needs, I have regularly witnessed systemic institutional violence. Professionals have power over peoples' lives and use it to work against people in poverty, in subtle, often unintentional, ways. It makes me angry because I have no control or influence over it. We are seen by the residents in the hostel as staff who should be "in control" of every situation. There was a situation between two residents both getting very angry towards each other. It was my responsibility to calm the situation down, but automatically you feel slightly out of control. No matter how much training you've had to deal with situations such as this, you never know exactly what is going to work, and I think it's very much about knowing the individuals. Since I know the residents well, there are ways to manage these situations, but at the same time respect the individuals, and separate their actions from their personalities: "That's what you

are doing, but it is not who you are.” There are other staff members whom I do get frustrated with, because I think they get a rush from this power, and use the imbalance to assert their authority in a negative manner. They become angry with the residents if they think the residents aren’t respecting the power that they’ve got.

— Elizabeth Naumann, United Kingdom

I’m a probation and parole agent working with high-risk parolees in a low-income neighbourhood. This is my community; this is where I live. I have a responsibility to those addicts and drug dealers — those are the guys I’m assigned to supervise. Part of my responsibility is trying to understand, “Why are you choosing this?” We have an extremely high unemployment rate, but it’s a dangerous business. One year I lost five guys who got shot — five of my guys. Nobody thinks they’re going to get killed. They’re invincible. But they keep getting killed. I did notice that all my guys love somebody and somebody loves them. They all have redeeming qualities. I see it as part of my personal goal to try and expand their circle — which is the same goal I have for myself, my co-workers, my friends, and everyone I meet. Because they’re taking care of their children and their families, the best that they know how. I’ve got to stop them getting killed, or stop them from getting back to prison. I consider it a personal failure when my guys go to prison. [...] My guys have a very reactive mentality. Reflection is a privilege of security. If we are secure in our lives, we have the opportunity of reflecting, to think and plan. A lot of my guys don’t have that. They’re living a life where everything is immediate. Whether I’m going to eat, or whether somebody has got a gun to my head, you have to react immediately. That happens from when they are very young until very old. They don’t have the luxury of thinking about it.

I get disappointed, and sad, and disgusted by what I see and hear, the powerlessness that I have. In my profession, people think we have a lot of power, and a lot of control, and we really don’t, although in other ways we do. While most of my co-workers handle their responsibilities very respectfully, the people who make me most angry are a few of my colleagues. They put me in physical danger by their disrespect for people. Their lack of empathy is often shocking. But I think it is often born out of frustration with a system they know

Ms Karen Hart, speaking about her work as a probation and parole agent, sees her responsibility as trying to understand high-risk parolees and helping her co-workers to develop empathy for them.



does not work. Perhaps they believe that a certain callousness and mentality of “the other” has to be developed to keep in this for the long haul. I’m not sure. I try to tell them little things, just try to relate to their lives, and try to bring it back down to earth, instead of all these regulations.

— Karen Hart, United States

The Merging Knowledge approach calls on each participant to speak from personal experience. Fourth World Volunteer Corps members often encourage people to express themselves. During this participatory action research, one person who went to great lengths to ensure that volunteers, too, could talk about their experience and thinking was Moraene Roberts, an activist who lives in poverty. She created a safe context for some of them to speak about highly confidential events in the lives of families they work with. The violence of poverty, for volunteers just as for many professionals working in low-income communities, is not a “theme”, but something that can hurt them in a deep and personal way. Here is some of what they said:

- Talking about violence done to ourselves is a very difficult thing. The violence we are faced with, most of the time we don’t understand it. And we don’t accept it, very deep inside us. Maybe from the outside it seems that we go along with it. But we refuse it with our whole being. That affects us when we live it, but it also keeps affecting us for years afterwards, in ways we are not always aware of. It’s important not to be alone with that, to get together,

to find the strength to do it. And it takes time. Sometimes when you are a victim of violence, eventually — without wanting it — you become a perpetrator of violence. Nobody wants it. Even the violent one, he knows or she knows about it somewhere. And it has to stop.

- Many times I accompanied young parents to meetings with social services. Very often, I witnessed authorities treating people violently. Those times were of course very difficult for the parents. But they were difficult for me as well. I often felt really frightened. It felt like a bomb ticking, like it was going to explode. People were treated so badly that I couldn't see how we were going to come out of that situation. I always felt that the violence was not only the business of the parents but my own business — that violence was against me and the whole of society.
- I was staying in touch with a family that had been placed in an assessment centre⁵⁹ with their six-month-old daughter. The mother remains to this day one of the most oppressed and excluded people I know. And yet, I discovered a warm, kind, loving mother, partner, and daughter. Regardless of the perils she and her family faced, her thoughts were always for the care of others. The assessment centre staff thought it would be good for the mother to have some counselling [...] However, social services stopped the service. This made me angry. Social services were controlling this family's future, which ultimately led to them losing their child into adoption. I believe social services viewed the family as unworthy of the support and commitment it would have taken for them to keep their child. I didn't sleep at night, not from just this example, but the whole twelve-month period when I tried to defend their custody of their daughter — but failed. It made me question over and over again, "What if I had only done this?" I would not sleep for hours. Even now, I constantly ask myself, "What should we have done differently?" It made me feel guilty, because I failed. Whatever I did, as an individual or acting as part of a movement, it was not enough.

59. A residential institution where staff monitors parents' capacity to respond to their children's needs and to safeguard their welfare.

“The Love of Children”, painted by Mr Guillermo Diaz Linares, was inspired by parents who say, “As we spend long hours away from our children when we are working, sometimes other people look down on us and do not treat us well. It’s for our children that we work, so that they can study.”



Many of the activists were moved by hearing from volunteers how they experience situations of violence. One said, “I’m overwhelmed. I had no idea just how much volunteers take this to heart. You support us all the time; we need to make sure we support you as well.”

Searching for Peace

One of the most striking things documented in our research is the way that people and communities subjected to the violence of extreme poverty make enormous efforts to live in an atmosphere of co-operation and to find paths towards meaningful peace. These efforts often go unnoticed. For example, people in poverty reach out to neighbours so that services can benefit the most disadvantaged people in their community. People who suffer police brutality educate themselves to help others protect their rights against abuse. Others risk their safety to speak out for neighbours who have been humiliated. Many people share food or shelter with



Mr Ronald Schexnayder of the United States draws on his own experience of having been wrongly accused by the police. He gives free legal aid to other people living in poverty.

others despite having so little that these gestures defy the notion of self-preservation. The very acts of resisting and speaking out against violence constitute steps towards peace.

I'm giving true personal testimony of such violence, creating knowledge, then peace. New Orleans is known to have corrupt police. I got stopped and charged with robbery, which I didn't know anything about — I was in another state at the time it happened. However, I wound up staying in jail for several months. At first I became so angry, I became ill. Then I said to myself, "I need to know the law to prove my innocence." So I went to the law library in the jail. They told me what books to read and I kept reading and reading. I found out how the judicial procedures worked. I found out about organisations, and I wrote, asking for help. During that time others came in with a copy of their indictments and charges, and I found out what they needed to do. I got many of them released, or we managed to get their charges dropped. However, it didn't work for me. I had to complete my unjust sentence [...] in prison for five years.

We protested because of unsanitary living conditions. They gave us spoiled food; they didn't give us proper clothing, soap, toothbrushes. We didn't get recreational time, sunlight, or fresh air. We refused to come out of our cells. We did petitions. We filed a civil suit against

the jail. This went on for two weeks. That was when they beat me up. I smuggled out a letter to the FBI and they came to investigate. We won the suit. They started giving out work shoes, toothbrushes, better food. After we ended the protests, they sent me to a worse prison with people on death row. After I got out I took a law course, because I kept being harassed by policemen, and [accused of] charges that weren't true. I took it upon myself to take a course in paralegal training, so I would know what rights I have. I helped those that go through the same challenges — things happen to them and they don't know the law. I started going out and helping people, giving out free legal aid. Having done time for something I didn't do, voluntary work is the only way I can get the anger out and have peace. Or let the people see that these policemen are corrupt. This way I create peace for me and others like me, and peace for the community.

— Ronald Schexnayder, United States

I have five children. Their father passed away. I fight every day so that they don't go hungry and so that they can go to school. Despite my efforts, one of my daughters died because of physical abuse and two others were subjected to other acts of violence. It hurt me very, very much. A lot of people have asked me why I haven't accused all the people who have done so much wrong. I haven't gone to court because I thought that they would kill me if I claimed my rights. I said, "I don't want to shed any blood. I don't want to see anyone take their last breath. I don't want to leave them to fight everyone else." I know that violence leads to more violence. What kept me going was the other families who live close to my home. Every time they passed by my house, my neighbours came to talk to me, saying, "Don't give up. Stay strong. You can't stay here by yourself. You have to go out, go for a walk and meet other people."

— Ivanite Saint Clair, Haiti

I've been through suffering. But making friends with others helped me a lot, because I got support and advice. Maybe if I had stayed quiet, hurting on the inside, trapped with what was going on in my life, I would be dead now. Sometimes it's fear or not trusting others that holds you back. I was used to thinking, "Tell others



Ms Ivanite Saint Clair of Haiti says, “Violence leads to more violence.”

about my life? That would make things worse — they would just laugh.” But it didn’t turn out like that. When I started to know more about ATD Fourth World, and I started coming and learning, my life began to change because I saw that I had to let out everything that I was bottling up inside. I think that is what we have to do for other families: earn their trust, show them that being shy doesn’t go anywhere because by not wanting to talk, you keep everything bundled up inside and you become silent. We have to help people break that silence.

