

DIANA SKELTON AND MARTIN KALISA

PEOPLE IN EXTREME POVERTY ACT FOR CHANGE

This chapter sets out to explicate All Together in Dignity (ATD) Fourth World, a movement founded by people in extreme poverty, and its approach, developed within a range of contexts and countries. We will describe who we are talking about when we say "people in extreme poverty" and how we see the differences between charity and solidarity. We will give background to the approaches that have developed over time, and will sketch two vignettes to provide the reader with a flavour of the challenges in our work. We will then discuss the pedagogical approaches to challenging the politics of knowledge and the reasoning behind these.

BACKGROUND ABOUT ATD FOURTH WORLD

Joseph Wresinski, founder

Joseph Wresinski (1917-1988) grew up in poverty and exclusion. He was born in a World War I detainment camp for enemy citizens where one of his sisters perished of malnutrition. When he was growing up, his family was stigmatised and insulted by others. He recalled, "Contact with others was based on charity, not friendship. From my earliest memories, the lack of money was linked to shame and violence." As an adult, Wresinski saw the roots of that violence in his father's humiliation at being unable to find steady work. He said:

My father shouted all the time. He would beat my older brother, much to my mother's despair [...]. My father frequently cursed my mother, and we lived continually in fear. It was only much later [...] that I understood my father was a humiliated man. He suffered because he felt he had failed in life; he was ashamed not to be able to give his family security and happiness. This is the true consequence of extreme poverty. How can anyone endure such humiliation without striking out? The poor react in the same violent way, nowadays as well as in the past. [...] Without realising it, violence was becoming — for myself and for my father — the means of washing away the numerous humiliations inflicted on us by extreme poverty.ⁱ

Wresinski — who first began working at age 5, and left school at 13 — did not let his childhood destroy him. When offered a chance to return to school in his 20s, he took it and became a Catholic priest. Later, he discovered a vast emergency housing camp in Noisy-le-Grand where he would found ATD Fourth World. He drew on his own family's experiences to understand not only how people were suffering, but also their potential to change society together. He told them, "You will be the liberators of your people. Instead of transforming the humiliation society imposes upon you into self contempt, you should learn to recognise each other's capacity. You have an experience and a knowledge that can transform society."ⁱⁱ

How ATD differentiates between poverty and extreme poverty

Within low-income communities, there are always some people whose situation is even more difficult than that of their neighbours. They may be looked down on and disparaged by others. In Rwanda, for example, one woman says, "Before I joined ATD, no one ever set foot in my home because I am so poor. Even when one of my children died, not one person came to help me. I had told my neighbours about the death, but two days went by with the body unburied. Finally it was people responsible for public works who dug the grave. I thought that I was the only one living so miserably in poverty."ⁱⁱⁱ In an urban slum in Spain, a woman says, "When I go through rubbish looking for food, neighbours tell me I'm making all of us look bad. But what do they think? That I enjoy doing it? [...] We're poor so we don't think of anything but tomorrow. Thinking about how to get the next day's bread stops us from thinking any further. From the

minute you wake up, if you can only ask yourself, 'How can I manage today?', you can't think of anything else.”^{iv}

In any low-income community, ATD's priority is to seek out the people whose lives are the most heavily burdened, particularly those who are ignored or stigmatised by others. Unless people who know what it feels like to be left out or pushed aside are the ones designing a project, it will never reach everyone. So ATD's aim is to think together with people in persistent poverty before beginning any project in order to ensure that no one will be left behind, and to benefit entire communities.

ATD's members

Membership consists of volunteers, allies, and activists. When ATD was first founded, no one was even involved who did not live in extreme poverty. When Wresinski and residents of the Noisy-le-Grand camp applied to register ATD as a non-profit, they were rejected because the people proposed as board members had no diplomas and some had criminal records. These people and others who live in extreme poverty and defend others are ATD's activists.

