

Volunteering with ATD Thailand

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OUR WORLD IS STILL IN NEED OF AN EFFECTIVE MECHANISM TO TACKLE POVERTY SERIOUSLY!

With all the problems going on in the world right now, I cannot help but think of all the people who are affected. When we think about it, we are all affected in different ways by poverty, global warming, world hunger and so on. These are some of the social problems that are major issues in our world today. Sometimes we live our everyday lives ignoring the fact that there are people out there who are in need of the basic necessities, struggling to make ends meet for their families and who are suffering, maybe on the verge of dying because of hunger. But in our society, the middle and upper class, us, including myself, we sometimes ignore these facts.

This is why organizations such as ATD Fourth World are very important. ATD stands for “All Together in Dignity.” Like the name itself suggests, ATD brings people from all cultures or social classes to work together to bring joy and laughter to the world. ATD started in a camp for homeless people in France back in the 1950s. ATD Fourth World has transformed the struggle to end poverty by recognizing poverty as a violation of human rights. ATD Fourth World believes in prioritizing these people who are living in the worst condition of poverty. With the concept and belief “Leave no one behind,” ATD strongly holds the vision that the world can someday erase the concept of poverty. Since people who live in extreme poverty tend to isolate themselves and feel like they are not part of the community, ATD’s vision is that someday there will be no poverty in this world and that everybody could live in a society where everyone is equally respected.

Poverty is a major issue in the world today with millions of people living in extreme poverty, nearly 10 percent of the world population. They live under difficult circumstances, some only have government support to rely on, while others rely on a job to make ends meet. Poverty exists in all corners and parts of the world. In a world where we have a limited amount of resources, it is much worse in developing countries in terms of the number of people affected by it. Poverty is the reason for people having different lifestyles and even the number of deaths from the rest of society. Statistics show that people who are living in poverty are more likely to die from natural disasters. More than 1.35 million people have been killed by earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, etc. over the past 20 years. In 2004, a tsunami killed 230,000 people. All of them were in developing countries like Thailand, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and India. In 2011, a similar magnitude earthquake with 30-metre waves hit Japan, a high-income country. The number of people who died in Japan was only 19,000. Putting an end to poverty is not a simple task that could be done overnight. It takes a tremendous amount of effort from people from all walks of society. There must be an agreement and understanding between people in society and education for every child must be mandatory since education is the foundation to having a bright future.

ATD Fourth World runs their projects in 32 **countries** on five continents, and is in touch with individuals and small non-profits in 146 **countries** through the Forum for Overcoming Extreme Poverty. In Thailand, the main mission is to build bridges of understanding and closer ties between the poorest communities and the people in the society. ATD Thailand does this by recruiting volunteers for activities as well as working with various NGOs. ATD organizes activities for the children and teenagers of the poor communities particularly to stimulate their growth in terms of creativity and imagination. As we all know, children in rural and urban poor communities do not have the same opportunities as those children who are of the upper-middle class. These children sometimes only rely on government education for knowledge. ATD helps them by providing extra learning with activities such as drawing, painting, reading books, and so on.



The extra educational activities organized by ATD Thailand every week are not to be seen as extra “schooling” for the children but more of a free space for the children to think and spend their free time doing things that are beneficial for them.

ATD Thailand works alongside many volunteers as well as another Thai volunteer organization called “Friends of ATD Foundation” who are in charge of reaching out to the adults of the community, since the number of full time volunteers is very limited. One of the most important things they do is to build strong relationships with the people of the community. Building trust with each other, between the people of the community and the volunteers, is very important. Children are the future, so by building a strong bond with them and educating them the way they should be will eventually lead to a better and brighter future for the community.

The community is located on privately owned land. The land used to be a garbage site owned by an individual who never claimed his rights to the land. So in the 80s, people started to settle there. Since the settlement is illegal, there is no possibility for them to access the electricity and water from the national supply system and the registration for the national supply system is impossible since they do not have the legal authorization from the landowner. All they could do is rent electricity from the neighboring people. There are a little over twenty families in the community today. They get their income mostly from roadside jobs such as flower garland making and selling or hulling chili peppers. Some have scavenger activities like collecting bottles, old metal and old wood. The children go to public schools that are linked with the temples nearby and where they are usually provided meals for lunch as well. I had the chance to talk to one of the mothers while I was volunteering at the community. She has said that she is relying on the meal provided at school for her children; this decreases their daily spending.