— Ada Maritza Orosco Aguilar, Guatemala

Each generation of people living in extreme poverty continually and courageously works for peace, often invisibly. One of these people is a woman in Arkansas (United States) whose son has lost friends to murder. She does everything she can to ensure that he does not harden his heart and seek revenge:

I’ve witnessed too many killings in front of my eyes. My two grandchildren’s dads were killed in front of my house, in front of me. The bullets passed by my head, so I told the gunmen, “Don’t come to my house, in front of my door with your guns. There are babies running around.” I am afraid that one day someone might shoot me, because I’ve seen the killer. My first-born son was angry, then scared, when his best friend got killed. Tutu was like a father to my son;

Doña Ada Maritza Orosco Aguilar of Guatemala says that fear and a lack of trust can keep people silent and “hurting on the inside”.



he brought him up as a man, because my son didn't have a father. When Tutu got killed, my son was aggressive and mean; he hardened his heart. He was doing the wrong things. I had to bring him back. And I told him, "I experienced that life [of violence] for you already, it's a part of nothing but jail and death. The choice for you is to let go and let God guide you in your path of living. You have to keep going forward and look at your future."

Another person struggling to resist violence is Adolpho Sabiths in the Philippines. His makeshift home is regularly demolished by city authorities. This makes it impossible for him to work enough hours to feed his family, because he needs to rebuild their shelter from scratch each time. Adolpho says how hard it is for him to think straight when he suffers from gnawing hunger, and yet he continues to resolve not to give in to his fury against the demolition crew and strike out at them:

At night, I am crying for all my heartaches and praying because I know that my sufferings can make me a violent person. [...] The demolition of our homes is violence. It means hunger. It is violence because you can think bad things against the demolition workers. They burn our wood; they tear up our tarpaulins. When our homes are demolished, I can't talk and I can't work, so it's a double pain. If you have an empty stomach, you can't think straight. I told my wife, "If I lose my faith in God, I could easily stab the demolition crew

leader.” I am disgusted with him. We’re hungry; we don’t even have regular work; there is no hiring. I’m desperate; my daughter does not have milk; we have no rice to cook. Hunger! Hunger! That’s why you can do violence, all because of an empty stomach, because those in authority don’t understand us poor people. We can’t eat dirt! If you don’t have trust in God, if you’re not praying, nothing and no one will guide you not to be a criminal. It’s true; it’s coming from my heart.

People such as Adolpho, Ronald, and Ivanite, whose daily realities are crushing, have unique ways of resisting violence and making it possible to live together in peace. Deep within themselves, people living in extreme poverty carry a sense of peace that the world generally does not see.

We hear this, for example, from Michel Brogniez, who lives in Belgium and has often been ignored by passers-by who look at him as just another man living in the street. He says:

I was put into a children’s home when I was two and a half years old. I was surrounded by violence being in the children’s home. Most [of the others] are dead or in prison now... It’s hard when you’ve been badly treated from a young age. I was homeless for three years. I slept in factories, abandoned houses, anywhere. Three years like that, no security; I had nothing.

We don’t get openly angry. Our anger is silent. It’s deep inside us, so there is no outward aggression or anything like that. We are so fed up that we can’t even show our anger. So there is just silence. Silence is like the dark. We would like to see a light at the end of the tunnel. You have to solve the problem of extreme poverty, because as long as there’s poverty, you will never have peace. You’ll have peace when you realise that the person opposite you is the same as you; a human being to be respected. Then you’ll have peace.

In a very different context, two women in Rwanda speak about their sense of peace. In the years following the 1994 genocide, many people were left without housing. These women, among many who got involved to help others rebuild, say:

I came to help out, because I myself was very much alone during twelve years. When you are no longer alone, anything is possible.

“Our anger is silent”, says Mr Michel Brogniez. This screenshot is from a video called “Extreme Poverty Is Violence” on ATD’s website.



Since 2009, Mr Laurent Ganau (at left), a Fourth World Volunteer Corps member, has made dozens of videos of people in poverty speaking out to end the silence about their lives. Many of these videos can be seen at www.unheard-voices.org.

*Solidarity allows you to find your intelligence once again —
you calm down; you live more peacefully with others.*

*My drops of sweat in my neighbour's field speak louder than
any words.*

People living in poverty strive towards peace by reaching out to every person from every background. This approach is based on creating mutual understanding, recognition, and respect. It is based on a belief that if we make it possible for the most downtrodden among us to exist in the eyes of others, we can unite on a road to peace where no one is left behind.

6

Governance for Peace, Rooted in the Struggle to Overcome Poverty

In society, and in public institutions, it is never enough to promote “the participation of all”. It is not enough to offer a microphone or a seat at the table to a person who feels condemned to silence. The year-long evaluation of our internal governance has highlighted that it is never enough to launch new projects. It is not enough to look for people whose contribution is still missing. For ATD Fourth World, a governance that leads to peace is one that fosters opportunities for genuine encounters and exchange at the heart of the academic, policy, and business worlds, at the heart of society as a whole, at the heart of religions and spiritual traditions — spaces where people living in poverty can meet different decision-makers in all these spheres and where, together, they can build new knowledge and strategies [...] so that social exclusion becomes a thing of the past.

— Eugen Brand, director general of ATD Fourth World
from 1999 to 2012

This chapter will address how ATD Fourth World structures its internal governance in a way that promotes effective and inclusive projects. We summarise a year-long process of evaluating our internal governance structures and share some insights that we think can also be applied to public decision-making.

While the meaning of the word “governance” is often limited to a system of management or authority, we are using the word to refer to more than formal structures of governing and decision-making. Because one of our central goals is ensuring that people in poverty can speak and be heard in ways that help overcome poverty and injustice, our entire governance is shaped by the need to make decisions together. This does not simply involve adding a few seats at the table for “poor people”. It is also more than an organisational framework intended to shape the direction of planning sessions or to help choose new leadership. Our governance



Mr Eugen Brand, former director general of ATD Fourth World, explores with some of our members from around the world a new approach to governance.

strives to ensure that people living in poverty are fully involved in all aspects of decision-making and that our work remains rooted in their experiences, ideas, and aspirations. This goal requires an atmosphere of respect and peace.

People living in poverty often experience a strong sense of isolation, powerlessness, and worthlessness based on years of humiliation and exclusion. In France, for example, Angélique Jeanne said, “I’m fed up with people telling me I’m incapable, and running me down. I want to govern my own life without others deciding for me who I should be and what I should be.” Over many years, we have found ways to build the trust and self-confidence necessary for people in poverty to take part in our governance. This atmosphere of trust and respect is not a static achievement, but rather something that we all are continually learning to cultivate.

Some Insights for Governance that Emerged

ATD’s work can be likened to a laboratory for finding the conditions necessary to leave no one behind and to enable people living in poverty

to shape our governance. Our research is unending, because these conditions can vary for different people and different situations. However, the process of evaluating our internal governance — which entailed four regional workshops that began in 2013, and which culminated in an international seminar in 2014 — led us to identify the following key insights, which this chapter will develop.

- **Liberating people in poverty to draw on their intelligence:** This challenge drives us to think more about the ways that people are stigmatised as victims. To overcome the invisible fences of poverty and gain freedom to make choices, people in poverty need others to believe in them. They need the power of thinking and acting for themselves, of learning together and from one another, and of belonging to a human community where they are valued.
- **Co-responsibility and Merging Knowledge:** We are frustrated by initiatives that purport to increase the “participation of the poor” without actually doing so. Even when the initiatives include people who were not previously part of local consultations, they often consist of simply adding a few more seats at a table to discuss a standard agenda. In order for policymakers to merge their knowledge with the intelligence of people in poverty, projects

Ms Angélique Jeanne stresses the importance of people being able to govern their own lives without others deciding for them.



must be formulated together and be carried out with shared responsibility from start to finish.

- **Challenging the power of force with the power of learning from one another:** Whether we are faced with the power of brute force or the power of funders whose agendas could undermine our approach, we take our cue from people whose struggles against poverty lead them to open the doors to understanding. The power of learning from one another and the power of listening to a child's concerns and aspirations keep us focused.
- **Intercultural intelligence as a force for fellowship:** We seek ways for our teams and members to learn from one another while being scattered across five continents and speaking almost forty native languages. We consider this diversity a source of strength, but we are also aware that it can be a source of inequality and humiliation. The approach we cultivate begins with naming the humiliation and unlearning prejudice and preconceptions, and it must be developed with continual efforts to create the freedom and trust that strengthen relationships. Instead of



Ms Martine Le Corre (left, with Ms Maria Cruz Sierra González) helped organise and facilitate our international seminar on governance. Ms Le Corre says, “People like us, from a background of poverty, have always been treated like guinea pigs.”

striving for a form of unity that might erase our differences, our goal is to develop our understanding of one another in ways that foster our interdependence and fellowship in working towards a common good.

- **An ethical approach to confrontation:** This approach is based on recognising disagreement while maintaining mutual respect and trust in the sincerity of one another's motives. When strong disagreements exist, it is important to bring everyone together in order to move beyond questions of guilt or blame. Believing in one another's sincerity enables us to look together at what underpins our work and to check whether we are on course to achieve our Common Ambitions. We aim to explore genuine questions with mutual respect in a frank and non-judgemental way. When we seek out the views of people who are the most isolated by persistent poverty, we open doors to new possibilities.
- **Sharing financial responsibility:** Financial decisions must also remain rooted in a sense of agency that is widely shared. Our priorities are driven not by donors but by involving people living in poverty in our evaluation and planning.

Because ATD Fourth World grapples continually with these challenges, we are led to question the dominant discourse around the term “good governance”. International institutions often use the term to compare developing countries with long-established democracies. They use it even though some people argue that it “lacks theoretical clarity”,⁶⁰ while others see it as one more way that “donor” nations demonise countries whose economic insecurity stems from systemic colonial-era injustices. Development aid is often contingent on difficult-to-measure “good governance”. This restriction is similar to anti-poverty strategies where temporary assistance offered to those considered “deserving” reinforces a top-down cycle of dependence, doing nothing to strengthen people in poverty and thus failing to create lasting change.

