

# DIGNIFIED WORK

# FOR ALL



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## *People with lived experience of poverty bring innovative approaches for ensuring decent work for all to the United Nations*

*"Having a decent job changes the way others look at us, that of our family, of our children. They are proud of us and we are proud of ourselves. We become people like the others, we are no longer ashamed to go out and talk to people."* Annick Vera, activist from France with a lived experience of poverty.

From the 6th to the 15th of February 2023 the 61st Session of the Commission for Social Development (CSocD61) took place at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. The priority theme was: "Creating full and productive employment and decent work for all as a way of overcoming inequalities to accelerate the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development".

The International Labour Organization defines [decent work](#) as "productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security, and human dignity." The [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) asserts that "everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment. In assessing the global state of decent work today, we reflect on statistics from the ILO which tell us that 8 percent of the world's workers were living in extreme poverty in 2018, despite having a job, and that in 2020, only 46.9 percent of the global population were effectively covered by at least one social protection benefit, leaving 4.1 billion people wholly unprotected. We also reflect on the fact that today, more than 60 percent of the world's employed population earn their living in the informal economy, with 2 billion of these individuals completely deprived of decent working conditions. Often hidden in this big picture is the reality of the care economy, of which there is a dire necessity to recognize and value the economic and social contributions of individuals who perform unpaid care work, usually women. Globally, we are in a situation of crisis regarding access to decent work.

For most people living in poverty worldwide, their work does not mean earning a living wage. It means exploitation, very low pay, difficult or dangerous conditions, and forced layoffs. The suffering caused by lack of resources and means is intensified by degrading and humiliating treatment. People experience disrespect and feelings of futility that prevent them from participating fully in their communities. These experiences feed extreme poverty and social exclusion.

### **I/ What is ATD Fourth World's background on the topic of decent work?**

People living in poverty try to get a job but too often land nowhere or in a useless position, with no positive impact on their life journey. In this case, their jobs function to keep them in a cycle of poverty and exploitation. In principle, jobs are the way to emancipate oneself from poverty, but can also be a trap of oppression that keeps people in poverty despite all their efforts.

To address systemic discrimination and create work opportunities, ATD Fourth World develops alternative work experiences: income-generating pilot projects that give priority to people in the worst conditions of poverty. These innovative programs, named "Working and Learning Together" (WLT) and developed in partnership with businesses, allow people affected by extreme poverty to generate new economic resources and re-establish social engagement while respecting the earth's resources.

First launched over 20 years ago, WLT programs operate in countries such as France, Senegal,<sup>1</sup> Madagascar,<sup>2</sup> Guatemala, and the United States. Their principal, aggregated findings are that:

-Programs must have the clear ambition of reaching those who are most excluded or who are experiencing extreme poverty, and to support these individuals in order to ensure their continued and meaningful participation.

-Education and training are not sufficient to help the most excluded people earn a decent wage. A wider, supportive environment is necessary, tailored to the individual's circumstances. Creating an environment for peer support among WLT workers improves outcomes for all community members, encouraging mutual assistance and solidarity.

-Valuing all individuals is essential. Workers, in particular those in the informal economy, are often stigmatized by the general population as lazy, incompetent, or untrustworthy. The real contributions they make toward more sustainable societies are unrecognized.

ATD Fourth World affirms that work should enable people to live in dignity, to make a livelihood for themselves and their families, and to be recognized as useful members of their society.

[Read the full statement ATD sent to the Commission.](#)

## **II/ Collective Advocacy Work by Civil Society**

ATD Fourth World is part of a network of NGOs which aim to bring a collective civil society voice to the Commission and to better influence negotiations between member states on the outcome resolution of each Commission. As part of the [NGO Committee for Social Development](#), ATD Fourth World is part of months-long preparation of the Commission. This year's preparation began with] an [Expert Group meeting](#) gathering experts on the priority theme, followed by the publication of [advocacy talking points](#) by the [NGO Committee](#), visits to Member States' Missions to explain our recommendations, and the organization of the [Civil Society Forum](#), which runs parallel to the official UN program.

The Commission for Social Development also represents an ancillary arena for organizing efforts surrounding the 2030 Agenda and its [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs). This makes the Commission one part of a broader, accelerating UN agenda which also includes the [High Level Political Forum](#), [SDG Summit](#), Summit for the future, and the World Social Summit set to occur in 2025.

