

LETTER TO FRIENDS AROUND THE WORLD FORUM ON OVERCOMING EXTREME POVERTY



International Movement ATD Fourth World
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NOVEMBER 2011 – No. 78

"MAY WE DARE WORK TOWARD JUSTICE AND PEACE!"

New walls have been going up around the world. Some are cement walls that make it almost impossible for people to circulate and to get to know one another. Elsewhere, we see neighborhoods putting up metal gates to prevent camping by people who have nowhere else to go. Intended to make life safer for some people, these walls condemn others to insecurity and suffocate them. They make it impossible for people to develop the mutual respect needed in order to work toward solutions together. Everyone misses out on the community that might have been.

And yet, faced with these formidable obstacles, sometimes taking great risks, there are women, men, youths and children who find breaches in the walls. They open doors, they invite others to gatherings or celebrations where each person is considered worth getting to know, with no one imposing a single way of living or set of convictions.

In working toward social justice, there are times when nothing is enough, even the mobilization of thousands of people, from the man in the street to the influential. Hope, always fragile, can be pushed aside until we are weighed down by the question, "Are our efforts all for nothing? What's the point if, behind the walls of rules, certainties, laws, the powers that be don't want to see or hear, don't want to share power?" So where can we find the courage needed to build

solidarity, without reversing into violence that would only trigger more violence, putting still more innocents at risk? Our era has been marked by events that pit people against one another. Where can we find the energy to build a community where the desire to live together in peace can be stronger than the fear of the "other," stronger than distrust of those who live differently, stronger than even the rejection of those who have no choice but to survive by their wits?

"May we dare work toward justice and peace!" was the call, thirty years ago, of Fr. Joseph Wresinski. This challenge remains at the heart of ATD Fourth World, which has always continued, together with others, to initiate thousands of gatherings amongst people and communities who know nothing of one another. Day after day, our goal is to build a new shared history: one that is free from false security and one where knowledge, learning and power are no longer the private property of some; but one where those who bear the brunt of every crisis are the first to inspire the way forward.

May we dare reach out to others in ways that will renew our energy, courage and ambitions.

Eugen Brand, Director General
International Movement ATD Fourth World

WORDS FROM THE FORUM ON OVERCOMING EXTREME POVERTY TEAM

Dare to meet each other! This is what all of us have been doing through marking the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. There were more than 250 events which took place in over 43 countries around the world. You can find out more about these events on the Forum's website (www.overcomingpoverty.org). There are new articles on the International Day being posted regularly on the website. It's not too late for you to send us your article, together with a few photos if you would like.

Dare to meet each other to strive for justice and for peace! This is what correspondents of the *Forum on Overcoming Extreme Poverty* experience day to day. You can learn about these experiences through reading the articles in this edition of our Letter to Friends of the World. In Portugal, we found out that the most important thing for people living on the

street is having a genuine encounter with each other. In Central Africa, Geoffroy shares his commitment in meeting children. In Lebanon, every summer, the organization Beitouna runs a family vacation. This provides a moment of peace and a step back which can give strength throughout the year. Finally, in Guatemala, participants taking part in the "Forum for Peace" show their commitment to living in peace through solidarity that strives above the violence that they experience.

We invite you to take part in the discussion forum on this theme, using the weblink <http://overcomingpoverty.org/forum/discussion-forums> : "Extreme Poverty is Violence. Ending extreme poverty can bring peace." You can contribute to this dialogue through the internet or by writing to us. Building peace is at the heart of our projects and this is shown throughout the regular exchanges.

We look forward to hearing from you.

● **LOOKING AFTER OTHERS WHEN YOUR OWN FUTURE IS NOT SECURE**

Geoffroy works with children and families in a village near Bangui. In January 2011 he participated in the international meeting of young people "Together for others" in the Central African Republic, as part of the International Youth Year.

This meeting enabled me to understand the meaning of an adventure I launched into quite a few years ago, when I had absolutely no idea what I was looking for or where I was going.

I was completing my vocational training, and needed to find an internship to start work, but as if I received a call, my decision changed; I decided to settle down in the village. My parents did not understand, and in fact neither did I. I was still very young, I didn't know what I was looking for. I stayed there with the young people, offering them my help, and sharing their life. My parents used to ask me: "Is that really what you want to do, just being with these young people in the village where there is nothing?"