Wealthy countries that control the international community's approach to sustainable development have not managed to overcome

60. Rachel Gisselquist, “What Does Good Governance Mean?”, United Nations University *WIDER Angle* online newsletter, January 2012.

poverty and social exclusion. Even in these countries, people in poverty feel that their voices are unwanted and unconsidered. Martine Le Corre, one of our members in France, expressed frustration: “I’m angry because I feel that people like us, from a background of poverty, have always been treated like guinea pigs. Others think up [anti-poverty programmes], imagine them without us, prepare them without us, and then force these things on us. And if it doesn’t work, they’ll start again with something else. [...] They’re always experimenting and not looking for any sustainable solution *with us*.” In the United Kingdom, another of our members, Moraene Roberts, described her view of governance:

If our country had good governance, we would never have had austerity measures. Instead, they’d have done more creative thinking about other ways to balance the debt. The number of suicides keeps rising among people who’ve been sanctioned and lost welfare benefits because of austerity. Politicians say there’s no connection. The most recent death was of a diabetic who lost his benefits, so he couldn’t pay his electric bill. That meant he couldn’t use his refrigerator to keep his insulin cold. And the way he died was by taking insulin that he knew hadn’t been kept cold and had turned into poison. It should be a national scandal that people are dying because of poverty in a country like this one. But the scandal hasn’t been denounced, because the disconnect between people who have power and people who are subject to power is too great.

In Parliament, there’s a huge gap between their thinking about poverty and the reality. None of them look at the systemic causes of poverty, and they don’t look at the human dimensions either. The entire focus is on individual legal responsibilities of people in poverty, and on sanctions to punish them. The great financial inequalities today have a parallel in huge educational inequalities. The aspirations of poorer people to get education and qualify for professional work have dropped off sharply. So many people in poverty have accepted this. You go to a rotten school, so you’ll spend your life on the dole or in a low-income job. Kids don’t aspire to more than that. Or if they try to, adults around them will say, “No, that’s not for the likes of us!” It’s such a waste of potential and possibility.

The series of workshops and the seminar that ATD Fourth World organised in 2013–14 to evaluate our internal governance helped us remain creative and ambitious with regard to our own practices of governance and those of the communities and countries where we live. A diverse group of our members, many living in poverty, re-examined our history together, looking for insights into a governance that builds peace by leaving no one behind. We also invited others — policymakers, philosophers, academics, and community activists — to join us in analysing what we are learning. Participants came from Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, France, Germany, Guatemala, Haiti, Lebanon, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mexico, the Netherlands, the People’s Republic of China, Peru, the Philippines, Senegal, Spain, Switzerland, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Vietnam. The final seminar, in November 2014, brought together sixty-eight participants. In addition to those who attended a workshop or the seminar in person, some joined in our exchanges by telephone from their homes in Palestine and the United Kingdom.

At the heart of the workshops and seminar was the long experience of Eugen Brand, who assumed a central role in the governance of ATD Fourth World when founder Joseph Wresinski died in 1988. Later, Brand was asked to serve as director general from 1999 to 2012. In thinking about lessons from his experience that could be relevant for other leaders, Brand said, “We have to ask ourselves how the way we build governance together helps create the kind of relationships where we no longer have on the one side people ready to give lessons, and on the other side people who supposedly cannot succeed.”

Liberating People in Poverty to Draw on Their Intelligence

Many obstacles prevent people living in poverty from believing that their ideas and opinions have any value. They may have spent a lifetime feeling trapped and without choices. When people cannot make the choices that create an external life and an internal sense of self, they can lose a sense of agency and feel weakened in their very identity. Our work to overcome

poverty begins with creating the conditions necessary for all people to make choices and to get involved alongside others in making decisions. Eugen Brand said:

Creating these conditions begins with people who know where they come from, who know their roots, and who have known human suffering and human hope, deep in their soul. [...] I'm thinking of Gerald Schmutz. On 11 April 2013, the Swiss authorities apologised for all the violence done to children sold into labour, very often because their parents were poor. Gerald experienced this violence and is working to ensure that no one forgets that yesterday's violence is still happening today. It takes different forms, but it continues all the same.

Gerald remembers, "When I was a child in an institution, they put a fence around me. I told myself, 'This is where my freedom ends.' Today that fence doesn't exist any more — except that there's what they do to me, and all the steps taken concerning me. In fact, the fence is still there. It's just invisible. I want to fight so that people can meet one another. It is in that encounter that we can work together, eye to eye, as equal partners, for the freedom we all need." Gerald is telling us how important it is in our efforts at governance to create opportunities for everyone to meet as equals.



Mr Gerald Schmutz is helping to break the silence about the forced labour and institutionalisation of children that took place in Switzerland.

Knowing what it means to be looked down on, Mr Parfait Nguinindji (right) in the Central African Republic says it is crucial not to “withdraw like a tortoise” but instead to share one’s thoughts.



The invisible fence that makes people in poverty feel trapped is made up of many factors. They tell us:

“I know what people say about me.”

“Everyone says I’ll fail.”

“How can I hold my head up, dressed like this?”

“The new caseworker said, ‘I know all about you; it’s all in your file.’”

Maria Théron in France said, “I’m thinking of all the people who have a hard time speaking up, or who don’t fit in. [...] I don’t want them to think, ‘But I have nothing to contribute’, when if you look, in fact they already contribute.”

In the Central African Republic, Parfait Nguinindji told of his experience of asking to speak in village meetings but being refused: “So I withdraw, like a tortoise into its protective shell. I go home, because I was told, ‘You there, your clothes are always torn. You’re nothing.’ So I go back home with my intelligence.”

Jean Stallings in the United States spoke of anger as part of the invisible fence, recalling her own “disillusionment at the disaster and corruption” of failed efforts to end poverty. She says, “We, the people, still seek equal rights and dignity in our lives today.”

Thomas Mayes from the United Kingdom said, “Like many, I’m a father and a husband, but because I have a low income, being a father and

a husband is a lot harder. [...] I've been sent to thirteen different training programmes, and they all tell you to approach things differently. It's hard to stay who you are. They steal your identity as you go."

People in poverty face prejudice when others react to their accent, their vocabulary, their appearance, or the address where they live. They hear themselves categorised and judged by the media and by politicians. This prejudice can stop people from developing an understanding of their own experience, feeling able to take control of their lives, daring to speak publicly, getting involved in collaborative projects, and helping build the governance needed for that.

Their time, too, can be harshly constrained, whether a single mother in the United States is juggling three jobs, or a father in Madagascar is trudging across a city to hunt for lost bits of scrap metal that can be resold to buy food for his children. Stuart Williams, in our team in Senegal, described the people there whose lives he considers the most difficult: "People who have water up to their knees during the rainy season, people who have no opportunities to send their children to school because their children's births have not been registered, families who are denied the things that they feel are absolutely essential to live humanly."

ATD Fourth World's November 2014 seminar began with an exercise in which each participant chose words to represent "governance". Priscillia Leprince, one of our members who lives in poverty in France, chose the words: "Not me". She explained, "Governance means making important decisions, and my life is already hard enough to manage, so I feel I'm not the right person to be taking part in governance." By the end of the seminar, however, Priscillia felt differently. She said, "People often describe me as a 'young person at risk'. They don't ever think that I'm a young person able to actually reflect, especially not about governance. [...] But now, I like this word. I feel able to assume responsibilities. As long as it's not alone, I feel capable of taking part in decision-making. [...] My responsibility in ATD Fourth World is to tell others my point of view and to invite people living in poverty in my neighbourhood to join us. I tell them that we listen without judging, and that this can help us to feel supported and to feel like a whole person who really exists."

While poverty itself may prevent people such as Priscillia from feeling ready to get involved in collective thinking, our approach is rooted

in making their involvement possible. Marcelo Vargas Valencia, one of our members in Bolivia, said:

It's important for people living in poverty to be able to exercise power in their own lives — the power of making decisions and the power of taking part. At one time in my life, I felt I lacked the power to make decisions. I lacked tools and training. I couldn't get a good job because I lacked work experience. I had no choices. I couldn't decide the direction of my life. When you suffer in that situation, you realise how precious it is to have the power of making decisions. It's important for every person. This is why it's important that activists have the power in [ATD Fourth World] to take part in making decisions. It's liberating. [...] For me to be part of reflection groups today is possible because others trusted me and knew I was capable of it. This is my commitment: to return this to others. We need to believe in one another. [...] We can show society that we want to work differently, and that we have proposals to make. [...] So that policies will not fail, we need the intelligence of all people, and particularly of people suffering in poverty. [...] We're creating a new approach to governance. It isn't perfect, and it's a work in progress, but we feel responsible for creating it.

In France, Didier Ponsot also spoke of the intelligence of people in poverty, saying, “It's intolerable that people don't recognise how much they can contribute. People in poverty are always spoken of as ‘vulnerable’ or ‘fragile’. We no longer speak this way about women, and we should fight the vocabulary used about the poor.”

Susana Castro Mustienes, one of our Spanish members, described coming together as the condition for people to take on responsibility: “When people meet one another, there is a force that enables them to gain confidence. In a way, this force enables us to take more responsibility, particularly for those who have lived their lives with no power or possibility to express their thoughts. [...] In our work together, it's essential that we be able, individually, to liberate ourselves from difficulties we might have gone through. By freeing ourselves personally, we become able to build collectively.”

Building collectively, of course, can provoke the challenge of jealousy or competition. In Bolivia, Diego Sánchez Sánchez, noted: “We aspire

to a kind of governance that doesn't put one person above another, but most importantly that doesn't pit one person against another." However, when special opportunities arise and only one or two people have the opportunity to represent a group by speaking publicly or travelling to an event, others can grow frustrated.

