

LETTER TO FRIENDS AROUND THE WORLD FORUM ON OVERCOMING EXTREME POVERTY



www.overcomingpoverty.org

International Movement ATD Fourth World
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STOP POVERTY: ALL TOGETHER IN DIGNITY

One hundred years ago in France, Joseph Wresinski, ATD Fourth World's founder, was born in an internment camp for "undesirable" foreigners. Throughout his childhood, his heart was twisted by the shame and rage of having to go out before sunrise to earn a few pennies for his family. His mother raised him with the courage and the sense of pride of people who are too often treated with contempt. All his life, Wresinski pushed and inspired people towards a radical refusal to accept poverty.

We are following in his footsteps by launching a major public campaign called "STOP POVERTY: All Together in Dignity". The campaign's Call to Action invites all people to stand up against poverty, just as all of you do. We invite you to sign it and have it signed by others.

Your passions, your successes, your experiences can inspire others. We invite you to help this inspiration to spread like wildfire by contributing to our Stories of Change series.

Some have already started writing these Stories of Change, in the United Kingdom, the Philippines, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and elsewhere. Everywhere in the world there are gems to bring to light – such as the words of Doña Maritza, an activist in Guatemala. At a Festival of Learning, she told us that she no longer felt trapped by

poverty, because she no longer felt ashamed of who she was. She added that today she dares speak to others, and reach out to those even worse off than she is.

In New York, a young woman who helps others in her community told a journalist: "I grew up in a violent neighborhood where there were no community centers or after-school programs — pretty much no place to go but home or the streets. With the help of the Street Library, all of this started to change. The street became a place where we could sit and read, or draw. But most importantly it gave us a space where we could let our imaginations run wild. A place that was violent before turns into a safe place. Some of the young people who used to make trouble changed. I would never have thought that they would become the great people they are today."

This year on 17 October, we will be observing the thirtieth anniversary of the World Day for Overcoming Poverty with all those who can join us.

We are confident and proud that we are together with all of you as we continue on the path to overcoming poverty.

Isabelle Perrin, Director General,
International Movement ATD Fourth World



WORDS FROM THE FORUM ON OVERCOMING EXTREME POVERTY TEAM

In this newsletter, we propose several ways for you to contribute to the public campaign "STOP POVERTY: All Together in Dignity". We invite you to **sign the call to action and get others to sign it too**; we also invite you to tell a real life story that shows that it is possible to join together to put an end to exclusion, to change lives and to create peace.

Some of the "Stories of Change" are presented here. Young people around the world need these stories to keep up with the innumerable challenges which humanity has to face. The first story tells us about Joseph Wresinski, the man behind the *Forum for Overcoming Extreme Poverty* and the *Letter to Friends Around the World*. In France, after years of isolation, a couple finds a place in their neighbourhood,

thanks to the Festival of Learning and to regular meetings with a woman who knew how to reach out to them. In Guatemala, Doña Mónica says: "We poor people can give, too. We're not just here to put our hands out and receive." And in Tanzania, Jenifa tells us of a chance encounter that gave her the courage to learn.

Many of you have already responded to this campaign through the Letters from our Readers section. We invite you to join the conversation launched in our *Discussion Forums* where you can continue to write about where you are and what you are doing.

● **WHAT COUNTS THE MOST IS OUR SHARED COMMITMENT TO OVERCOMING POVERTY**

In 1917, Joseph Wresinski was born in an internment camp for foreign nationals in Angers, France. Being from a family without any means, he experienced at a very young age the injustice and violence of extreme poverty.

In 1957, with the families in an emergency housing camp outside Paris, he founded what is known today as ATD Fourth World. Throughout his life, he actively sought out people in extreme poverty in Europe and all over the world. Everywhere he went, he wanted to learn from them and from people who give the best of themselves to overcome poverty.

Knowing that this struggle, led by people in deep poverty, is both essential and also difficult, in 1980 he founded the Forum on Overcoming Extreme Poverty.

Wresinski wrote: *"The Forum came into being because we wanted to unite all resources and strengths, so that no one would be alone or become discouraged, and so that we could learn together how to move ahead with the poorest people. Whether we are officials, ordinary citizens, representatives of national or international organisations is*



unimportant. What counts is our commitment alongside the most disadvantaged people."