A little later on, with a Caritas group, I helped very deprived families in their daily lives. My father had stopped coming to see me; he didn't understand, but I felt like I was part of a family.

Then for three years, in one of Mother Theresa's associations, I got involved in musical activities, dance and singing with orphans suffering from psychological problems. I was very touched by these meetings that I could never miss: I had to stay at the side of these children.

But I was asking myself, "Geoffroy, what are you looking for? Maybe it's time now to turn towards a working life." But just two or three months later I met Joachim and Elie who told me about ATD Fourth World... and just when I thought I was going to "be free" of them, there I was once more working with children: Tapori children!

During this "Together for others" gathering I understood at last that this adventure was not in vain, that I was not

wasting my time. I really found the strength to continue supporting these families that have the knowledge and experience to build a world with more solidarity.

These orphans were rejected yesterday, but today they are working, and they say, "Hello Sir, and thank you!" Yet although people think I am a schoolteacher, this is not the case! It is thanks to the friendship and solidarity we offered them, that these children can enter working life and contribute to development. Today they in turn are building this friendship and solidarity, and this I find most touching.

GEOFFROY – CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC



● **HAVING A GENUINE ENCOUNTER**

Forum Abel Varzim –Development and Solidarity – is an organisation whose aim is to promote citizenship through research into greater social justice, whilst defending the dignity of each person. [...] The following text is found on the website of this Forum (www.forumavarzim.org.pt):

Every night – including Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays – volunteers from Life and Peace walk through the streets of Lisbon, following set routes, and offer each homeless person a parcel of food and – and this is the important bit – their willingness to listen, a chance to have a conversation. They also try to direct them towards homeless shelters.

[...] All along our route we have made friends. There are people whose name and background we know. We are happy when we meet up with someone we haven't seen in several weeks. Mr. Abel, Mrs. Rosa, Mrs. Cremilde, Mr. Antonio... we could multiply these names by 1187 (according to the authorities, this is the number of homeless people in Lisbon.)

Many of these citizens no longer have any identity papers. When this is the case, as far as the State is concerned, they don't exist any more. All that is left is their name. But that is enough for us. As soon as we arrive in any given place, [...] homeless people arrive [...] All of our 'tours' are similar, yet they are also all unique.

One day, and I can't not speak about it, I went around a public park as we know that several people often slept there. [...] At the far corner of the park, one of the walls was full of holes. Whilst approaching a hole which can't have been more than 20 cm in diameter, we called out asking if anyone was there. And there was. Three men who needed food and clothes.

How can I forget all this? I don't know what affected me most: the shock of finding them there, the nauseating smell coming out of the hole, or the terrible situation in which these men had found themselves. But then – it could be us! It only needs something to happen: a financial crisis, losing a job, sickness... The most important thing on each of our 'tours' is to give dignity to each homeless person that we meet. [...]

PAULO A. – PORTUGAL

● BEITOUNA IN BEIRUT: THE 'HOUSE' OF SOLIDARITY

Every summer, Theresa, a Franciscan sister, Sako, a grocer, and the volunteers of the Beitouna Association organize a family holiday.

Beirut, the summer of 2011. On this 18th of July, a dozen families are in a state of excitement. They are going to leave the city and head for the mountains and the clean air for a holiday with their families. Sister Theresa explains: "A holiday with their families means everyone – parents, teenagers, young children and babies, both the able-bodied and the disabled; it also means both families who have been able to 'make it' financially as well as others who live in conditions of extreme poverty."

In Lebanon, a person's religion is cited on their national identity card, but for Sister Theresa, religion is not an issue. Both Christians and Muslims are invited to climb on the bus for the mountains. After two hours in the flood of cars leaving the capital, they arrive at the camp with its large tents in the middle of a stand of oak trees.