Because people in extreme poverty have been so completely disenfranchised throughout their lives, and often for generations, before they can believe in themselves and their own sense of agency, they need others to believe in them. When Wresinski was later able to begin recruiting volunteers and allies from more privileged backgrounds who would make a long-term commitment, he insisted that they unlearn virtually everything they thought they knew about poverty in order to learn from activists. Today, ATD Fourth World's full-time Volunteer Corps numbers 400 people, some from backgrounds of poverty, and others more privileged. They make a priority of seeking out people whose situations of poverty and exclusion are the most challenging. Available to be posted in the country where they are most needed, they live in low-income communities getting to know their neighbours through daily life.

ATD's allies do not live in poverty and work in many different professions. As allies, they critically question their colleagues and neighbours to transform understanding and behaviour based on what they learn from people in extreme poverty.

Activists are people who have experienced the worst situations of poverty and exclusion and have also become leaders in reaching out to others going through difficult times. One activist is Benita Martínez Molines, a mother of five in Spain. She says, “I know what it means to go to bed hungry, or to eat spoiled food from the rubbish dump.” Because she lives in a zone known for drug trafficking, one day the school bus driver grew afraid and decided to skip making stops there. Benita recalls, “The bus just stopped picking them up. And I was afraid to complain to the school because if they realised we lived in such a place, they could have removed custody of my children. It was so unfair!” Now a grandmother, Benita has become someone her neighbours can count on. Drug addicts say to her, “Don't move away — who else would help us?” They know that she is always ready to invite them for coffee and to talk to them. She says, “Whoever I can possibly help, I do it. Just yesterday, I was talking to a girl who is having trouble. I gave her my flower pot, in hopes that she can get some money by selling it because she needs to get out of this problem. Maybe poverty will never end — but it can bring us together. It's worth it to continue fighting by sticking together.”

On charity, solidarity, and prioritising people in the worst situations

Wresinski described his childhood memories of receiving charity as a trap: people who offered his mother charity not only embarrassed her, but judged and constrained her, even urging her to abandon her most troublesome son in an orphanage. In developing an approach to solidarity, Wresinski's priority was always to increase each person's freedom. He was always demanding of people in extreme poverty, calling on each one to try to live up to their highest ideals. He expected them, in turn, to exercise their freedom by becoming demanding of themselves and of others, insisting on respect, and challenging the top-down nature of charity. His view that care and support for individuals were also political acts led him to continually connect such acts with calls for policy changes. Today, connecting the personal to the political remains a centrepiece of ATD's advocacy at the UN. People in very difficult situations who make the efforts to reach out in solidarity to others in their communities also call on policy-makers to use similar approaches on a global scale.

The most important ideal for Wresinski was that for any solidarity to be meaningful, it must be based on a continual search for the people who are the most in need at any given time — and who will later take on a reciprocal role in the responsibility for seeking out others who are even worse off. Anyone who receives care and support from members of ATD is also called on to contribute, first of all in terms of helping society to sharpen its understanding of extreme poverty, and also to seek out others who may be even more in need of support — and have more to contribute to understanding.

In order to put this approach into practice in Rwanda, the members of ATD there, who are from a variety of economic backgrounds, decided to consider the four categories of poverty defined in a national study.^v At the top end, there are people who are in poverty but are managing. They may own some livestock and their children attend primary school. The category considered in the greatest need is that of people who own no land or livestock and are physically incapable of work. They must beg to survive, and their children are malnourished and unschooled. The ATD groups in Rwanda train some women in each community to search for and reach out to people in the worst situations. Whenever these women discover a particularly difficult situation, all the members come together to show solidarity. They may do this by repairing a home or stable, weeding the garden of someone who has been hospitalised, or caring for orphans. Part of what differentiates this from charity is that the people who may first receive help become part of the groups' mutual support network, thinking together about future priorities and seeking out public authorities in order to speak on an equal footing about issues that are important to them. The World Day for Overcoming Poverty provides an opportunity when policy makers become open to these dialogues with people in poverty. While power differentials remain, ATD's members prepare collectively in advance by being ambitious for one another to be able to express powerfully not only individual situations but the collective understanding and analysis that they have developed over time.

