



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

# Fourth World Information

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## Acting Together for a Europe of Dignity for All

In early February, ATD Fourth World held a major conference on European poverty at the University of Warsaw. Entitled “Acting Together for a Europe of Dignity for All”, the conference brought together not merely activists in the fight against poverty and politicians from all over Europe, but uniquely some of the poor themselves. Chris Cragg, a British journalist, went to find out what it was all about...

At first it seemed like a rock concert. “Say a greeting in Polish, Dzień dobry” - said the voice with the microphone. “Dzoon doopry” boomed out 300 odd voices. “Oh, try it again!” said the voice. “Jane dobra” replied the audience. “That’s better” said the voice, now try Spanish. “Hola!” responded the crowd. And so it went on. Dutch, German, French, Hungarian, Romanian and even Arabic followed. Only the English sounded a little hollow. “Hullo” said the voice and everybody laughed and boomed back: “Huulloo!”

The whole process must have taken at least 20 minutes, but by the end of it the ATD Fourth World European conference was in fine voice. Who on earth were these people and could they possibly be serious?

They certainly were. ATD Fourth World volunteers live on the minimum wage of the country of their activities. They are **dedicated to the elimination of extreme poverty and working with the poor to help achieve this**. The Movement was founded in 1957 by Joseph Wresinski, a forceful French priest of Polish extraction, in an emergency housing camp in Noisy-le-Grand, near Paris. From a very poor background himself, Wresinski maintained that poverty was an **infringement of human rights and that it was everybody’s sacred duty to fight it**. To emphasise the “everybody” the Movement was open to all regardless of religion.

He also had one profound insight and another powerful, if simple idea. The insight was that those outside extreme poverty simply failed to notice it, in spite of the fact that it was often staring them in the face. It was not just because they looked and turned away. It was that the socially excluded became invisible for a host of interlocking reasons. **Extreme poverty was often too ashamed to show its face**. The extremely poor often hid themselves away, too embarrassed to be seen. Equally, poverty ground down the spirit and dulled the mind. Constant battles with authority and lack of education created fear and made people hide away.

The idea was, to the cynical, all too obvious. If you wanted to help the extremely poor, you did not merely have to ask them what they wanted. You had to help them achieve it, with the emphasis on “them”. It was about personal achievement by the poor and their empowerment. **Fighting poverty was about restoring self-**

**esteem, even more than it was about money**. If you wanted to help the poor, doing things for them was not enough. Furthermore, **poverty had to be tackled holistically**. Employment, housing, education, health care and access to public services were all part of the same constant struggle that kept the poor in poverty and often invisible. Lack of financial resources was just a symptom of something else.

So Wresinski threw out the soup kitchen approach and started to build a community. This community globally has now grown to number some 370 volunteers and some 100,000 members in support, many of whom have experienced extreme poverty personally. And if the organisation was nearly 50 years old, it did not seem so in the largest hall of Warsaw University. In the linguistic melting pot of the auditorium, the average age could not have been more than 30.

No sooner had the ice been broken by the multilingual greeting, than delegations from 16 countries introduced themselves. Belgium, the Czech Republic, the UK, Eire, Hungary, Luxembourg, Hungary, Germany, Spain, Russia, Poland, Romania, Italy, Holland Switzerland and the Slovak Republic were all represented. **Yet what was perhaps unique in a forum of this kind was that many of the delegates had seen real poverty themselves and in many cases were still suffering**. They were here to tell it how it was and share their experiences. Furthermore, they were gathered under the auspices of Aleksander Kwasniewski, President of Poland and Walter Schwimmer, the Secretary-General of the Council of Europe, the European Economic and Social Committee and funded by the European Commission.

In effect, **many of the politicians who have responsibility for fighting European poverty were going to meet people with personal experience of it** and with luck hear their opinions. In addition, they were also going to meet an extremely determined group of ATD Fourth World volunteers and representatives from smaller anti-poverty groups from all around Europe and hear stories of often distressing inhumanity, passing as official beneficence.

Such stories were legion. There was the British woman, ill in hospital, who was asked to sign a “routine” form without understanding it only to discover that it was a document that would put up her children for adoption on the grounds that she was too poor to keep them. Fortunately, she got advice from a friend who explained its implications and she refused to sign. In fact this is a remarkably common phenomenon right across Europe. One Swiss woman underwent a particularly bitter form of blackmail. She could only keep three of her youngest children, if she sent the older three boys to a special school, where she soon lost touch with two of

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them. As another Italian mother put it: "I was too poor to be allowed to keep my children, but not poor enough to be re-housed so that I could keep them."

**It takes a certain kind of courage to speak up in this way in front of an audience, particularly one in which sit politicians and bureaucrats with official titles.** Most of the revelations came in small working groups, structured around the themes of support rather than dependency, belonging and participation. The extent to which society alienates and patronises the poor and how it sucks the self-confidence out of them was illustrated by one Swiss man who admitted that he felt intimidated by officialdom because he spoke a Swiss-French patois and was laughed at for his lack of education. It made him both angry and frightened at the same time. In practice, once he started to talk to the group, his words flowed both freely and almost poetically about his situation.