For two weeks, parents and children are going to have a good holiday, finding their place in the group without forgetting any of the others. No one contests the modest conditions that are offered. Each one participates in making the stay a pleasant one. There is always someone to go fetch

water, to help with the cooking, to support a mother who feels particularly vulnerable because of a problem she faces. The children and the teen-agers have time together, sometimes far from the forest, under the leadership of counsellors. What excitement when they return to tell their parents about the games they played, the discoveries they made, the epic matches of football and basketball they enjoyed!

The success of the "Olympic Games" is due to the spirit of the camp. It is not a contest to show off those who run the fastest, or jump the highest. It is a fun day where everyone can go further, together. Each one has his or her strength, to put at the service of the others. The camp also allows the parents to decompress, to forget the daily problems they face back in Beirut. Worries and feelings are shared, as well as a lot of laughter.

When people have spent two weeks together in this good atmosphere, they have built strong relationships, which help to maintain the solidarity in the neighbourhood to which they must return. Whether their housing is permanent or in a tent, during the camp holidays as well as throughout the year, the families from Nabaa (a neighbourhood of Beirut) appreciate Beitouna, a word which in Arabic means "our house."

Beitouna is more than a building. It is the House of Solidarity.

FRANÇOIS P. – FRANCE-LEBANON

● "PEACE HAS TO BE BUILT BY EVERYBODY FOR EVERYBODY"

In 2010, the 17 October Peace Forum was organised as part of the commemoration of the World Day to Overcome Poverty. It was prepared at a Family Meeting.

We have been supporting deprived families for many years. Our dialogue based on their lives is enriched by the debate with other people, and leads to construction of peace, respecting Human Rights, to which everybody can contribute.

Testimonies were given during the Family Meeting:

For me money doesn't bring happiness or peace; peace means that all of us are in good health (...)

For me peace means respecting others, something we must teach children so that they are respectful, change can only start with them. (Mrs J.)

I cannot say I'm living in peace. There are lots of things that prevent peace. I don't have a job, I can't feed my children. That's why I can't say I'm living in peace. (Mr O.)

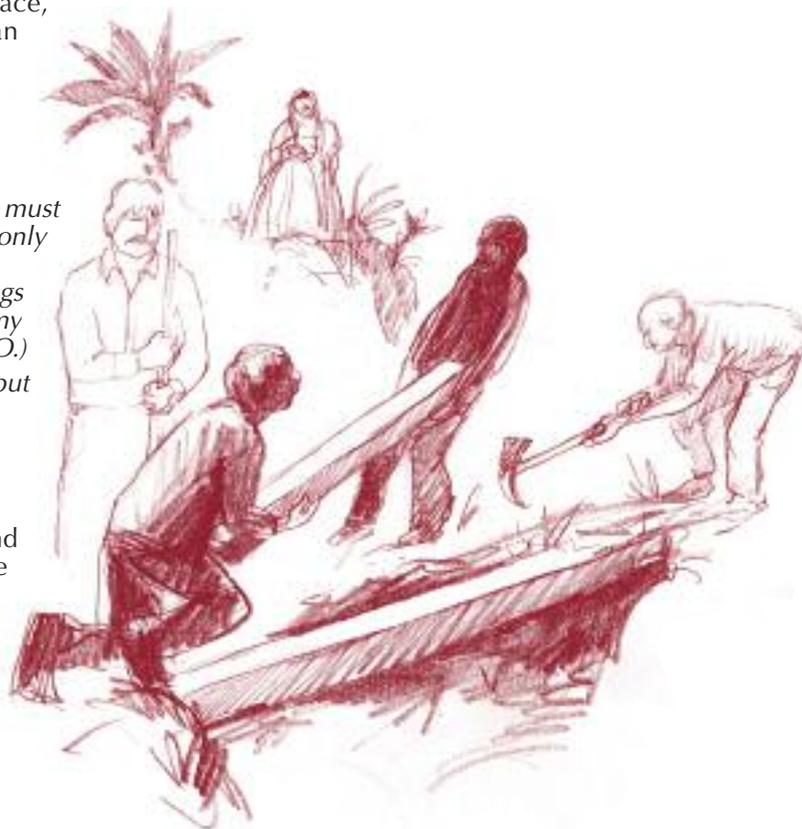
For me peace is a minute of dialogue, it's difficult but communication is important. (Mrs A.)

