

55th Session of the Commission for Social Development – Side Event

LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND: THE WRESINSKI APPROACH, 60 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

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Room 8, United Nations Headquarters New York

Geneviève Tardieu

As Emma has shown us, extreme **poverty is a waste of human capital**. It points to a broken society.

Joseph Wresinski, the founder of ATD Fourth World, was born and raised in poverty. He knew from his own life, even as a child, that this **waste of human potential is unacceptable**. He knew also that people who are trapped in poverty have specific life **experiences on which new knowledge can be built**.

Wresinski's approach gives priority to the people who have been left furthest behind. It introduces people in poverty as new partners, especially in terms of knowledge. Real change can happen only in thinking together.

In order to transform our world, we must accept a drastic change of perspective and, from the beginning of any undertaking, include input from people who live in poverty.

In 1973, Wresinski addressed a gathering of young people who came from low-income neighborhoods all over **Europe**. He said:

*"This is why no one wanted you,
because you know what **true justice is**, you who have lived **with injustice**;
you know **what work is**, you who have **not learned a trade**;
you know what **education is**, you who have been **deprived of school** "*

The knowledge of impoverished people is seldom recognized. People deprived of formal education are mistakenly viewed as **ignorant**, but they are **the surest source of new knowledge**.

One of our members from Burkina Faso said:

"Even in extreme poverty, a person has ideas. If these ideas aren't recognized, people fall even deeper into poverty."

Wresinski challenged any knowledge that has been built without input from people living in poverty. He pointed out the need both for academics and for people outside universities to question their **own knowledge**. In an address he gave at the Sorbonne, he proposed a radical change.

He said that scholars should go into low-income neighborhoods and listen to the people there *"... to let themselves be taught, corrected, and ready to call into question not only their knowledge, but the foundations, the method, and the meaning of their knowledge. People who have received an education,"* he said, should be *"ready to question the use made of that education."*

Wresinski introduced a total reversal of our relationship to knowledge. If we integrate this into our practices at all levels, we will have a fuller **understanding of the world.**

This is an essential step in building a world that we all want to live in. For decades, the Fourth World People's University has enabled people who live in poverty to meet and think together with academics, practitioners, and others; and new knowledge has emerged through these encounters.

It involves regular meetings and dialogues that bridge the gap between people whose voices are usually not heard and people who have power but who **cannot understand poverty without the insights of those who are experiencing it.**

Participants are encouraged to ask themselves questions relevant to their own lives.

For example, on the theme of violence a young woman who lives in a trailer with her family told us:

"We are not used to looking around us; we need for someone else to ask the important questions. We experience violence every day — it's how they treat us every day, through threats and evictions. We are subject to that and at first, we don't even see it."

A guest speaker with expertise in the theme is invited to interact with the group after hearing what the participants who live in poverty have to say.

For example, during a **session about the media**, participants spoke about journalists lacking respect toward people in difficult circumstances.

People who don't have an experience of poverty often harbor misconceptions and preconceived ideas. A journalist attending the session told us:

"I never had a discussion with a person who is poor. If I write about street people, I wasn't going to show them the article. Here, I understood that an article could be very wounding for the person I was writing about."

The **Fourth World People's University** puts knowledge to the test of reality.

The facilitators initiate a true dialogue by creating a new balance of power within and among the different peer groups. Specific conditions are needed, including having participants recognize one other as equal partners in the discussion.

A middle-aged man in France who has lived outside in the woods for years, said about the Fourth World People's University:

*"It's already a mark of respect for a human being. **It's the person who does not look at you in your distress, in your misery, but who looks at you as a human being. It starts there.**"*

Offering a space where people can reflect about their lives, letting them define the issue, letting them ask questions instead of being subjected to questions: all this is empowering.

One participant, a mother living in a squat, said:

*"I thought I was the only one who had had her electricity cut off, but there I heard everyone talk about their own situation. That made me do **a U-turn on myself.**"*

Through this process, the People's University has for years fostered new knowledge, which contributes to our advocacy, and some of that knowledge has been applied to public **policies.**

For example, **in Guatemala,** members of the Fourth World Movement have challenged so-called "**free**" **education.** They showed the hidden costs it entails and convinced the government to give families in poverty **real access to education for their children.**

Another example: in France, ATD members proved that they suffered **discrimination because of where they lived,** and a law was passed to outlaw discrimination on the basis **of social background.**

At the international level, members of ATD Fourth World evaluated the **Millennium Development Goals** and contended that **the goal of reducing poverty by one half was not acceptable.**

They stressed the urgency of adopting **practices that Leave No One Behind.** Finally, the international community took up the challenge; and we owe that to the intelligence and determination of the most deprived people.

In conclusion : all of us — people from all walks of life — who seek to fight poverty, we have to be made aware that **development and progress** need to be conceived and implemented, with **people whose life is a constant struggle just to survive.**

Thinking together with them is fundamental to Wresinski's approach. If we want to promote just societies while fighting poverty, we have to reconsider what knowledge means as well as address policy issues.

Wresinski's approach leaves no one behind because priority is given to the people who are furthest behind. As Wresinski said, "Real change can happen if we want it to. "

Thank you