In our team in the United Kingdom, Moraene Roberts has often been asked to represent others over the years because many people have confidence in her. Describing herself, she says, "I was born into poverty, [...] and] I'm a disabled mother [...] who] raised my children on a very low income on a rough housing estate."⁶¹ About playing a public role, she said, "I try not to feel hurt if others resent it sometimes. When people are hurting about other stuff in their life, they need a place to unload it. So I might be in the firing line. But I know they'll apologise later. And if I'm asked to do something, I'll contact others to prepare with them. Most of them know that I'm not trying to pretend I know it all. It's a collective knowledge, acquired over years, that we're asked to share." In 2014, Moraene was one of the people chosen to be part of our national coordination team for the United Kingdom. All our members were involved in the process of deciding who would serve on this team, first appointing a temporary group — called the Renewal Committee — whose purpose was to consult with members over nine months before proposing candidates for the team. By the end of the process, not one person expressed any jealousy or frustration. Moraene said, "I was gob-smacked and amazed because they all congratulated me. I think the change happened because people had been asked by the Renewal Committee what they thought."

Overcoming the feeling of being trapped by invisible fences begins with a point made by Harvard sociology professor Christopher Winship: "ATD is about living with and working with the poor. If you truly get rid of social exclusion, all the rest follows." It also requires all of the elements named during the seminar: ensuring that no one feels judged or alone, as Priscillia noted; believing that each person is capable, as Marcelo said; coming together regularly in the way that Susana said can be a force to free ourselves individually so that we can then work collectively; and continually consulting each person in the way that Moraene has done over the years and in the way achieved by the Renewal Committee.

61. *The Roles We Play: Recognising the Contribution of People in Poverty*, London, UK: ATD Fourth World, 2014.

Ms Priscillia Leprince from France: “Listening without judging can help us to feel like a whole person who really exists.”



Mr Marcelo Vargas Valencia, from Bolivia, says that each person needs to be trusted by others to have power over his or her own life.

Mr Thomas Mayes, from the United Kingdom, explains why living in poverty can make it hard to hold onto one's own identity. (Photo from *The Roles We Play: Recognising the Contribution of People in Poverty.*)



Co-responsibility and Merging Knowledge

By practising co-responsibility, ATD Fourth World ensures that decisions remain rooted in the realities of persistent poverty. This goes beyond the commonly accepted forms of “participation”, which sometimes allow new voices to be heard, but which fail to challenge inequality and persistent poverty, and which sometimes manipulate participants by appending their input to decisions made before they arrived. Our challenge is to foster deep and continual changes in the ways in which we meet and exchange, and the ways in which we organise ourselves to be decision-makers together. We try to create conditions where each person, with his or her own experience and knowledge, questions and answers, vision and proposals, will take part in joint responsibility for decisions concerning his or her own future neighbourhood, village, country, and world.

Tilly Evenor, from Mauritius, says, “Sometimes people come to our neighbourhood to interview us and then leave. They shouldn’t do that just to put something in a book; but if they want to change our lives, that’s different. For my family and our grandparents before me, I don’t want my children to go through the same things that I did. True governance means being at our sides, walking with us to discover the world of poverty.”

Vivian Asusena Luis Orozco spoke of her experience: “In Guatemala, every member of ATD has a voice. We can say what we think, and we make decisions together. We all take part in governance. [...] We act when we see what needs to be done. We don’t wait to be told ‘That’s right and that’s wrong.’ [...] To look for other families and children to involve in our Street Libraries, we visited different places. It wasn’t a decision made by a few directors; we all chose together. [...] We’re the ones who look for means to go further. We don’t just wait for someone else to act.” Her compatriot Maria Luisa Rojas Palacios added that this co-responsibility succeeds when we remain attentive to how each of us can develop. She said, “Eugen Brand describes ATD Fourth World as being like a vessel that receives so much potential. How do we use that human potential that every person has? How does each person find a place in our work together, a place to develop his own potential? It’s always together in a group.”

Starting in the late 1990s, this concern — for how developing each person’s potential can benefit a group — led us to develop the Merging Knowledge approach. This consists of workshops where people with



Mr Parata Barry (here with Ms Isabelle Pypaert Perrin), on his return to Burkina Faso after attending a seminar in Senegal, took the initiative to train others about the Merging Knowledge approach.

complementary types of knowledge work on an equal footing to learn from one another. People living in poverty form peer groups to design every step of the approach, which is based on trust and on an ethical framework ensuring that no one's words will be manipulated or used against them.

Virginie Charvon, who spent seven years in our team in Burkina Faso, recalls introducing the Merging Knowledge approach there in 2012. "In our meetings, we were failing to develop our understanding of what people in poverty experience. We were sure using small groups would be a good approach, so we tried that. But each time, there was resistance because of traditional rules around dialogue in the culture and because of the concern that each small group would not be hearing what the others said. Then several of us travelled to Senegal to take part in a Merging Knowledge seminar there. I was sceptical about bringing this approach from France to Burkina; it seemed too foreign. But Parata Barry, whose experience with both poverty and blindness have sharpened his understanding of human nature, was so convinced it would work that he became a leader to launch it in Burkina over eighteen months. It helped that we first experienced the approach outside of the country. Nothing

was imposed on anyone — and that’s how we managed to adapt a way of thinking and working together.”

Challenging the Power of Force with the Power of Learning from One Another

One of the key issues discussed throughout the workshops was power and the forms it takes in any human endeavour. From community organising to international aid, many organisations aim to empower people at a grass-roots level. However, at the same time, the priorities of these organisations are often set by donor institutions. Similarly, at the United Nations, donor countries have the power to harm developing countries by withholding aid. In governing ourselves, and in our relationships with donors and others, we base our strategies on the power of learning from one another.

One participant in the seminar warned, “Society is based on a balance of power, not on consensus. It’s important not to be fooled about power relationships.” This remark reveals a view of power as the unequally distributed capacity of some people to force their will over others. Part of our work has been to challenge this form of power — which can be expressed as political constraint, economic pressure, or military force — through a radically different form of power: the power to unite and create together. Not the zero-sum power that comes from getting others to do one’s bidding, but the enlarged sense of agency that comes when people meet one another, affirm their dignity, and work as a community. Jacqueline Plaisir, our deputy director general, expressed this contrast by speaking about our team in Haiti, where she lived from 2002 to 2011:

Power relationships in Haiti have been militarised for many years. A school built in an underserved community was commandeered by the UN armed forces and the national police before it had a chance to open its doors to a single child. A “disarmament” campaign was so badly run that it only increased the number of weapons in the community. At the same time, the residents of this low-income area remained convinced that the country was capable of overcoming brute force. Merita Colot was a woman who did not learn the alphabet until she was an adult, but who spent the last decade of

Ms Jacqueline Plaisir speaks of a woman in Haiti who, despite her own struggles, inspired young people with the power of learning.



Ms Jacqueline Plaisir (at right) and Mr Eugen Brand (behind her) with residents in Haiti in 2010 after the earthquake.



her life opening her home to more than five hundred children for our Street Library and Tapori activities. Throughout the community today, there are young people who grew up having learned from Merita. She inspired them to believe in new ways forward and to challenge the power of force with the power of learning together. Although power relationships exist, we know that all people are equal in dignity. People in poverty have intelligence and experience that others lack. This can bring us somewhere new.

In a 2014 book, a passage that Jacqueline wrote about Merita⁶² was read by Elizabeth D. Gibbons, a Senior Fellow at Harvard's FXB Center for Health and Human Rights, who said, "I'm marvelling at the energy, and courage, and commitment of people living in poverty who make a difference. You documented this by sharing Merita's story and the stories of the young man there who writes music as his contribution to peace, sharing the message, 'Every human being is a chance for humanity.' *Artisans of Peace* documents the extent to which international humanitarian and peace-keeping operations consistently undermine the efforts of the poorest to better their community and enhance their dignity. Time and again, ATD Fourth World is witness to international actors displacing poor communities' efforts, such as UN troops taking over a shining new school and source of pride in the community to serve as a militarised headquarters. This makes it even harder for local people to choose to work towards peace. International aid has undermined human dignity through crimes like child abuse by United Nations peacekeepers, or the cholera epidemic brought to Haiti by the United Nations. This crushes hope. In that context, what circumstances make it possible to choose to work for peace? What led Merita to trust ATD Fourth World to bring Street Libraries into her home?"

Some of that trust comes from forms of power that can be stronger than the power of weapons: for example, the power of thinking and acting for oneself; the power of learning from one another; the power of belonging and of loving others. Sharing this kind of empowerment can make it possible for people to hold fast to their deepest convictions in the face of physical risks. Marylise Roy, who spent five years as a volunteer in our team in Guatemala, spoke of a time when there were deaths due to gang violence every day.

The gang, based right next to Doña Nicolasa's home, was led by outsiders new to the community. But there were also young people in the gang whom she had seen grow up. She felt she could communicate with them. She could say, "I know your family; I know what you've been through." She knew them by name. When things were very tense and when the gang members were spending

62. Diana Skelton, Eugen Brand, David Lockwood, and Jacqueline Plaisir, *Artisans of Peace Overcoming Poverty – Volume 1*, Pierrelaye, France: ATD Fourth World, 2014.

time with her own children, she told us, “I have nothing to lose, so they don’t scare me.” And she went to tell the gang members that things couldn’t go on that way. She succeeded in finding words that may have touched their hearts. She answered violence with non-violence. I saw that, in very serious situations, she managed to avoid the worst. Her capacity for engaging others in dialogue is a great strength. And I’ve never heard of any reprisals against her family.