TWO OF ATD'S APPROACHES

Using beauty as an antidote to poverty

Children mired in some of the worst situations of poverty have a vision of beauty. One of ATD's processes of social change begins with children in Street Libraries by offering them the highest quality art materials, as well as opportunities to create songs, poetry, or theatre. For people in poverty of all ages, ATD runs creative workshops. Poverty often damages health and bodies, and puts people in situations that are out of their control. For people to develop their senses and feel in control of their bodies, they can learn with talented professionals how to best use their singing voice, perform on stage, or manipulate a paintbrush or a tool. The physicality of creative workshops enables each person to develop a sense of agency, identity, and intuition.

A man living in poverty in France, Kader Ait-Ali, confirms this, connecting it to his sense of solidarity with others. After he began participating in an ATD singing club, he said, “At first, I found it strange to sing with others. When I was a kid, I never felt like I could do anything. Inside me, something was just off. People told me I was a loser. I was still living in the streets when I started coming to this club, so it was hard to come regularly. But now I have an apartment. And when it's Saturday, I'm so glad it's time for the club that I run here! If one of the others doesn't show up, I'm sad, it's not the same. Before I met ATD, I just didn't like myself. I called myself crazy. But here, people liked me and told me I was a good person! It wasn't the singing that made me enjoy this; it's the relationships with people. [...] I never thought I was capable of creating something beautiful to offer others. Now seeing the audience happy when we perform, I appreciate that people accept us as we are. So now I take my turn to support people who are having hard times.”^{vi}

In Burkina Faso, Parata grew up living in the streets. After going blind, he continued to walk far and wide every day to be connected to others, and to be a friend of children living in the streets. In 2008, however, a hit-and-run driver injured his leg, leaving him wary of leaving home. This physical isolation made him determined to learn to play the guitar. To convince other members of ATD to help him do so, he said, “Speaking out goes together with music. If you are strumming a guitar while you speak about life, people concentrate — they will never forget it. If I can play the guitar, people will listen to me. [...] The guitar can chase away worries, and keep pain from settling in my heart.”^{vii} When ATD members were

looking for a way for Parata to fulfil this dream, they met Alassane, a plumber who plays the guitar. Alassane was thrilled with the idea of offering lessons to Parata. He said, “My brother is disabled too. When our parents died, he is the one who raised me. He would sing to ask passers-by for money. I always wished I could help him. My friends are afraid of the disabled, but I consider them my family. I have always wanted to be able to teach music to someone with a disability.” Alassane does not own a guitar — but he found other musicians who were willing to loan theirs for Parata's lessons, and then for performances. Finally, one of them gave Parata her guitar to keep. Parata's vision to use music as a force against pain touched others who joined him in solidarity.

The rationale and evolution of the Merging Knowledge approach

Merging Knowledge (MK) is a non-violent way to transform individuals, both rich and poor, and to create lasting change in society. It was first developed in 1996-98 in France and Belgium by a group of activists living in poverty, academics, and Volunteer Corps members. The goal was to overcome the distinction between people in poverty who recount their lives and academics who analyse them. MK develops a form of knowledge specifically linked to the life experiences of people in poverty as considered carefully by them, in dialogue with others that aims to change society by influencing academia.

People in poverty have knowledge that is ignored by others. Wresinski accused academics not only of exploiting and subordinating people in poverty, but also of having “up-ended or even paralysed the thinking of their interlocutors. This happened because [researchers] did not realise they were dealing with a thinking that followed its own path and goals. [...] Paralysing the thinking of the poor [happens when research] is for a goal external to their life situation, one they did not choose, and which they never would have defined in the same way as the investigators.”^{viii} ATD developed Merging Knowledge (MK) to change this, challenging the politics of knowledge by asking: Could the thinking of people in poverty about their collective struggle somehow find its way into the university system? Françoise Ferrand, the pedagogical counsellor for the initial project, says that through MK “we establish a completely different relationship with the poorest people. Activists don't simply describe their lives; they prove that they are able to examine their experiences and the experiences of others. They are building concrete programmes and imagining possible solutions. [...] We've known each other for a long time, so I often know the whole story hidden behind their words. I encourage them to express themselves fully [...] looking at what they write, what they mean, and what they want to write.”^{ix}

