

The Volunteer Corps of the International Movement ATD Fourth World. A belief in humanity

General Assembly of the Volunteer Corps 2009

The Fourth World Volunteer Corps was born from the conviction that humanity has an ethical imperative to make poverty history, allied to the belief that human beings carry within them the courage and resources to achieve this goal.

In each country on every continent there are men, women and children who are condemned to live in extreme poverty: people who must struggle to ensure the survival of their families and communities, who are denied the chance to grow and flourish, and who are not seen as capable of making a useful contribution to society. They are scarred by the humiliation of being blamed for the intolerable living conditions and the exclusion that they face.

The Fourth World Volunteer Corps was born from the conviction held by ATD Fourth World's founder, Joseph Wresinski, that humanity has an ethical imperative to make poverty history, allied to his sincere belief that human beings carry within them the courage and resources to achieve this goal.

Joseph Wresinski insisted that it is only by reaching and working with the people that poverty has damaged the most, that poverty can be ended. This ambition, held by everyone involved in ATD Fourth World, is at the heart of what it is to be a Volunteer and leads to a commitment to find, support and learn from other individuals or groups who may be isolated or alone in sharing the same ideal.

Today, half a century after its creation in an emergency housing camp in France, members of the Volunteer Corps are located in many parts of the world. They build long-term relationships based on trust and respect with some of the most marginalised members of society, through being present in their communities or by reaching out to them wherever they are forced to live. These encounters change everybody involved and lead to new ideas and action. The identity of the Volunteer Corps is built upon this determination to recognise, understand and be transformed by the reality of life for the millions of people who have no choice but to try and resist the worst consequences of poverty on a daily basis.

Witnessing the courage and hope shown by people suffering extreme forms of discrimination has pushed Volunteers to build bridges between people living in poverty and other concerned citizens and actors in society. It inspires them to invent a wide range of innovative actions, projects and partnerships to combat poverty. And it convinces them that the greatest challenges to the world today – such as peace and reconciliation, sustainable development and the defence of human rights – cannot be faced without a radical change in the relationship between society and its poorest members, a change built on the recognition of their experience and knowledge and the necessity of their contribution.

The Fourth World Volunteer Corps forms a global community of people coming from many walks of life and from many cultures and countries, who bring with them a wide range of ideas and beliefs. All choose to offer their enthusiasm, talents and know-how from a deep personal conviction that together they can contribute to a more just world; a world where the dignity of every individual is recognised and defended and where the cost of progress is not borne by the most vulnerable.

This diverse array of life experiences, viewpoints and sensitivities provides a rich and invaluable source of creativity and imagination. It is also a profound challenge that ensures a deep regard for the quality of human relations. Valuing its diversity helps the Volunteer Corps to build a world view

that is as much based on human understanding as on an awareness of international trends and events.

Joining the Volunteer Corps is an opportunity to create with others an ethical lifestyle that challenges inequality, the excessive consumption that drives modern society and traditional ideas of organisational hierarchy. Via an ethos of equality, collective responsibility and interdependence, and through an effort to share financial and material resources, the Volunteer Corps aims to provide all its members with an environment of mutual support. All Fourth World Volunteers receive the same basic stipend linked to their family status and the cost of living in the country in which they are located, regardless of seniority or responsibility. They also benefit from health care cover and a solidarity fund that meets emergency and other needs.

In choosing to join the Volunteer Corps, members agree to make themselves as available as they can in terms of the geographic and logistical needs of the International Movement ATD Fourth World. Together with other members of the International Movement, including people with direct experience of poverty, they work in small teams where they support one another and share their responsibilities, their failures and their successes.

The Volunteer Corps welcomes people of all ages, whether single or as a couple, with or without children, who are looking to support the fight against poverty over the long term; for some this represents a life wide and lifelong vocation. Volunteers put in place the resources and conditions to enable them to reflect regularly on their experiences individually and collectively. In this spirit they are free to review and renew their choice to continue their path in the Fourth World Volunteer Corps.

Over time, the closeness of their contact with people resisting extreme poverty and the need to rely on one another creates strong bonds between Volunteers, fostering a solidarity that genuinely supports each of them, through their own personal and spiritual development, to offer the best of themselves in the effort to make a world free from poverty.