It’s true that she had nothing. Things that could have been taken had already been lost. Maybe that gave her a feeling of freedom: the only wealth in her life was her children. To protect them, she found the courage to go and speak to the young people.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, our members have struggled with sharing power among their group. They are all young people who volunteered their time to run a programme of cultural activities for children in poverty and, through our Tapori Movement, to make it possible for these children to build friendship with children from other backgrounds and other countries.⁶³ For many years this group of young people were able to collaborate informally. Then new administrative procedures in the Democratic Republic of the Congo required all non-profit groups to work more formally and to elect a president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer. Déogratias Kankele described how this led to conflict:

We had been used to trusting completely in what each of us could do. We supported one another to get everything done. But when policies changed, we had to work more formally. And my feeling then was that something got into our heads. We were tempted into a power game that damaged our mutual trust. If one person is the president, he has the last word, he organises, he’s the chairperson, and he decides who has the floor. Even when others speak, he’s the one summing things up, and in his summary, he can leave things out. He can use only the ideas he had to begin with, not taking into account anyone else’s ideas.

So this is how we worked; we were running into a wall. We were putting up the walls ourselves. Things got quite tense and it was

63. To learn more: <http://en.tapori.org/>



Mr Déogratias Kankele (left) from the Democratic Republic of the Congo at our seminar on governance.

not easy. [...] For instance, we might have needed to buy crayons or paint for an activity with the children, and instead of figuring it out, we'd just wait for the treasurer to arrive. And if he didn't arrive in time, we were stuck. [...] So to get past that, we had to come together again, and we had to talk it over. We had to choose certain principles. Even though our structure is required to remain formal, among ourselves we no longer recognise it. We don't call ourselves by official titles. If a non-profit or a government office requires that our president sign a letter, we can put on that hat to sign it. But we just call each other by our names. We distrust all the titles, which could make us believe that whoever is the treasurer is the only person in charge of a financial report. Before having any titles, we just organised the work among ourselves. Any of us could give ideas. [...] We strongly emphasised intelligence that makes room for the words of the very poorest people. It's not about any one of us being intelligent; it's about having the intelligence to begin with the words of the poorest. That's good practice.

The group is determined to avoid becoming stuck again in the trap of giving titles more importance than seeking out people whose lives are the most difficult, to think with them about what the common priorities should be. Déogratias added that when they need to remind them-



Mr René Muhindo (at right, in front) with Mr Déogratias Kankele (far left) and friends in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They focus their decisions on the concerns and aspirations of children living in poverty.

selves of this, they imagine that the title of president is carried by one of the children to focus on that child's concerns and aspirations for the whole group. "If we make what these children said our mission, I think the governance we build will be one that moves things forward."

Another member of our group in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, René Muhindo, gave an example of what it means to focus on children's concerns: "Children push us to go farther. In our neighbourhood, no one used to speak to Mr Emile. People said he was a sorcerer. As we realised later, he was in fact very poor. He had no one to talk to, and so others invented things about him. It was the children who urged their parents to think of Emile. The whole Taporé group, and the children's parents, joined in to help fix Emile's house." Today Emile Habamungu has become an active member of the group and someone on whose advice Déogratias and René rely when thinking about common priorities.

That same focus on common priorities was also highlighted by Shwu-Shiow Lamontagne-Yang, one of our volunteers. She asked: "In whose name is power entrusted to a person? I find it important always to look at the root. When we look at the root of our collective and individual history, we lessen the risk of abusing power. We each know why we have

Mr Emile Habamungu, also in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is someone on whose advice others now rely.



power, in whose name, and for what purpose. [...] This leads each of us to grow, and it leads ATD Fourth World to grow as we share power and responsibility.”

Intercultural Intelligence as a Force for Fellowship

How can ATD Fourth World’s teams and members, scattered across five continents and with varied mother tongues, continually learn from one another? Each of us is rooted in a specific local context. In each place, our members develop creative approaches that can help inspire us elsewhere.

However, communicating across borders and languages is an immense challenge to our governance. Not all of us are literate. Our access to computers and the internet is varied. Certain ways of speaking are specific to one language and cannot easily be translated. To compound these differences, we live in a world where intercultural dialogues can be fraught with humiliation. There are countries that grew wealthy by colonising others. Countries that were colonised struggle today to overcome that heritage as well as current exploitation by multinational companies.

Some European university students travel around the globe to give advice in low-income communities they do not know, while some African university students fear that they will never graduate because they cannot afford to travel for a required international internship.

There are also issues with the way society thinks about “diversity”. It can sometimes be promoted in superficial ways that gloss over existing inequalities. Eugen Brand said, “Diversity is richness, but it’s also a huge field of inequality. [...] There’s a strong connection to humiliation that is unimaginable to those who don’t experience it. Whole countries suffer humiliation. People in governments can be personally humiliated, like a UN diplomat who spoke of the humiliation his country suffers at the United Nations for its lack of financial resources.”

In our own work, we continually develop strategies for coming together on an equal footing, whatever our levels of education or our national and cultural origins. This entails more than simply bringing “diverse” people together around a table. Too often, exercises intended to promote multicultural tolerance can turn into attempts to compare different forms of oppression or different degrees of suffering. Also, people may be humiliated by being urged to describe experiences that are painful for them to dwell on. Some workshops also urge people to talk about personal feelings in ways that are completely inappropriate for certain cultures.

Our approach focuses instead on overcoming deep-seated concepts of inferiority to give priority to the voices of people in poverty through dialogues that are respectful of all. Far beyond looking for diverse faces or interviewing people in poverty about what they want, we involve all our members, who are from very different backgrounds, in discussing issues and making decisions together. Michel Sauquet, an author and specialist in cross-cultural issues, described ATD Fourth World’s governance ...

[...] as an art for creating spaces of debate and elaboration of proposals that should impact public policies [...] and break down cultural barriers. [...] Here in this seminar is strongly reaffirmed the will to avoid stigmatising the other, and the concern for respect in the ways of speaking about one another. I find extremely important this effort of mutual intelligence, which is that of ATD Fourth World, and which is also intercultural intelligence. [...] Eugen Brand spoke

of looking one another in the eyes. This is very important; it is the complete opposite of a paternalistic approach. Joseph Wresinski's language was not one of charity; it was a language of justice. [...] You bring together people who are very different from one another in a rationale of the "and", not "or". The "or" rationale says, "Your culture or mine, your way of thinking or mine, your situation or mine." The "and" rationale is that you find common reference points to move forward and to work together. One reference point is respect. [...] One of ATD's great successes is having spread around the world to create dialogues among people who see things differently, and in the end to engage them in a common struggle, in a context of mutual respect among countries.

The "and" rationale of mutual respect guides us in our work. "None of us is 'from somewhere else' on this planet," insisted Beatriz Monje Barón, who is part of our team for the Latin American and Caribbean region. "It's not that we are 'diverse'. This is just who we are — people in many different places, together contributing to build. It's not only about diversity but about what's inside each person and each country. Recognising those roots as part of our common identity shows what each person, each group, and each country brings to the table."

Daniel Marineau, a Canadian volunteer of ATD Fourth World, said, "Working in my own country, I need outsiders who aren't infected by our local prejudices so that I can see people living in poverty differently." Like Daniel, all of us were raised in a world of prejudices and unjust hierarchies. Taking time to unlearn those prejudices is an important first step towards changing our own expectations and aspirations about who should have the floor in a meeting or who should take the initiative in a new situation.

Eugen Brand described how one person made it possible for children living in the street to be the ones to initiate an exchange:

Jean Yanogo was one of our volunteers in Burkina Faso, a man steeped in the culture of his own country. He knew that visitors don't enter someone's home without first keeping a distance and clapping their hands in the outside courtyard so that the other person has the freedom and time to welcome them. He had exactly this culture with

the children living in the street. There was no house, no door, but he would make other volunteers in the team stop a few yards away and tell them, “We’ll stay here and let the children say if they are ready to welcome us or not.”

For trust to grow among us, and to make room for creativity, we need this time and freedom — both given and received — in welcoming others. We need to travel together the pathway that builds trust to create the conditions for being invited inside and into mutual involvement by people, neighbourhoods, and countries, and for us to welcome them as well with who we are. We must constantly recreate these conditions to start projects with others, from the beginning. Are we mature enough to offer that freedom, or are we afraid?

When a workshop was held in Boston, several participants raised questions about everyday ethical dilemmas in diverse communities; for example, how to interact with homeless people in Harvard Square, where local employers sometimes give food coupons to homeless people — or avert their eyes without speaking to them. One of our volunteers, Cristina Diez Saguillo, contrasted this with the way the local population sees Harvard students: “The community of homeless people have made that public space their space. The [wider] community perceives it as not part of Harvard. But Harvard itself is made up of many students who come here to study; and yet residents say that the local population never wondered, ‘How are we going to make them part of the community?’ The students are kids who have a lot of intelligence, who have the money to pay for school, so the local population considers them part of the community and sees them as contributing something. Homeless people who come to Cambridge are also part of the community, and they also bring something to the community. But when there is debate about whether or not to give them food coupons, and when some people avoid them entirely, no one is noticing what they bring and how they contribute to the community.”

Ekédi Mpondo-Dika, a Harvard doctoral student who chaired part of the workshop, wrote about what she appreciated hearing from ATD Fourth World: “One powerful answer was that these problems cannot be solved if we keep considering them as individual dilemmas. Instead, we



Ms Ekédi Mpondo-Dika (left, with Ms Virginie Charvon) in the United States: “We need to think about the kind of community we want to build so that exclusion ceases to exist.”

need to think about the kind of community we want to build so that a) no one is alone in facing the pain of others, and b) the kind of exclusion we see in Harvard Square ceases to exist. I thought this reminder of what collective work means and the possibilities it opens was very important.”

A Brazilian volunteer, Mariana Guerra Ferreira, suggested another way of considering diversity: “ATD is made up of the life experience of each person. It is not ‘from’ one place ‘to’ another place, but instead from one part of humanity to another part of humanity. For example, there is forced immigration in search of better living conditions: tens of thousands of Haitians crossed the Peruvian–Brazilian border. This isn’t a Brazilian issue or a Peruvian issue; it’s an issue of humanity, of circumstances that force human beings to find a solution. If we take a closer look, we see that these people today live in inhuman conditions. [...] How does what we experience reflect our humanity? How are we building global knowledge based on this experience?”