A professor of criminal sociology who took part, Françoise Digneffe, explains why the academics had to take a back seat to people in poverty, and how MK challenged her own academic work:

Our approach was to produce something about the vision that people in poverty may have of society; therefore it is only for people in poverty to say what they think. What we can do is to work with them so that they can express their thinking in such a way that it can be more understandable. [...] It's our job to ask questions—but we had to make them understand that our questions didn't mean we didn't believe them, or that they were lying. [...] I question more than ever the presumption that we can understand what people are saying better than they understand themselves. [...] Academics, like many people, have doubts and fears about the environment in which people experiencing poverty live. [...] This whole experiment makes you question the meaning of the words that we use. [...] Now, I'm of the impression that I use these complicated words that won't be understood as a kind of windshield so that I don't even have to see. This intellectual jargon [...], maybe we don't really know too well what it means. When we have to use words which seem simpler, we really have to start thinking.^x

MK was primarily shaped with people living in persistent poverty. Their work, beginning shortly after Wresinski's death, was rooted in his vision of the unique knowledge created by people in poverty. For discussions to be reciprocal, they considered it necessary to use both equal speaking time, and words and vocabulary of equal weight, with the pedagogical team intervening with suggestions for new approaches when misunderstandings occurred. Different forms of expression were combined: visual, written, personal accounts, debates, interviews, etc. All participants did individual writing, with support available from the

pedagogical team. When the mixed group of all participants came together for seminars, in addition to formal discussions, they emphasised informal time together over meals, outdoor walks, and singing. To create equal footing among participants living in extreme poverty and others, the key rule of MK is that no one may put anyone else under a microscope. Each person (including academics or policy-makers) must speak from their own personal experience. No one may co-opt someone else's experience by saying, “What she meant to say was....” If a speaker is not understood, that speaker may then choose to express her/himself differently. The goal is for each participant to gradually develop their own personal analysis of their own lived experience.

Part of the process requires significant portions of the work to occur within peer groups: people in poverty in one group; academics in a separate group. These groups are a safe space for peers to challenge each other. For people in poverty, it is particularly important to have private space to prepare dialogue with academics. For instance, if someone is considering sharing some particularly intimate details about her own life with the larger group, peers can give advice about possible risks. The peer groups also work together in small groups to read, understand, and prepare questions about each other's writings.

This methodology requires a commitment from all participants to “emancipatory knowledge”. Because the group as a whole is developing new knowledge that no member of the group would have developed individually, the goal of this knowledge cannot be a theoretical one (for example to fulfil the requirements of a researcher's thesis). It must be emancipatory — knowledge that will be used to overcome injustice by changing the daily lives of people in poverty. One of the activists who helped pioneer MK, Martine Le Corre, spoke in 1999 about it: “During these two years, thinking through our lives, and those of our families and friends has been a painful experience. From my early childhood, I was never really considered as a human being in my own right. I was always seen as a child from a particular kind of family with a certain problem [...] especially at school. I'm only too aware how difficult it is when you live in terrible poverty not to have anyone to say, 'Of course, you're capable!' [...During this MK project], I've been thinking about the teachers who gave me a really hard time. I'd like to wait for them on the corner with this dissertation and say, 'Look what I was capable of! And maybe I'd have been able to do a lot more if I hadn't had the carpet pulled out from under my feet!’” Another activist, Christian Scribot looked back at the evictions and hard times that he and his children had struggled through. He said, “We're told, 'It's your fault' so often that we end up believing it. In this [MK] programme, I felt that my way of life was being valued. It allowed me to leave something important for my family — it was dignity.”^{xi}