In the various UN spaces in which we are present, ATD's mission is singular: to emphasize the necessity of [SDG 1: to end poverty in all its forms everywhere](#) by involving people with an experience of extreme poverty in that work at every level and following their lead.

*[Some takeaways about the resolution on decent work adopted by the Commission.](#)*

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<sup>1</sup> Séminaire international "Travailler et apprendre ensemble : Les conditions d'une économie plus humaine par la participation de tous," ATD Quart Monde, 2010

<sup>2</sup> "Good Practices for Reaching People in Extreme Poverty, CASE STUDY" – International Movement ATD Fourth World, Madagascar, 2011

- 1) The resolution recalls the [guiding principles on extreme poverty and human rights](#) adopted by the Human Rights Council in September 2012. Based on international human rights norms and standards, the Guiding Principles provide for the first time global policy guidelines focusing specifically on the human rights of people living in poverty. They are intended as a practical tool for policy-makers to ensure that public policies (including poverty eradication efforts) reach the poorest members of society, respect and uphold their rights, and take into account the significant social, cultural, economic and structural obstacles to human rights enjoyment faced by persons living in poverty. Those guiding principles were the first document that included rules requiring states to respect people living in extreme poverty. ATD facilitated the inputs of people with lived experience in the final document.
- 2) The multidimensional aspect of poverty is mentioned several times, and the resolution highlights that social inclusion should be reached through integrated development strategies, including health, education, employment...  
*“Recognizing the relevance of better understanding the multidimensional nature of development and poverty while stressing the need to use multidimensional analytical tools, including multidimensional poverty indices and risk analysis to capture the interlinked nature of deprivations and vulnerabilities as well as understand poverty dynamics and shape policy, and recognizing that appropriate national multidimensional poverty indices allow countries to better target, coordinate and monitor poverty eradication measures”.* This point coincides with ATD Fourth World’s advocacy for new tools to measure multidimensional aspects of poverty and its [Hidden Dimensions](#).
- 3) In the resolution, Members’ States recall the proposal of the Secretary-General to convene a World Social Summit in 2025.
- 4) The terminology “intergenerational transfer of poverty” or “intergenerational poverty” was used throughout the resolution. ATD advocates for the use of language such as “[persistence of poverty](#)” instead. This is because the concept of “intergenerational poverty” puts the onus on families to get out of poverty. “Persistent poverty” sheds light on the reality that people stay in poverty for reasons of systemic violence and discrimination.
- 5) The resolution highlights the feminization of poverty and the necessity to underline the value and dignity of women’s labor, in all sectors, including in care and domestic work.
- 6) Member States call for nationally appropriate universal social protection systems and the implementation of the [Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for a Just Transition](#), launched in September 2021 by the UN Secretary-General.
- 7) The resolution also “recognizes the important role that families can play in combating social exclusion.” ATD Fourth World projects and actions around dignified family life are rich with contributions to make toward this discussion.

### [III / ATD Fourth World hosts dialogues during the Commission](#)

Two case studies were chosen to highlight the experience of ATD Fourth World internationally on the topic of decent work. One of them was Zero Long-Term Unemployment Zones ([Territoires Zéro](#)

[Chômeur de Longue-Durée](#)), which provided a delegation of two women, Laure Descoubes and Annick Vera, to participate in the Commission.

In France, historically, ATD Fourth World programs around work are based on a triple refusal: the refusal of begging; refusal of assistance; and the rejection of uselessness. It is in this context that fourteen years of Working and Learning Together programs in the country gave rise to Zero Long-Term Unemployment Zones in 2016, a program which hires, on a voluntary basis, long-term unemployed people on permanent contracts, at minimum wage and on time, to do work that is locally useful but not carried out because it is considered unprofitable for the traditional market. These businesses are funded, for the most part, by the reallocation of costs and lost earnings associated with long-term unemployment. Launched by ATD Fourth World and then joined by other players in the fight against exclusion, the program gained unanimous support of the Parliament and has led to calls to make reality the right to employment.