Donna Haig Friedman, then director of the Center for Social Policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston, said: “I think of the intention of governance as growing a plant and creating the conditions for blossoming, for individuals, groups, countries. I was struck by the connecting of humiliation and diversity, and the idea that humiliation is there. What conditions enable the safety, trust, and mutual recognition for humiliation to be named, so that it no longer has the power it has when it’s secret? Then it becomes part of the power of being able to make something blossom. What is that power like? It has people having a stake

in what happens, having a stake in each other, and having agency. That power means having a sense of mattering, and seeing and experiencing that what we do together matters in the world.”

An Ethical Approach to Confrontation

Our approach to confrontation is based on recognising disagreement while respecting and trusting the sincerity of one another’s motives. The priority we give to constantly seeking out the most persistent situations of poverty means that we often hit an impasse, with no easy solution. This can lead to conflict among ourselves. Allowing space for that conflict is an important aspect of our organisational culture. While our international leadership team makes decisions that we may not all agree with, we seek to work through confrontations by coming together and anchoring our dialogues in mutual respect and trust. When projects do not go as we hoped, instead of casting blame, we find it more constructive to learn from our weaknesses and refocus on our common aspirations and potential as a way to strengthen our approach. In thinking about who should be present to work through a disagreement, we make a point of seeking out true experts: people whose persistent poverty sharpens their perception of what is at stake for everyone.

One of our allies, Pierre Saglio, spoke about a time when he was serving as president of ATD Fourth World–France:

A few years ago, I strongly disagreed with our national director about a question of political strategy. The dialogue between us was painful. ATD’s international leadership team helped us to respect an ethical approach to confrontation: a way of naming our disagreement, with a deep mutual respect, but without minimising or hiding the disagreement. It’s important to speak about disagreement to get to the bottom of things. Eugen Brand said, “The question is who should be around the table to discuss it, so we can create the conditions needed for all of us to speak together.” I think we need this ethical approach to progress in a democracy. It’s not one person who’s right and can then crush the others; we need to look together for ways to build an agreement without avoiding confrontation.

Cycles of blame can take hold in any confrontation. An element that guides our approach is that fault-finding only makes people feel small and hampers each person's ability to act sincerely and to develop a broader understanding of a question. One of our volunteers from the Netherlands, Niek Tweehuijsen, noted, "Deep poverty is a great catastrophe. Feeling guilty about your situation is very, very hard. I've heard people who have always been blamed. It's often the person in poverty who is blamed or feels guilty. [...] I see it often today, and there's no future in that. Young people are fed up with it. [...] Here, though, I'm glad that we haven't been speaking about perpetrators and victims, but about reconciliation. Creating places where it's possible to reconcile and to respect one another without guilt — I think this builds society's future."

Joseph Terrien, a French ally of ATD Fourth World, explained that agreeing not to judge can be the key to moving forward: "In the context of helping students who have difficulties in school, [...as educators] we had a strong determination to look first at underpinnings of support before seeing the difficulties. We set up small groups for mutual support. One of us would tell the others about a situation where he might feel blocked. To speak openly about this situation with others required every precaution in advance to say: there's no shame in failing. Agreeing on that was an achievement for the group. It facilitated trust so that among ourselves we could expose things without being judged. And again and again, by the end, [...] hidden doors would open."

Donald Lee, who worked on economic and social affairs at the United Nations for twenty years, noted how ATD Fourth World's approach to coping with internal conflict strengthens connections that go beyond mere professional and working relationships: "[During this seminar] there were instances where people talked about conflicts. Conflicts are a real part of building relationships, and no family is perfectly happy all the time. And the fact that ATD's members raised these issues just demonstrates how hard they're working at building those relationships, because if someone really wasn't concerned about the quality of the relationship, they would gloss it over and say: 'Yes, we have a working relationship,' but here they've worked to actually expose themselves. It's a real risk when you say: 'I didn't really do well. I had a conflict. I couldn't achieve the goal I set myself.' Or, 'I worked with my colleagues and we didn't reach agreement.' The fact that they could open themselves up to say this in a seminar illustrates the

kind of empathy that one needs to develop in the field. [...] I think it's very important to see what emotional attachment people have to ATD and to the values it conveys to them, and what it offers them.”

Sharing Financial Responsibility

We at ATD Fourth World, like any non-profit, must continually raise the funds for our work. A difference is that we do not consider people or projects to be “beneficiaries”. In 2008, all our members decided that work on financial questions should be one of our Common Ambitions. Since then we've worked more actively on how each of us can play a role in communicating with donors, whether foundations and institutions, or individuals who might be able to give only a small amount of money.

Our boards of directors include people in poverty, like Thomas Mayes in the United Kingdom. Before accepting responsibility for making decisions about funding, Thomas said, he gave it “a lot of consideration. I wasn't sure if I'd be able to keep my own identity if I had to do the sort of decision-making where we looked at figures and decided, ‘Well, we haven't got enough to fund this, so we need to put it on a back burner.’ I didn't know at first if I'd be able to step back and say, ‘Well, I agree until we find funding in the future, or we find another way of bringing it into another project.’ [...] But] I decided to join the board of directors because I can give a point of view from somebody who has experienced different aspects of poverty.”

Some of our projects receive large grants, but we remain wary of powerful funders having the position of being, according to an African proverb, “the giving hand above the receiving hand” — a giving hand that might threaten our ability to choose our priorities with people in persistent poverty. We have sometimes given up grants that would have required us to betray our principles. One such instance occurred when a particular foundation decided that it would continue funding us only if we implemented a study to analyse the weaknesses of people in poverty. Unless a grant can support projects chosen and designed by our members, we rely instead on individual donors and smaller grants.

Mbaye Diouf, a school headmaster in Senegal, reflected: “Receiving grants can sometimes lead to external pressures and controls, which ATD Fourth World obviously doesn't welcome. [...] Here, we have been



Mr Donald Lee (left) and Mr Mbaye Diouf (right), at our seminar on governance, appreciate speaking openly instead of glossing over issues.

speaking openly about finances. We have explained why giving hand-outs to the poor is not ATD Fourth World's approach. Instead, we seek to support people's efforts to make their way in life. And the priority for us is to engage in this with those who are most disadvantaged and isolated."

Since 2008, some two thousand of our members have joined in participatory action research that equips each of us to join in making our message known. This speaks to the active role of Thomas Mayes, and all our members, in thinking about how we choose what to put on the back burner and about how we communicate with our donors. While we have always relied more on many small donors than on large grants, these changes since 2008 have made it possible for donors to hear directly from a broad cross-section of our members, in particular through videos on our Unheard Voices website.⁶⁴

The Horizon We See: "All Minds Together"

Because horizontal collective governance is always a continual work-in-progress, we approach it *tèt ansanm*, an expression in Haitian Creole meaning with "all minds together". The expression evokes all forms of solidarity: putting shoulders together for a physical task, hearts together sharing sorrow or joy, and heads together thinking about a challenge. It speaks to the courage and longing for peace of the Haitian people, who,

64. <http://unheard-voices.org/?lang=en>

facing hurdles and humiliations, have never stopped trying to rebuild their country with solidarity and dignity for all. *Tèt ansanm* describes ATD Fourth World's approach to creating the conditions that enable people with experience of poverty and people recognised by society to share responsibilities and work together towards sustainable peace. Eugen Brand recalled that Joseph Wresinski's aim in founding ATD Fourth World was as follows:

[...] to accompany the path of liberation advocated by the people most crushed by hunger, ignorance, and violence. He wanted everyone on this path to grow as a free human being, choosing — for a while or for a lifetime — to attain his or her own freedom by linking it to the struggle for freedom of those most affected by the violence of poverty. [...] Nelly Schenker, a woman with a long history of resisting poverty in Switzerland, made me think a lot about this. In her country, which is also mine, one district has adopted an “exit” law to give people with incurable illnesses the right to end their lives in dignity when the suffering is too much. Many people said, “This is another freedom to achieve for humanity.” When I asked Nelly what she thought, she replied, “With this law, I’m even more afraid of going to the doctor. I already feel guilty about the state of my health. The doctor doesn’t hesitate to make me feel that I’m not doing enough to take care of myself. It’s really unbelievable! We’re in a country where some people are thinking of the freedom to leave this world behind when they want to, but others are still not guaranteed the right to live in this world, to be born into this world, to be recognised in this world.”

I think her reflection puts us at the heart of a type of governance that would serve human rights and peace, where the search for liberty would no longer be a privilege for some and a profound humiliation for others. [...] Globalisation not only uproots the poorest people but also displaces entire populations. We are overwhelmed with false projects while men and women disappear, forgotten, often without leaving any trace of their own history, their vision of the world. We are living in a climate of silence, with so many stories of people remaining untold.

In Honduras, Doña Doris Hernandez lived on a river bed because she didn't have the right to build her hut on the banks of the

river. One night the water rose so fast that her hut was going to be carried away by the river. She said, “All I could think of was grabbing my children’s hands and looking in my hut to find a little album of photos, drawings, and texts.” These were pieces of her history with us. Holding her children’s hands and clutching the album, she got out. This gives me a question to use in evaluating: How are we, and how do we remain, a group that, like Doña Doris, holds in its hands at the same time the history in an album, and the horizon of the future that is in children?

Like her, we are in a precarious position because, in wanting to create true meetings of people, we are going against the current. This world could suffer and die if it is not linked with the horizon of freedom, the freedom to be yourself, to say who you are as a person and as a people. This brings us to the heart of a tension: where do we come from; and who have we become between yesterday and today, between our roots and our horizon? Roots die without irrigation from the horizon, and the horizon has no scope for the future if it’s not grounded firmly by roots.



Tèt ansanm: This Haitian Creole expression (here, on an Appalachian-made patchwork), which evokes all forms of solidarity, conveys ATD’s approach to horizontal collective governance.