Embedded in the MK methodology is a non-violent approach to social justice. Many social justice approaches are based on the concept of class struggle. For instance, Sol Alinsky's approach to community organising requires identifying enemies, and then finding ways to force concessions from the enemy, such as ridicule, the power of numbers, pressure, and threats.^{xii} However, class struggle is ill-adapted for people in the worst situations of persistent poverty. As the proverb says, “When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.” Even long-disenfranchised communities sometimes manage to harness enough collective strength to take on the more powerful elephants of policy-making institutions. But when that is done in a confrontational way, in ATD's experience, it often leaves behind the poorest and most excluded people on the margins of those disenfranchised communities. The backlash to confrontations can even worsen their situation.

In 2009, MK was first used outside of Europe. While many aspects of the approach were appreciated, the question of confrontation was not. The French version of the MK Guidelines requires overt confrontation of ideas: “Without this confrontation to identify discord, there can be no collective construction.”^{xiii} The cultural context in Belgium and France is such that society in general, including people in extreme poverty, consider confrontational dialogue to be stimulating and constructive. Claire Hédon, a journalist with Radio France International and an ATD ally, confirms:

A passion for confrontation is deeply embedded in French culture. The French dictionary defines the opposite of confrontation as being 'isolation and separation'. It can be a way to accept that points of view differ and to understand other points of view by making a point-by-point comparison. But it is also something that we love doing for hours. I've had people who were not used to this way of conversing think that a group of us were yelling at each other, when in fact we were just having an animated conversation! Without confrontation,

conversation can feel too smoothed out and boring to the French.

French and Belgian activists who participate in an MK project train themselves to tackle language aggressively, challenging specific words. For instance, when academics spoke about the “resilience” of people in poverty, several activists grew angry because of the way the word “resilience” is sometimes used against parents in poverty in family court where they may lose custody of their children if they are not considered resilient enough. This exchange, which took place during an international MK project with interpretation between French, English, and Tagalog, was so aggressive that at one point the language interpreter began crying, worried that perhaps she had caused the argument by mistranslating something.

In Haiti and Mauritius, when ATD first considered using the MK approach, participants immediately felt that this part of the methodology would be culturally inappropriate. Confrontational dialogues there always end with at least one person feeling humiliated. Jacqueline Plaisir, an ATD volunteer who grew up in the Caribbean, explains:

People in Haiti who have been constantly humiliated are never comfortable arguing to defend their point of view. And in Haiti, we construct our thinking differently from people in Europe. Belgian and French arguments can volley back and forth like ping-pong matches! But here, we have a different rhythm of speaking and thinking. Conversations need to be gradual. People who have been humiliated gain confidence in their own thinking when we take a lot of time to listen to one another, and to put our ideas together.

To respect each person's sense of their own worth and dignity, Jacqueline changed the methodology. Instead of shaping the process to tease out conflict explicitly, she made a rule that no one react directly to what others say. Instead, their approach to collectively construct knowledge was a gradual one. Each person spoke in turn on a given topic; then each person took a second, then a third turn. Without debate, each participant listened intently to the others; little by little, they influenced one another's thinking.

Worldwide, it is hard to have a slow, gradual influence on a methodology — particularly because the participants from the global south who would like it to change do not think an open confrontation with the French and Belgian architects of the method is the best approach. It is also possible that the differences in cultural, social and geographical context are too great for any single methodology to work in the same way everywhere. At the moment, the Guidelines in French remain as originally written in Europe — even while their English translation is more nuanced. The practice continues evolving when international MK workshops take place.

