



International Committee for October 17

*"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."
Father Joseph Wresinski*

Statement by Donald Lee, President, International Committee for October 17 at the Special Session of the Seventh Biennial Meeting of the International Committee on 17 May, 2018 at the Campidoglio, Rome, Italy

Madam Mayor, Excellencies, Distinguished Guests and Friends,

The International Committee for October 17 is very honoured that the City of Rome has graciously hosted this special segment of our Seventh Biennial meeting.

Many people upon first encountering the name of the Committee are puzzled by the reference to "October 17". What is the meaning of "October 17"? In fact, it refers to the special day each year when people living in extreme poverty and their allies come together to mark the global commemoration of two very important events —the World Day for Overcoming Poverty and UN International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. The main objective of the Committee is to promote the true meaning and spirit of these twin observances.

The special public session today is an established practice and highlight of the International Committee's biennial meetings where we engage in an open dialogue with people and organizations outside of the Committee. To focus the dialogue today, we have proposed the theme *"Coming together with those furthest behind to build an inclusive world of universal respect for human rights and dignity"*. This is also the theme that has been selected for the upcoming 2018 commemoration of the United Nations International Day for the Eradication of Poverty.

You will be interested to learn that this year's theme, as in previous years, was selected by the United Nations after careful consultations with activists and people from grassroots organizations in 18 countries across 5 continents. This consultative process for the selection of the theme is quite unique and underscores the Committee's commitment to inclusiveness and participation, especially of those most excluded and furthest behind.

"Coming together" as it is used in the theme means more than mere inclusion and participation. It implies a partnership and solidarity with those furthest behind in their daily struggles to overcome poverty. Perhaps, most importantly, it also implies the creation and protection of "safe" spaces where people living in poverty can speak openly without fear of discrimination or retribution.

When the United Nations launched the Millennium Development Goals in 2000, it set itself the goal to eliminate extreme poverty around the world. However, the actual plan to implement this global poverty goal became a matter of concern for many people, when the United Nations General Assembly agreed to set the

target to halve — not eradicate — the number of people living in extreme poverty by 2015.

The initial expectations of many people living in extreme poverty and their allies were crushed by what they perceived as a decision to effectively condemn more than half a billion people to continue to suffer the severe deprivations of extreme poverty beyond 2015. When the United Nations reported in 2015 that global poverty had been reduced by more than half, this was small consolation to the men, women and children who had been left behind.

The disturbing conclusion is that the men, women and children who had been left behind were more than likely to be the ones *who were furthest behind*.

Why? because efforts to reduce poverty are likely to reach the more visible and accessible poor communities, rather than people in the fourth world — specifically, the less visible, most marginalized and socially excluded people in society.

Therefore, ATD Fourth World and other NGOs lobbied hard, to ensure that the new Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations would "endeavour to reach the furthest behind first."

When Father Joseph's Wresinski issued his call for all people to come together to fight extreme poverty on 17 October 1987 — the first observance of the World Day for Overcoming Extreme Poverty — he launched a powerful social momentum that demonstrated to the world that when human rights are violated, extreme poverty will thrive in the midst of prosperity and plenty, and those furthest behind will be forced to suffer social exclusion, discrimination, injustice and violence.

From his first-hand experience of working with people living in poverty he was convinced that extreme poverty could not be eradicated unless the least visible, socially excluded people in society are treated with dignity and can fully enjoy their human rights.

Such an approach, based upon full respect for the dignity and human rights of people living in extreme poverty, can catalyse and sustain a transformation in social interactions — a social transformation that is inclusive, and explicitly recognizes the knowledge and experience of people living in poverty and their vital roles in creating pathways to peaceful and sustainable societies.

If peace is indeed the universal goal of all people, then only a world free from extreme poverty will provide the sustainable foundation for building peaceful and inclusive societies.