Concluding Observations

One of the speakers on the last day of the seminar was Yves Doutriaux, a member of France's Council of State. Having served as an ambassador of France and as its representative on the UN Security Council, he observed that, when resolving armed conflicts, the participation of local people is likely to bring solutions that can be sustained long after UN forces have left:

“Governance” can have a pejorative connotation: countries in the North explaining to developing countries how they should be governed. But in interacting with ATD Fourth World, we came to understand that the question is not only about how ATD is organised, but how to more effectively eradicate poverty. How can this goal be shared by governments, businesses, the media, civil society, and international organisations? Seeing ATD Fourth World activists and volunteers discuss their lived experience taught me a lot. [...]

In policy decisions, there can be a catastrophic level of smugness linked to participation. Policymakers will claim there was a long time-frame of local consultations, when in fact we missed people. But ATD points at involving the most excluded people in participation. [...]

The UN Security Council is at the very top, a small group whose permanent members are mainly rich countries. They do not represent the diversity of nations. In their responsibility for peace and security in situations of conflict, it's a top-down process. But a true resolution to crisis means involving stakeholders: the local population. That was the message of Father Joseph Wresinski: the poor, those living without security, must be able to participate with their dignity respected. The poor must be able to speak to society.

When the Security Council or other great powers address crises, they should better know and share this message from the poor. Local populations are better placed to name priorities than are donors, bankers, and foreign governments. To resolve violent conflicts, instead of imposing peace from the outside, we need to support local people to take their destiny in hand. This is more effective and decreases the chances of violence resuming once the Blue Beret soldiers have left.



Mr Yves Doutriaux of France (left) with Ms Tilly Evenor of Mauritius at our seminar on governance. Ms Evenor says, “True governance means being at our sides, walking with us to discover the world of poverty.”

Donald Lee reflected, “Many people like me have been impacted by ATD. It’s a journey of self-discovery, enrichment, and personal growth. Testimonies have a wide breadth of impact on people’s lives. [...] Your governance has lessons for how to build caring institutions and inclusive societies. Your global public voice has been substantial at the United Nations — through the Guiding Principles on Human Rights and Extreme Poverty, the evaluation of the Millennium Development Goals, the World Day every October 17, and other work. In continuing to address the questions of human rights, human potential, and dignity, we need you to speak out more loudly about the sort of society we should build, one where people in poverty are not asked to pay for a financial crisis through austerity measures, one where businesses should not be allowed to thrive without paying living wages to their workers.”

Moraene Roberts wishes the United Kingdom’s governance involved more consultation with people in poverty:

A lot of problems happen because of a sense of superiority, the government thinking it knows best. Rather than “knowing”, they should put themselves into a position to find out. But most Parliamentarians represent only the well-to-do. They talk about local businesses rather than local people. Power corrupts, not in the sense of politicians doing something illegal, but it corrupts intentions, those original intentions of doing something to help people. When you’re in

a position of influence, you can so easily lose track of who the people are, who you should use that influence on behalf of.

The government has a few highfalutin experts who think they have it right. Even local government is influenced by the profit motive and by what will save money. So they lose track of the fact that government is supposed to be about people. How often do they think, "For whom was I put here?" Now that I'm part of ATD's national coordination team, I never think that it's my role to come up with solutions. My role is to consult others. You can have a sense of governing only if you know why you're doing it. And to know why you're doing it means constantly asking others and admitting that you don't know.

Stuart Williams, who was part of ATD Fourth World's international leadership team between 1993 and 1999, and who later joined our team in Senegal, explained how he sees our governance:

This past year we've been working together on an evaluation–planning process that will help determine the work of ATD Fourth World in Senegal over the next four years. We've taken a year to do it because it is essential that people who have the most difficult lives can contribute. One hundred people were involved and are part of the decisions that are now being made. Some of them live in one of the communities where ATD Fourth World has been involved for a long time, where families live in shacks attached to the base of newly-constructed buildings awaiting completion, knowing that they might be evicted at any moment. Their lives sometimes depend on them begging to provide food for their children. Obviously, in communities where life is very precarious, there are tensions within the family and between families, and these families propose that our work bring together all the neighbourhood children to help generate a sense of peace in the community. [...] In ATD Fourth World, people have an openness to what other people are contributing. They see an essential part of their role as bringing together what people are trying to do, in small ways but also at a much wider level. This enables [the public] to see the role of very poor people differently: not as victims of poverty, but as people who aspire to be partners in deciding

what is to be done. Helping this process to emerge, and building on it, requires as much a capacity to listen as it does to control or to authorise decisions. This is part of the nature of what we mean by governance within ATD Fourth World.

Our work on governance has been part of a continuing search for a way of working that enables each of us to gain in understanding of our lives and of the meaning of our action together. This search enriches our relationships by increasing our freedom as we share responsibility for decision-making. In concluding the seminar, Eugen Brand reflected:

With “all minds together” and Merging Knowledge, we are opening doors. These approaches can help us meet the challenges of the twenty-first century if we accompany them with a deep and constant transformation in our ways of meeting one another and collaborating to make decisions together. In this decision-making, we must ensure that each of us can play an active role. We must create the conditions for each of us to contribute knowledge and experience, questions and analysis, vision and proposals. We must build long-term co-responsibility among all of us to contribute to the decisions that will shape the future of our neighbourhoods and our towns, our nations and our world.



November 2014: Participants from twenty countries and five continents, at our seminar in France, explored how we can be decision-makers together on a path towards peace.

Afterword

Where Are We Heading?

Our work at ATD Fourth World starts with people's lives, not with theories or statistics. As we have recounted throughout the three volumes of this book, our roots and our driving force stem from people coming together:

- People like Aling Tita Villarosa speaking out on behalf of those who, like herself, have nowhere to sleep but in a cemetery in the Philippines.
- People like Moraene Roberts in the UK who receives welfare benefits, daring to write about her life and to appear in photographs in order to resist the stigmatisation of all people “on the dole”:

[We've] dared to put [our] heads above the parapet. [...] But putting a face to the words is important. It's harder for the public to look at [our] photos and imagine a scrounging monster. It brings more of our full identity into the world.

- People like Daniel in the Central African Republic, who risks his life in the midst of armed conflict to encourage face-to-face requests for forgiveness that break the cycle of revenge.

Where are we heading? This is the most vital question for people in poverty. If you are using every ounce of energy just to survive, you ask yourself this question constantly. Parents ask, “Where are we heading?” when every day they worry if they will earn enough to buy food for that night's dinner. Teenagers wonder what opportunities they really have to head anywhere when the police humiliate and harass them. And children feel the futility of this question when teachers tell them that they will amount to nothing.

When our members gather to discuss where we are heading, the process itself becomes a source of strength. Thinking *together* is vital because

it spurs us to forge new bonds that can catalyse social change. This is as true in Central Africa as it is in Switzerland. People in both countries are discovering that, despite their nations' ideals of human rights, people in extreme poverty continue to suffer from the weight of exclusion and the fact that their own history has been ignored.

Our partnership with people living in some of the worst situations of poverty has led us to see the world differently. We do not see a system that seems basically sound if only a solution could be found to the problem of poverty. What we discover instead is a continuum of violence. A society may enjoy a sense of community or have reconciliation processes for resolving armed conflicts; however, these do not guarantee peace for people in extreme poverty. People in poverty, like others, aspire to end armed conflict and violent crime. But those visible acts of violence can mask the violence of poverty itself.

The common values of most nations are deeply misunderstood. Even when a nation declares its support for human rights, these rights are repeatedly violated for people living in poverty. A situation that can look like peace most often excludes people in extreme poverty. In economic crises and armed conflicts, people in poverty pay the highest price. Because they already bear the burden of accumulated deprivations, they suffer more than others, even in processes of peace and reconciliation. When people living in poverty are not included in reconstruction processes, they are denied the chance to reclaim the little they once had or to participate in the reorganisation of their communities.

This misunderstanding is not limited to countries that have undergone armed conflict. After the earthquake in Haiti, a large part of the population was suddenly homeless. Side by side in the streets, people from different neighbourhoods and backgrounds mourned and began the long work of clearing the rubble. Around the globe, world leaders and private citizens alike were moved to contribute. Soon after the earthquake, the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti called for giving a "[Voice to the Voiceless](#)" in the plans for reconstruction. Members of ATD Fourth World living in poverty took advantage of this invitation to tell the United Nations their most ambitious dream: that *all* Haitians would work together to rebuild a nation where no one would be left behind.

But as the months went by and plans were made for rebuilding, communities once more diverged along lines of education and income.

“Peace”
painted by
Mr Guillermo
Diaz Linares.



National efforts to design new schools, hospitals, and museums did not include people living in Haiti’s most fragile and scorned communities. The same distrust that had long kept other Haitians from venturing into low-income neighbourhoods now also prevented the most excluded people from contributing to reconstruction. Somehow both international largesse and the efforts of Haitians themselves perpetuated the same misunderstanding: that the solution to poverty lies in distributing assistance, and the future can be prepared only by the best and the brightest professionals. People in low-income communities say that the 2010 earthquake destroyed everything around them — except social exclusion.

In Switzerland too, the misunderstanding endures. A national soul-searching is going on after the discovery by the general public that children were auctioned off as cheap labour for more than a century. But even as Swiss agencies are making formal apologies for the past, institutional violence against people living in poverty there has continued unabated. Children are still removed from the custody of loving parents because of a lack of income or education. Young people are still told that they will never amount to anything and shunted into dead-end classes instead of receiving the support they need to flourish in school. Able-bodied adults are still humiliated by being categorised as “incapable of work” and condemned to social dependence.

Policies aiming only to reduce the percentage of households with less than a minimum income are not only insufficient, but also dangerous. We often see that these well-intentioned strategies actually deepen inequality — the policies improve the situations of some, while reinforcing the exclusion of the most disadvantaged people. Programmes designed without the input and expertise of people in underserved communities fail to take everyone into account and thus deny the human rights of the people who are excluded.