*Romain, an employee of a Company with employment purposes in Thiers, France*

Laure Descoubes, who acts as the Co-Director of two Zero Long-Term Unemployment Zones enterprises in Thiers, France, presented the founding hypotheses of these enterprises, describing why it is humanly and economically possible to eliminate long-term unemployment at the local level. The first hypothesis is that *no one is unemployable*, when the job is suited to people's abilities and skills. The second follows that *it's not the work that's missing*, a large number of useful jobs, of a great diversity, remain to be carried out. And the third– *It's not the money that's missing*, as it is job deprivation that costs more than the production of additional jobs.

She was also able to share the practical side of creating job opportunities for the long-term unemployed, which included powerful elements on how the health and productivity of the working environment is predicated on the trust built between managers and employees.

Annick Vera is an employee of one of these businesses in Thiers, France. Throughout the commission, she was able to share the knowledge she has gained on dignified work from the perspective of someone who has experienced long-term unemployment and poverty.

She highlighted an environment of non-judgment as a condition for dignified work, which in her experience, allowed her to feel free and proud of herself. Having a job is a way for her to feel useful for her family and community.

[Read Annick and Laure's full statement.](#)

[Watch the video about the experimentation presented at the UN.](#)

The other case study brought to the Commission was [Working and Learning Together - Electronics Recycling](#) (WALTER), an eco-social business in Brooklyn, New York, USA, operating in the very under-resourced neighborhood of Brownsville, which provides job opportunities for people facing persistent barriers to employment with an emphasis on youth. Partly founded by ATD Fourth World, WALTER has a dual mission to responsibly recycle electronics and to provide employment opportunities to young adults in Brownsville who are facing obstacles to employment. WALTER targets certain people in the community who would otherwise not be able to or have a very hard time getting a job. The current employee base is largely made up of those who have experienced homelessness or who have gone through the criminal justice system.



*Tyler, Damian and Zuri, three of the young employees of WALTER*

Many of these employees were met through the [Story Garden](#), an ATD Fourth World action which connects children and residents of under-resourced neighborhoods to opportunities to learn together and express themselves.

By getting to know these individuals as children, the ATD Fourth World team in New York City was witness to their willingness to grow as adults, to grow as contributors to a society, and also to their entrepreneurial aspirations. Many of the ideas behind WALTER also came from research on the [Hidden Dimensions of Poverty](#). Over 3 years, a national research team composed of people with lived experience of poverty, academics and practitioners, led a national research following the Merging of Knowledge methodology. This methodology was developed so people impacted by persistent poverty, academics and practitioners could think together on an equal footing. It identified nine dimensions of poverty, one of which involved work, providing a blueprint for the development of WALTER.

The research provided takeaways such as these: A dignified work opens the door to a better future - for the people working, their family, their community, and to the future of our planet; It develops a sense of belonging and rejects individual futility and disposability; It makes a positive impact on others and on the world; It gives purpose and provides social and economic recognition.

Guillaume Charvon, the President of ATD Fourth World USA, and a Co-Founder of WALTER, was able to present these findings at the Commission with the support of a [video](#) featuring the contributions of employees from WALTER. [Read his full statement here.](#)

These projects found an audience during the Commission in a diversity of spaces, which first included an Expert Dialogue on Dignified Work for All, the official Side Event organized by ATD Fourth World. In addition to Annick Vera, Laure Descoubes, and Guillaume Charvon, the dialogue also included Simel Esim, and Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. Find the [concept note](#), [programme](#) and [recording](#) here.

[Read Olivier De Schutter's statement](#) and [Simel Esim's statement](#).



*ATD Expert Dialogue on Dignified Work for all, Official side-event at the UN*



An informal dialogue on the topic of decent work was also hosted at the ATD Fourth World house, which gathered New York community members, activists, and civil society partners. This was followed by a visit by Annick Vera and Laure Descoubes to WALTER, where they worked alongside employees and discovered how the business operates. The delegation also met with two representatives of the French Mission to the United Nations.



*Meeting of the delegation with Mr. Olivier Richard, Minister Counselor and Head of the Development and Climate Division, and Mrs. Eléonore Peyrat, Minister Counselor and Head of the Economic and Financial Department, French Mission to the UN*

The Civil Society Forum organized by the NGO Committee for Social Development provided two additional spaces for these projects to be shared. Guillaume Charvon presented WALTER during a panel discussion on the topic of “Working Toward Concrete Solutions for Marginalized Young People Facing Unemployment,” which was moderated by the ATD Fourth World Representative to the United Nations, Aria Ribieras. The second panel discussion of the Forum was on the topic of “Challenging the Dominant Economic Paradigm– Ensuring Social Protection and Just Transitions in the World of Work,” and featured interventions by Annick Vera and Laure Descoubes.