Joseph Wresinski drew his strength from the resistance to poverty from the poorest people; but he also felt he had things in common with what was expressed in the first letters he received from readers of this Letter to Friends.

In November 1983, he wrote to some of the Forum correspondents: *"Dear Friends, it was wonderful to receive your replies to the Letter to Friends.*

Today, I would like to continue this channel of communication between us and between all those who are trying to put an end to human misery. With your help, we can exchange, not only about distress and worries, but especially about what each one of us is doing to help bring relief and hope to those who suffer most. In this way, we will together be laying the foundations of a new kind of development that will exclude no-one and especially not the most unfortunate."



● **UNCOVERING HIDDEN TALENTS**

I used to go regularly to meet the families of a housing project between a railroad track and a highway on the outskirts of a town called Metz. On one of the buildings, on the first floor, the shutters were always closed. That's where Jeanne and Henry live, isolated from the other residents. They have had very hard lives, with numerous health problems and a



little boy who had been taken away by social services. Meeting with them earned me quite a bit of disapproval in the housing project: *'Why bother seeing them?' 'Anyhow, they have nothing to say. They don't do anything, you're wasting your time.'* *'We're not like them, they are not nice people.'*

Each summer, a week of fun creative workshops, with young people and families who want to give time and share their talents, was organised. That year, one of the proposed workshops was a computer workshop. For that, we would need to have access to an electrical power supply. I decided to ask Jeanne and Henry if we could use their power—they agreed without hesitation.

The other residents asked us: *'But why are you asking them? We could easily have supplied you with the electricity.'*

On the first day of the festival, Jeanne and Henry looked out at us through the window all afternoon but didn't come out.

On the second morning, when we reached the housing project, we were surprised to find a table set up outside Jeanne and Henry's window. In front of it was Jeanne, who greeted us and said: *'You, know, I know how to make dolls out of cloth. Can I do a workshop?'* *"That's great! Go for it!"*

At first, the children were reluctant to participate. They had heard others saying that they shouldn't talk to those people. We decided to accompany the children over to Jeanne's table, and by the end of the day it was surrounded by a good-sized crowd. All the children were holding their own little dolls in their hands. [...]

When I think about all the long road traveled with them over the years in order to enable them to finally emerge from the shadows and share what they know, I tell myself that those moments were the keys that let us open the shutters on uncovering hidden talents.

ANNE H., FRANCE

● **WE HAVE SOMETHING TO GIVE TOO**

“We poor people can give, too. We’re not just here to put our hands out and receive.”

Doña Mónica’s assertion reminds me of the many gestures of solidarity I witnessed take place between the families of the community in Guatemala where we lived. It was often the case that the families who chose to help other families would not have “a lot more”, but were, in fact, in the same precarious situation. Even so, they would still lend a helping hand to the others. [...]

One of the many examples that come to mind is that of Doña Julia. She saw close at hand the harsh reality that her neighbor faced with regard to her children’s schooling. Coping alone, the neighbor had been unable to help her three eldest children continue their studies. It was just impossible for her to meet the required costs every day. Her fourth child was keen to continue his studies. But it was impossible for her to enroll him, never mind support him on his path to an education.

One day, during a chat with Doña Julia, she told me that she wanted to help this young adolescent complete his schooling, just as her own children had finished theirs. [...] I saw her talk to other women in the neighborhood as she went in search of a backpack, a pair of pants, some shoes, etc. I saw how she wanted the very best for that family. Some of the other neighbors supported her initiative, and that is

how the boy was able to take the next step on a journey that was, naturally, full of difficulties.

What do such gestures of solidarity, made in the midst of poverty, say about the daily quest for survival? Often I would see the poorest families go to enormous efforts to grow their ties with their neighbors. [...]

Outside projects and aid are very often a one-off, but ties of solidarity and the quest for survival will remain anchored at the very heart of a community. [...]

ELDA G., GUATEMALA



● **LEARNING TO READ WAS THE BEGINNING OF HOPE**

My name is Jenifa and I am a mother of five children. I work at the Fish Market in Dar es Salaam in an area called ‘The Lebanon’ beside the official market. I make tea to sell, cook chapati * and other food for lunch.