As young people show when they pitch in to dig drainage ditches in Senegal, and as adults show when they participate in a People’s University in Belgium, those subjected to the violence of poverty want, above all, to be able to provide a different life for their children. Even children themselves are eager to contribute to their communities, to show that everyone’s hands can be of use to others. On their own, however, people in poverty cannot build the bonds that are missing between them and the rest of society. This requires commitment from everyone to shape a future where sustainable development means more than protecting and sharing natural resources. It also means involving all people in merging knowledge about how to make environmental initiatives fair and inclusive.

This is what UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called for in his message for the 2012 International Day for the Eradication of Poverty:

Let us make an investment in our common future by helping to lift people out of poverty so that they, in turn, can help to transform our world.

The potential of people in poverty to transform our world has been ignored for too long. People who have limited access to news and modern communications walk for hours and take significant risks simply to get news of relatives and friends. They have an irreplaceable contribution to make in transforming how society communicates. Families whose health and lives are endangered by the environmental damage of dangerous working conditions and unsafe housing have a unique contribution to make towards sustainable development. Those who live in neighbourhoods and countries where gunshots are frequently heard know better than anyone the value of peace. Living constantly in fear, they strive for peace on a daily basis and therefore have an irreplaceable contribution to make to our efforts to end violence.

Asked where we are heading, people in poverty express two aspirations: to live without violence; and to live in communities where a sense of concord and goodwill connects everyone. These aspirations are entwined. As the world works to fulfil the Sustainable Development Goals, it is crucial to understand that a truly sustainable planet is one on which no one is left behind or discriminated against. To live sustainably, now and on behalf of generations to come, we need to build bonds between people in poverty and the rest of society.

To this end, ATD Fourth World has three endeavours under way:

- **The Merging Knowledge approach — pooling the courage, intelligence, and engagement of all people — constitutes the fundamental act necessary in all partnerships.** Humanity's collective creativity and imagination are deprived of the knowledge that people in poverty can contribute. Just as Frederick Douglass's and Harriet Tubman's experiences in slavery drove them to inspire others and lead them towards freedom, there are people today suffering the violence of poverty who can inspire all of us and lead us towards a future we have not yet imagined. But being able to draw on their knowledge requires conscious effort and continual vigilance. If the contribution of people living in poverty is missing at the outset, any partnership will inevitably leave them behind. In order for institutions or policies to reach everyone, we need to create the conditions for people in poverty to be a driving

force in shaping their approach. ATD Fourth World aspires to support every country and institution in maintaining the effort needed to include people living in poverty. At every level — in government, private agencies, and neighbourhoods — people should be constantly on the lookout for those who are missing and who have an irreplaceable contribution to make.

- **History needs the personal and collective authorship of people living in poverty.** In the Joseph Wresinski Centre, through participatory action research methods, we are collecting history written together with people in poverty and archiving perspectives that historians have seldom recorded. Knowledge of our collective history makes it possible for us to recognise other people: this person's story, that person's vision; one person's singularity, and that same person's universality. When we understand our history, we can be free from violence. Just as looking at history from the perspective of women or learning about enslaved people broadens our understanding, learning about the past experiences of people in poverty and seeing historical events from their perspective can begin to heal wounds and open us to mutual understanding. History written from the perspective of people living in poverty can serve as a source of knowledge to be drawn on in building peace.
- **We want to show that people living in poverty regularly defy violence.** Their courage is rarely noted, and their names are unheralded. The realities of poverty, and the suffering and humiliation it creates, obscure how adamantly people strive, day after day, to look out for one another and to prevent and resist violence. To get rid of poverty, we need to refine our understanding of it by learning from those who know the full extent of the hidden violence of poverty. Recognising their acts of resistance opens a door to a new world, one where each person's inalienable dignity is respected, where every child born can have a decent life, and where everyone has a chance to contribute to the well-being of all.

Wherever trouble and unrest are commonplace, and in communities where young people are under continual suspicion, parents despair

because no one sees their children's courage or the solidarity that actually exists in the community. Who sees the maturity of teenagers who take on responsibilities for earning money and caring for children or the elderly? Who sees the bravery of the young people in Bangui who, in order to run a Street Library with children, must explain to armed men why they are on the road? Who sees their determination to prove wrong those who expect only the worst of them? And yet, all of them know that the end to violence and poverty begins with "wiping the spirit of destruction from the souls of our young people". Where the world is heading depends on them and on so many other unrecognised artisans of peace.



“Hope”,
painted by
Mr Guillermo
Diaz Linares.

About Volumes 1 and 2 *of Artisans of Peace Overcoming Poverty*

VOLUME 1

A People-Centered Movement

- **A chapter on the origins of ATD Fourth World** retraces why and how Joseph Wresinski launched ATD in 1957.
- **Thirty years in Haiti** recounts the story of people, beginning in 1984, who looked for ways to cope with fear in their “no-go” district by trying to “become examples for the neighbourhood so there would be peace”. The World Day for Overcoming Poverty also became a touchstone for these efforts. Following the 2010 earthquake, our members climbed to the furthest reaches of this district to ensure that no one would be forgotten, and answered a United Nations call for “Unheard voices thinking about Haiti’s tomorrow”.
- **People choosing to work towards peace** come from all backgrounds: activists, born into poverty and taking responsibility in their own communities; allies, who use the fact that they are accepted to challenge colleagues or neighbours to act differently towards people in poverty; and the Fourth World Volunteer Corps, which shares a collective responsibility for no one to be left behind. No one is too young to make a difference, from young people in France and Senegal, to children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Through a Forum on Overcoming Extreme Poverty, individuals and non-profits who are not members of ATD Fourth World can also encourage and inspire one another.
- **Inventing ways to live in peace together.** Because poverty can isolate people behind stereotypes and reduce them to silence, participation in Fourth World People’s University sessions is a key

way to begin thinking together. A Merging Knowledge approach can make it possible for people of all backgrounds to develop new knowledge, drawing on the hidden intelligence of people in poverty. Concerning training and employment, both the pedagogy of non-abandonment and projects where professionals agree to take risks with the long-term unemployed make possible a new approach to decent work and to excellence. Finally, beyond thinking and working together, creativity can help to overcome poverty because it transforms the way people see themselves and one another. Street Libraries and Story Gardens share the means for creative expression, culture, art, and beauty. This chapter concludes with “Dreaming Permit”, a personal essay about creativity and culture.

VOLUME 2

Defending Human Rights

- **Ensuring protection and support to Syrian refugees in Lebanon:** As refugees flood into a beleaguered low-income neighbourhood, residents see that the newcomers are afraid to trust anyone. Parents and young people whose own lives are difficult nevertheless find time to reach out and build a new community that gains strength from its diversity.
- **A new start — mass resettlement in the Philippines:** As global warming causes sea levels to rise and floods to worsen, thousands of families are being resettled from informal housing along Manila’s urban canals to new communities many kilometres away. The ATD Fourth World team supports some of the most fragile among these families as they face the substantial challenges of meeting the administrative conditions required for resettlement, and of looking for ways to earn a living in the new communities.
- **Human rights in Guatemala, Thailand, and Peru, and at the United Nations:** In a low-income neighbourhood of Guatemala City, where many people lock themselves indoors in fear, some residents have the courage to come outside to prevent

young people from hurting one another. In Thailand, Peru, and elsewhere, our members have advocated for the indivisibility of all human rights. This work in different communities, followed by extensive collaboration with experts, led the United Nations to adopt, in 2012, the Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, co-authored by people living in poverty.

- **Taking a country at its word: challenging human rights violations in France:** Implementing these Guiding Principles means tackling prejudice and discrimination against people living in poverty. In 2013–14, our members in France challenged stereotypes in public opinion and engaged in dialogue with policymakers, leading to an expansion of existing anti-discrimination law to include “victimising inhabitants of disadvantaged neighbourhoods, particularly as linked to a place of residence and to a person’s real or imagined origins”.
- **Horizontal governance: making choices together and keeping promises:** Within ATD Fourth World, we make decisions based on interdependency and cooperation within a common ethical framework. This is how we share responsibility for choosing common ambitions. It is also how we evaluate commitments like the Millennium Development Goals, set by the United Nations in 2000 to eradicate extreme poverty. Were these promises kept or not? How did people confronted with the most extreme poverty gain in freedom, responsibility, and solidarity? With the participation of two thousand people in more than twenty countries, we evaluated the impact of these worldwide goals.
- **Sustaining our collective will to continue moving forward:** It is vital to build links of solidarity that make it possible to reach out to others, both for people who were born into extreme poverty and for people who choose to join them.



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ATD FOURTH WORLD ALL TOGETHER IN DIGNITY

“Members of ATD Fourth World are creators of peace, capable of healing countless wounds from helplessness, from indifference, from exclusion, [...] at the forefront of human solidarity. The great transition is from use of force to use of language. ATD Fourth World is on the front line to make this possible.” — **Federico Mayor Zaragoza**, *Director-General of UNESCO, 1987–1999*



“The experience of ATD has made of it the principal partner of impoverished families across the world. It is therefore with an authoritative voice that it can affirm that extreme poverty is violence and that the violence of contempt and indifference causes chronic poverty. Based on its long involvement, ATD can say that people living in poverty make a unique contribution in striving towards peace between different communities across the globe.”

— **Cassam Uteem**, *President of the Republic of Mauritius, 1992–2002*

Artisans of Peace Overcoming Poverty introduces partners in peace-building whose efforts are rarely recognised. Volume 3 recounts how young people in the Central African Republic continued organising Street Libraries with children throughout the civil war that began in 2013. In the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and elsewhere, people living in poverty are victimised by stereotypes and feared as a source of violence; but the greatest violence is done to them. Their participatory research leads to a new understanding about the choices people make to end the silence surrounding this violence and work towards peace.

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