During the Forum we listened in the groups to families expressing the sad conviction that violence was not going to disappear. At the same time, the examples given by participants, the testimonies of solidarity and mutual support in the neighbourhoods made credible a concrete way of living which enabled us to form a new conviction: peace is possible.

Mrs C. told us how on the day her house collapsed due to a landslide, several neighbours grabbed their picks, smashed rocks and dug out the earth. Then they helped her rebuild her cabin.

She told us "I felt happy, I realised that I was not alone, contrary to what I had believed." This happiness from knowing that you are not alone, that you can count on others when your life goes off the rails, is the foundation on which we can build real security and therefore peace. We just have to be capable of learning this from these families who are so familiar with the consequences of the rest of society forgetting, misunderstanding and ignoring them!

17 OCTOBER PEACE FORUM – GUATEMALA



• I don't think that extreme poverty is inevitable. It is important today to put mechanisms in place which allow our countries to combat poverty.

Amara S. – Mali

• Through the meetings and exchanges on this website, we will more surely meet our objective of a world without extreme poverty, where the social, cultural and economic rights of the most disadvantaged people are better respected.

Ibrahim – Burkina Faso

• We can discuss and share our experiences through this website, and in this way not feel alone. We can cross borders without discrimination.

Alejandro N – Bolivia

• Despite the physical borders and the land which separates us, you allow people, through this virtual means, to learn from one another, to meet up, to get to know one another better, and to be a witness for the poorest people who are at the heart of humanity.

I'll make sure I disseminate this letter and let the members of the 17 October Committee in Mauritius know about this new Forum website.

Roseline C. Mauritius

• You cannot imagine what moral support we receive when we read all the testimonies and news. It gives us courage and also helps us understand that we are not the only ones waging this war (against extreme poverty).

Joseph K. Cameroon

• I think it is essential to put people from all backgrounds in contact with each another to share with one another about the daily struggles of those living in poverty, as well as those who, more broadly, fight against poverty.

Jean - Belgium

• I am certain that this chain that we are forming will awaken many consciences.

Leonard B – Cameroon



"Extreme Poverty is a violence itself. If extreme poverty ends, peace can take place."

People living in extreme poverty continue to be considered primarily as those who commit violent acts against which society needs to protect itself. For example, the authorities put in place laws to prosecute people who beg and people who live on the street, and to evict people who are living on land without formally having the right to. These people are the object of real discrimination because they live in poverty.

With this new discussion, we want to have an exchange on **the violence experienced by people living in extreme poverty**, understanding the role they have alongside other actors, towards building peace.

In what way is extreme poverty a violence?

Through what you experience or witness with others, what do you consider to be most violent in extreme poverty? How do you, on your own or together with others, resist the violence of extreme poverty?

What peace do we hope for?

What do these words mean for you: "peace," to have "peace" or to not have "peace"?

What peace is it that you want to contribute to for your family and for others?

You too can share your observations and experiences through the website: www.overcomingpoverty.org
or by email to permanent.forum@atd-fourthworld.org

The "Forum on Overcoming Extreme Poverty" is a network of committed people who want to develop friendship and exchange knowledge about what poor and very poor people teach us, i.e. people who suffer from multiple disadvantages in the areas of education, housing, employment, health and culture; those who are criticised and rejected the most. This forum invites people to join a worldwide movement to overcome extreme poverty, to rebuild communities with people living in extreme poverty, inspired by their lives. This movement expresses itself in the **Letter to Friends Around the World**, which publishes the texts written by its correspondents three times a year, in French, English, Spanish and Portuguese. The Forum on Overcoming Extreme Poverty is run by the International Movement ATD Fourth World, an international NGO whose headquarters are in Pierrelaye, France. Those who join the Forum do so in their own right, and do not have to become members of ATD Fourth World. Our e-mail address is: permanent.forum@atd-fourthworld.org Internet : www.overcomingpoverty.org Subscription \$8/8€ per annum - Support subscription: \$10/10€ per annum.

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**HÉLÈNE PERDEREAU'S
COMMITMENT IS TO
ILLUSTRATE THE TEXTS
OF THE LETTER
ON A FREE-TIME BASIS**

PAGE SETUP:
LYDIE ROUFFET