In order to survive and support my family I left home at a young age and became a housewife. Until I met my husband I had to fight very hard, but when we came together our situation improved. Even though this was true I still used to feel the pain of not knowing how to read and write. There was no chance of me finding a better job because when I was asked to read I couldn’t and that used to make me feel bad.

It was when I met Rachel and Laurent, that I began to feel hopeful about making a change. They invited me to join a literacy class at the Fish Market. Even though in the beginning I was very shy, worried and lacking confidence I tried to attend all of the classes. My



life is still difficult and sometimes I miss a class because I start work at 4 am, work all through the day and am always running around. Every Tuesday, Thursday and Friday I do all that I can to join the group of learners, even when I have to carry my bucket and the food I sell with me.

It’s not always easy.

A big challenge that I had to face was the judgment of people around me, their unkind words and laughter. They would always joke about me leaving my job to go to a class. But I am determined. [...]

Today my life has changed. Before I felt as though I was disabled, unable to communicate and always silent. Now I can read what’s on the packet, buy at the best prices, give the correct change and I have stopped losing money in my small business. There are changes in my family life too. I can now take the time to read and write with my children and we find ways to support each other. My children are proud of me.

JENIFA M., TANZANIA

* Indian Bread

(Kuandika : Write - Kusoma : Read)

STORIES OF CHANGE

These real life stories from around the world show us it is possible to join together to end exclusion, to change lives and to create peace.

You can read the full length versions and discover more stories at: <https://storiesofchange.atd-fourthworld.org/>

What you all have in common, dear friends and correspondents, is your willingness to find ways to overcome poverty wherever you are.

So please write in and share your own stories to publish as part of the Stories of Change series.

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

- Thank you for your wonderful mission to reduce poverty and encourage people living in poverty to participate
Gracy F. - India
- I listened to RFI on 12 February, the 100th birthday of Father Joseph and I found it very interesting, concerning the poverty-stricken living conditions of certain communities, in particular pygmies, who not only live in extreme poverty but are also stigmatised and rejected. We want

to help them engage in a merciless struggle against misery and poverty, and so we are remaining in constant contact with the Forum and groups in order to learn more. *Lucie Y. - DRC*

- The Moroccan league for citizenship and human rights has decided to organise several activities this year to fight poverty. In October we intend to hold a national march against poverty. *Sedraoui D. - Morocco*



SIGN THE CALL TO ACTION

Wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty, human rights are violated. To come together to ensure that these rights be respected is our solemn duty.
Joseph Wresinski

Poverty is a form of violence. It leads to humiliation and it silences people. It destroys lives. But poverty is not inevitable. Like slavery or discrimination, it can be overcome. Those who endure poverty resist its injustice in countless ways. If we are to confront the challenges facing the world today, we need their intelligence and courage. Today, people who feel outcast are making themselves heard and are taking action. Others are joining them to build a peaceful world where no one is left behind.

I choose to join them in overcoming poverty!

www.poverty-stop.org

SEEN ON THE WEBSITE

No doubt you have already planned activities and projects for the year 2017. Some of you also celebrate the World Day for Overcoming Poverty on 17 October. You can be part of this campaign by:

- telling people about it,
- signing the call to action and asking others to sign it too,
- contributing to the Stories of Change series,
- organising an event for 17 October.

All over the world, people are taking part in the campaign in a wide variety of ways: concerts, marches, communicating in the media (radio, television, newspapers, social media, etc), conferences and round tables.

Would it be possible to link your planned events to this 2017 public campaign: STOP POVERTY: All Together in Dignity? Tell us what you think in the Discussion Forum.

Discussion Forums

Now that you've read
our call to action,
what's possible for you
to organise where you live,
in link with the 2017 campaign?

➤ [Participate in a discussion forum](#)

We would really like to talk to you about this, and include your event on the website.

You can also share your observations and your experiences on the website: www.overcomingpoverty.org or by email: overcomingpoverty@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: overcomingpoverty@atd-fourthworld.org Internet: www.overcomingpoverty.org Subscription \$8/8€ per annum - Support subscription: \$10/10€ per annum. © International Movement ATD Fourth World - Printed by ATD Fourth World - Méry-sur-Oise - No 96 - March 2017.

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM
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