*Annick Vera delivering her statement at the Civil Society Forum, at the UN*

A [statement](#) was also delivered by ATD Fourth World Representative to the United Nations, Yasmine Raouf, in front of member states during the official Closing Session of the Commission.

#### **IV / Decent work: Conclusions**

Arising from what was shared in the spaces described above and from the experiences collected from within the Movement, the following ideas regarding decent work stand out:

- 1) Our main observation on the topic of decent work is that people with the experience of poverty want to contribute to society and to have those contributions valued. Dignified work opportunities present a practical solution to how and what people can contribute. In order to work, be productive and to overcome the obstacles associated with poverty, such as shame and limited access to education, people with the experience of poverty tell us that an environment of non-judgment is paramount. Education and training are not sufficient to help the most excluded people become part of the workforce. A wider, supportive environment is necessary, which recognizes the individual's circumstances. In this sense, we also consider that education and training are also necessary for the employer, to be able to create a thriving workplace in partnership with employees.

*“One thing that Jonathan (the employer) pays attention to is what we all do best. And usually he'll set us up with different tests so that we know what we can do first. No matter what we're doing, we're able to pick up after each other. Like if one is falling behind, then we're able to*

*pick each other up. Because we're all a team. That's just how it has to be. (...) This is the first job that I've had where I was actually comfortable coming to work and I didn't have to really worry about being judged or anything like that.” - Rah, USA*

- 2) In job-seeking, individuals may be discriminated against on the basis of gender, race, nationality, ability, religion, and other identity-based factors. People living in poverty face these forms of discrimination as well as that on the basis of socioeconomic status, what Olivier de Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, refers to as “povertyism.” The shame associated with poverty also leads to [non take-up of rights](#), a situation in which potential beneficiaries of social protection schemes end up not receiving their entitlements.

The Movement observes that segregation serves to keep individuals living in poverty far away from job opportunities, increasing barriers to employment. In order to be inclusive of segregated and marginalized communities, job opportunities need to come to people where they already are.

Another important tool to combat discrimination lies in the hiring process– In order to be given a fair chance, policies of “open hiring” must be instituted in order to promote an environment of non-judgment. Practically, this may include measures such as abstention from the requirement of drug tests and background tests, when appropriate. It may also include providing employees with uniforms and equipment free of charge. Proactive measures are recommended.

- 3) In matters of gender-based discrimination, the Movement observes that individuals of different genders do not experience unemployment in the same ways and face different precarities and indeed degrees of precarity within and without a job.

*“Being a woman in the street, a single mother, is way more humiliating and shameful than for a man, people do not look at you the same way, they despise a woman. And I have faced a lot of violence as a woman in shelters.” Annick, France.*

- 4) We also recognize the distinct challenges to secure employment faced by young men of color in the United States. In New York City, where ATD is present, young Black men face the highest rate of unemployment, with only 1 in 4 Black men in a job in 2022.<sup>3</sup> Young Black men also face the highest rates of incarceration, with 1 in 5 Black men born in 2001 likely to be incarcerated in their lifetime and 50% of the current incarcerated population in the city being African American<sup>4</sup>. In New York City, nearly 60% of homeless shelter residents are Black<sup>5</sup>, with Black men over-represented in the street homeless population. Racism and segregation, among other issues, coalesce to keep young men of color, and especially Black men, in a cycle of poverty.

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<sup>3</sup> COVID-19 Economic Update, CNYCA, 2022

<sup>4</sup> Incarceration trends in New York, Vera Institute of Justice, 2018

<sup>5</sup> Coalition for the Homeless, 2023

- 5) For many people who have lived in extreme poverty, especially long-term, being able to work requires recovery from the impacts of poverty on their mental and physical health. The trauma of poverty can often mean that many people with this experience may find themselves unable to work at all. These individuals' right to a dignified life should be guaranteed.