This was not unusual. Once they feel confident enough to speak, many of the most deprived have an eloquent directness that goes directly to the point. One woman peered at the name tag of an EU official over lunch and simply asked: "Can I call you Jean?" Still others, once talking, almost could not stop in spite of the fact that their words were being simultaneously translated by a small army of the University of Warsaw's finest young linguists.

Just how easy it is to fall out of the social network and into trouble was shown by a young German speaking Swiss woman, who had suffered a nervous allergy in high school and left with too few of the educational qualifications that Swiss employers regard as obligatory. She had sunk remorselessly down the ladder to the point where a job as a waitress was a dream, but now her state social security allowance had run out. Meanwhile an Irish group were trying to do something about a Dublin estate with 400 families, where drugs abuse, AIDS, unemployment, poor schooling and depression were rife. There was an uncomfortable paradox here. Unschooled themselves, when they wanted to learn about their children's education, they felt intimidated by the teachers unless they went as a group. Yet as a group the headmaster would not see them.

Viewed across Europe, there are plenty of well-attested delusions about poverty in different countries. "What! You have poverty in England?" was often said with surprise. Yet if there is something that binds the states of the European Union and those countries about to join, it is that **deprivation and poverty are not only prevalent, but the causes are remarkably similar.** Poor health and education combines with bad housing or no housing at all to create the kind of defeat and depression that are the roads to invisibility and exclusion. To use a particularly fatuous British example, if you fall back with the rent, you can't move to more appropriate and possibly cheaper housing until the back-rent is paid. You are often stuck waiting for eviction. As somebody remarked: "The poverty-trap is a cross-cultural issue."

Of course, it was stressed many times that the ATD Fourth World approach to helping the poor takes considerably more time and effort than the standard format of dropping a coin in a begging bowl. One volunteer in Alsace spoke of the effort that had had to be made, first to overcome the suspicions of caravan-living families, and then to actually visit them in situ. However much they liked him, and perhaps because they did like him, they were too ashamed to show him where they actually lived. One not-so-obvious point made

in the conference was that **the time taken to get the dispossessed to act for themselves or indeed articulate their needs was considerably longer than the attention-span of politicians and bureaucrats.** In this brave new Europe, the latter tend to jet in, pronounce and jet-out, but not this time in Warsaw.

Speaking of time, an English teacher, working in Gdansk found out more or less by accident a huge pocket of poverty in the port, where some people after a variety of misfortunes were stacked five people to a room. Parents in this situation knew only too well that the chances of their children getting a higher education were virtually nil and they were thus trapped for a further generation in abject poverty. He went to work to see if he could help and went shopping with them to prepare for a Christmas party on the estate. "It took forever, as everybody debated what exactly was the right choice of food. But this Christmas, they did it all on their own!" he noted proudly. Yet underneath this affiliated volunteer's cheerfulness was an under-current of anger. Poland recently cut the state alimony paid to women whose husbands cannot pay, by 50%.

Indeed sheer outrage is often part of the underlying motivation of volunteers when faced by inhumanity. One such person, Elzbieta Kauch, was working in the railway station at Kielce, a small Polish town, when she allowed some homeless people to wash their hands and faces in the station bathroom. The reaction was immediate, not only did the passengers object strongly but the station authorities threatened her with the sack, if she did it again. At this Kauch saw red and repeated the "offence" risking her job. Not the least of the achievements of the conference was that Jerzy Hausner, Deputy Prime Minister of Poland and Minister for Economy, Labour and Social Policy agreed to go to Kielce and look into the matter. The railway authorities may be surprised at this outcome, but it was a triumph for the petite grandmother, who has now been involved with ATD Fourth World for two years.

**Such stories are a healthy antidote to some of the rhetoric that peppers the documentation of the EU and the pronouncements of governments on poverty.** As Jérôme Vignon, Director of Social Protection and Social Integration at the European Commission, freely admitted, "the European Community has a nice line in clichés about poverty." Yet for all the rhetoric over 55 million Europeans in 15 member states live in poverty and this number is unlikely to go down as the Community expands. On the contrary it will grow exponentially. The first figure means that one in ten children live in families with no employment.

Yet if the conference was left in no doubt about the scale of the task ahead of them, there was also a **new mood of co-operation.** Officers of both the European Commission and the Council of Europe had both encountered the situation on the ground. As Aleksander Kwasniewski, the Polish President wrote in a personal message: "The louder we hear the voice of ATD Fourth World, the greater we are aware of the extent of poverty."

If it does nothing else, the conference, with its workshops, its singing, its linguistic explorations, its painting and its sculptures, its sense of inclusion, will have **brought the invisible poor closer to the heart of European power.** The message was very direct. As the homeless Frenchman shyly said as he unveiled his small painting to the audience: "This is what I want. It is a home."