SHARING DAILY LIFE AS PRAXIS

ATD's perspective begins with the point of view of people who have been the most disenfranchised by persistent poverty. Its entire praxis, as Wresinski said, “was born from the sharing of daily life”. In this daily life, there are many moments when solidarity seems almost unattainable: in the humiliations and anger like those of Wresinski's father, or in the stigma and bias that may be heaped on people in Rwanda or Haiti. However, there are also powerful forms of solidarity that are an inherent part of daily life for many people living in poverty. People like Benita in Spain, Parata in Burkina Faso, and many others give courage and inspiration to those around them. By creating opportunities for them to meet and collaborate internationally, ATD offers this inspiration to a wider circle, including policy-makers and academics. There are many ways to cultivate solidarity. One can be showing everyone how much relationships matter. Creating beauty together is another way. For people experiencing persistent poverty, acts of creation can open doors in their own mind, making it possible for them to see themselves as valuable members of a community. When more privileged people can begin to see them differently as well, this can break down stereotypes, setting the stage for solidarity action to effect long-term change.

*Diana Skelton
Deputy Director General
ATD Fourth World*

Martin Kalisa

TOGETHER IN DIGNITY

*Regional Co-Director for Africa
ATD Fourth World*

- i
Anouil, Gilles, (2002) *The Poor Are the Church: A Conversation With Fr. Joseph Wresinski, Founder of the Fourth World Movement*, Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, pages 3-4.
- ii
ATD Fourth World (1988) "Je témoigne de vous," (DVD) Paris, France: Editions Quart Monde.
- iii
Hamel, P. and Gasengayire, A. (2006). "La sueur que je mets dans le champ de mon voisin", *Revue Quart Monde*, Paris, France: Editions Quart Monde.
- iv
Jean Venard and Benita Martínez Molines, "La sécurité, ce serait de pouvoir penser à l'avenir", *Revue Quart Monde*.
- v
The UBUDEHE programme.
- vi
Kader Ait-Ali, Jean-Paul Baget, and Brigitte Bourcier, "Au risque de l'harmonie", *Revue Quart Monde*.
- vii
Virginie Papeloux-Charvon, "C'est ma guitare qui me donne du courage", *Revue Quart Monde*, Issue 218, 2011, <http://www.editionsquartmonde.org/rqm/document.php?id=5175>
- viii
Monje Baron, B. and Brand, A.-C. (2012). *Extreme Poverty Is Violence – Breaking the Silence – Searching for Peace*. Vaureal, France: ATD Fourth World. Page 21.
- ix
Szac, Murielle (1999). "Le Quart Monde Rencontre l'Université" (documentary film) Louvain, Belgium: Atd Fourth World.
- x
Ibid.
- xi
Ibid.
- xii
In *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (1971), Saul Alinsky wrote: "The job of the organizer is to maneuver and bait the establishment so that it will publicly attack him as a 'dangerous enemy.' [...] Always remember the first rule of power tactics: Power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have [...] The thirteenth rule: Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it. [...] In conflict tactics there are certain rules that the organizer should always regard as universalities. One is that the opposition must be singled out as the target and "frozen." By this I mean that in a complex, interrelated, urban society, it becomes increasingly difficult to single out who is to blame for any particular evil. There is a constant, and somewhat legitimate, passing of the buck. [...] The problem that threatens to loom more and more is that of identifying the enemy. Obviously there is no point to tactics unless one has a target upon which to center the attacks." . New York: Random House. Pages 101, 128, and 131-2.
- xiii
"Guidelines for the Merging of Knowledge and Practices When Working with People Living in Situations of Poverty and Social Exclusion" (2002). Published in *Le croisement des savoirs et des pratiques – Quand des personnes en situation de pauvreté, des universitaires et des professionnels pensent et se forment ensemble* Paris, France: Éditions de l'Atelier. In English, a different version of the Guidelines is available at: <http://www.atd-fourthworld.org/what-we-do/participation/merging-knowledge/>

REFERENCES

- ATD Fourth World (1996) *Talk With Us, Not At Us: How to Develop Partnerships Between Families in Poverty and Professionals*, London, UK: Fourth World Publications.
- Fourth World – University Research Group (2007) *The Merging of Knowledge: People in Poverty and Academics Thinking Together*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America.