*“I lived 3 and a half years in the street. I was homeless. Yes, we need to get back to work but what happens when you spend too much time on the streets, it is almost impossible to get back to work. Because your health is destroyed. It is hard to find a job when no one is helping. You are traumatized, not only in the head but it is your whole body. We want to work, but we cannot. When you are not on the streets anymore, you need to recover. I went through the worst. It affects your mind, your memories, your strength, your energy. You cannot focus, cannot be patient, relax, calm, you cannot listen. I couldn't even watch a movie for one hour. It takes a lot of time.” Patrick, USA.*



*Patrick taking the floor at the Expert Dialogue on Dignified Work for all.*

- 6) The most marginalized people have meaningful contributions to make in addressing the world's challenges, especially climate change. Youth living in poverty need to be part of climate action, and have a critical role to play in their local contexts, to support their communities through the Just Transition to a sustainable, green economy.

*“I know we're helping somewhere, some place. Because if there was no E-waste businesses, all of this metal garbage would be thrown in third world countries. (...) There's toxins in batteries and all of that. So if we don't do what we're doing here, like we're contributing, I feel like we're helping. It makes me happier to know that I might actually be affecting something. Gives me a little sense of purpose.” -Damian, USA*

- 7) A dignified job is one that gives you a platform to build on for your future, wherever you go. Learning skills, with training adapted to each person, is key for employees to arrive ready to work everyday and to envision their futures.

*“Before WALTER, I couldn't work, I couldn't find anything that would teach me how to do most of the stuff that we do here. Like dismantling, using the pallet jack, hand truck. Well, yeah money is the main reason. Yes, but it's also the skills to have for different fields. Most likely if I either get fired or I quit this job, which honestly, I don't see myself quitting at all, but having the skills to dismantle something to, you know, know how computers work or how a laptop works or how to clean a hard drive is-- I can go into different fields for those things and I'll know how to do it and I'll know how to do it well.” -Zuri, USA.*

- 8) People who have experienced poverty tell us that money is freedom. A dignified job or job market is characterized by how it offers security, on which freedom is predicated. With a dignified job, people are able to dream, to plan for the future, to be a recognized member of a family or community, and to have pride.

*“A permanent contract is the guarantee of a job for life because a job is life! You can see the future, make loans, have a house, you can think about training, learning, you are no longer marginalized, you exist, you participate in society.” - Employee from a company with employment purposes, France*

*Having a job provides money, and money gives you the freedom to go do things with family and friends. You know, if you have money, you can afford it. So basically, kind of everything got better.” -Tyler, USA*

- 9) Access to dignified work provides a practical means of combating social exclusion. A life in poverty is often characterized by isolation and a lack of private and public life. People’s private lives are often intruded on by the state and other forces, leading to experiences of shame and insecurity. In order to access aid, people are forced to give up their right to privacy. At the same time, poverty and social exclusion often means no real public life. Poverty affects people’s abilities to access schools, places of commerce or leisure, or other public forums. A job invites people back into public life, by providing access to a community space in which they are a “citizen” and, with decent pay, by giving people the opportunity to access diverse spaces which have financial barriers.

*“When people were talking about their families and their lives, I couldn't talk about my family. I had no social life. My struggles, my pains were my own. I couldn't share them because I was ashamed, I always felt judged because of my life.” -Annick, France*

- 10) Through our various Working and Learning Together case studies, Zero Long-term Unemployment Zones, and WALTER, we emphasize that innovative financing solutions are key and must be tailored to local contexts. The local marketplace plays an important role in dictating how new companies and workplaces may thrive long-term. In France, Zero Long-Term Unemployment Zones is partly funded by the reallocation of public funds. Operating in the United States, WALTER was launched with only private funding.

The [Social and Solidarity economy](#) encompasses entities that are engaged in economic, social and environmental activities to serve the collective or general interest based on principles of voluntary cooperation and mutual aid, democratic or participatory governance, autonomy and independence, and the primacy of people and social purpose over capital in the distribution and use of surpluses and or profits as well as assets. Our work for the Commission on Social Development allowed us to see how ATD developed innovative approaches anchored in this Social and Solidarity Economy, rooted in the local needs of the communities. These innovative projects show that an alternative to the dominant economic paradigm is possible, with the creation of jobs with high social and environmental impacts, sometimes not sustainable in the “classic market economy.” If we aspire to global systemic change, this change needs to be bottom up, inspired by those innovations, and should be supported by government legislation.

The Movement is now preparing for October 17, the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, whose theme is “Dignity in practice for all” and which will focus on decent work and social protection.

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