Visiting a community in Bangkok where ATD Thailand runs a program with children



When I first arrived at the community, I was welcomed with big smiles. It shows that Thais will always be Thais.

I was able to work with the children for a few weeks with activities such as drawing, painting and even quizzes to keep their minds active. The pure innocence on their faces reminded me of myself when I was younger. Every child has chances to grow, to become someone important in society someday. But of course nobody is equal in terms of opportunities. So that is why it is our responsibility to help those who are in need. By lending a helping hand, it could help someone; it could even change lives. So I tried to build relationships with the children, getting to know them week by week, even though it was for a short while. I was able to provide my support as well as learn from them. It was a great couple of weeks. I found that a lot of children there were really capable. My experience did not prove that people of the lower class of the society have far worse capabilities or education compared to children from a family of the upper middle class. But, of course, the gap is very big when it comes to opportunities. Children growing up in poor areas, no matter how good or talented they are, will be less likely to be noticed. It is how society is built. But from what I see, the children in the community were all capable. Some are better with numbers while others are more creative. Younger children who have not attended school have already learned some math. It shows that the community center that ATD built was a great achievement to both the organization and the community. There were no children left behind, everyone was treated equally.

It surprises me to see people living in this condition. Everybody knows poverty exists; I have known this for so long. But to be able to see it with my own eyes, interacting with people themselves, has changed my perspective on everything, even life itself.

Homes in the community where Adil worked during his internship



I have been to many different environments and lived with people of different classes. I have seen people working in every class of the society. But never in my life would I imagine people living in extreme poverty such as this, especially today when our countries are experiencing a period of development.

Seeing people selling lottery tickets under the hot burning sun in Thailand is not surprising to me anymore knowing that Thailand has a very low unemployment rate. So this means people who are living under the worst of the worst conditions are still looking for jobs to support themselves. It makes me wonder why they do not get the recognition or support that they need from us. It saddened me to see, to know, that all I could do is watch and try to do my part to help. But one person cannot change it. I alone cannot change it; I've known that. Poverty is not strange to the eyes. It is an issue that has been going on for decades and decades but yet, it still exists today. It's interesting to me to see how ATD works. I've always wanted to know what an organization does to help those in need. Like I said before, I was honestly surprised to see the capability of the children in the community. The education they have received might not be as good as those children who go to better schools but I was surprised that the children were very capable of so many things. Working with children was harder than I thought. Controlling them, keeping them in one spot, was quite a task. But we managed to do so by providing them with some work and games to get their attention on one thing.

I have learned so many things from the experience. What I have seen was only a very small percentage of the people living in extreme poverty. I truly believe in ATD's goal of making the future better by eliminating poverty fully. I think it is possible. But it is only possible if everyone lends a helping hand. In order to make a change in a society, everyone needs to start with themselves first. If we want to eliminate poverty, we need to start being aware that there are people in our own society that live in extreme conditions. There are children who rely on their daily meal at school and there are children who are not being educated enough to show their true potential. I think to myself a lot about how life works in very mysterious ways. People who are born rich have it so much better; people who are born poor have it much worse.

The structure of our society keeps the poor remaining poor while the rich remain rich. If only we could eliminate this. Then I thought to myself, if people who are living in extreme poverty could still welcome me into their community, into their homes with big smiles and open arms, they are there, still appreciating life the way it is, why can't we?

Some of us want more and more, much more than we ever need. It makes me sad to realize that I'm so caught up in life that I never get to think of the people who are living in very poor areas under extreme conditions. It really inspires me so much. My respect goes out to everyone who is out there working hard to survive, to be a part of society. Life is tough; nobody can deny that. Our world is still in need of an effective mechanism to tackle poverty seriously. My respect also goes out to all the social workers and organizations that are fighting everyday to help those people in need. I would like to thank ATD for being one of the foundational supports that keep their world going.

Adil Khan

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