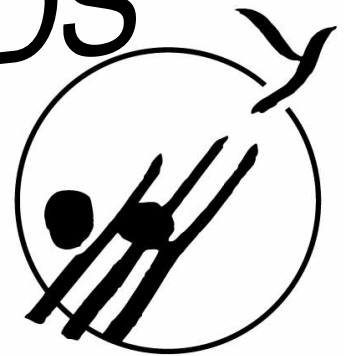


LETTER TO FRIENDS AROUND THE WORLD

Permanent Forum on Extreme Poverty in the World



International Movement ATD Fourth World
107, avenue du Général Leclerc - 95480 Pierrelaye - France

December 2006 – N° 65

Happy New Year 2007 to all of you!
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EDITORIAL **Are we really so different from one another?**

Throughout the world, within very different realities, are we not performing acts, each of us in our own way, that express our thirst for harmony, for peace, for justice, for generosity?

The midwife and the employees of the Motherless Babies Home in Nigeria accept being paid very little, without complaint, "because of the babies", motivated by the same impulse as the young people of the Villanueva Cultural Centre in Argentina, who offer free classes to the children in their neighbourhood. In Nabaa, just outside of Beyrouth, it is not easy to keep the peace between the local residents and the many refugees that have poured into the area. However, it is these very same residents, who are themselves very poor, who have made the effort to take in and to offer their services to the refugees. The book "Gold under the Bridge" describes the living conditions and the courage of people living in

extreme poverty in the Philippines, based on the story of Mercedita's family, that lives under a bridge. Mercedita, who died a few days after the book was launched, said: "I am very happy with our book. I will remain alive, especially for my children." In another country of Asia, a little eleven year-old girl whose family is too poor to pay for her education, is offended when the tourists that she spontaneously assists for free offer her money.

To be treated with dignity, to demonstrate one's usefulness, to manifest one's solidarity, are vital needs which are common to all of us, and which we all aspire to satisfy in order to affirm our place in this common world of ours. The examples reproduced in this Letter to Friends reveal an active effort to create a humanity which is indivisible and fraternal. They confirm that we are not so different from one another.

HUGUETTE REDEGELD
VICE PRESIDENT

★ THE LITTLE GIRL

"LAST SPRING, I went to Qianling Mausoleum with a foreign visitor. The mausoleum was built inside a hill called Liang Shan. While we were climbing up the hill, a little girl with two strings of souvenirs followed us. She spontaneously showed us the position of the mausoleum gateway; she also told us some local legends related to the mausoleum hostess, the famous Chinese Empress Wu Zetian. The girl was just like a little tour guide to us, and I translated everything she said to the foreign visitor. When we climbed up to the top of the hill, the foreign visitor asked me how much we should pay the little girl for her diligent service. When I asked the little girl, she said: "My help was for free." Then she showed me a string of twelve traditional Chinese Zodiacal Animals made of local cloth, and asked me if we would like to buy one for 20 RMB. I asked the foreign visitor and he shook his head and told

me he didn't like it. Then he took 20 RMB and asked me to give it to the little girl for her service, but not accept the string of twelve cloth animals. Right then, I saw her eyes were suddenly full of anger. She was offended.

"No! My help is for free! The souvenir is for sale!" she said slowly and then held a hostile silence.

On our way down the hill, I saw that the little girl was coming down too, so I tried my best to make small talk with her and found out that she was from a village nearby. Because her family was too poor to afford her primary school education, she began to sell some little souvenirs to support her studies. At that moment, I was deeply touched. She was such a little girl, at the most eleven years old! While I told the foreign visitor what I heard, he was very upset and he asked me what he should do. I told him: "If you really like the souvenir now, please buy it! If you still don't like the souvenir, please don't!"

WILLIAM CHENG, ASIA

★ **“WE ARE A GROUP OF YOUNG PEOPLE** from the West District of Rosario in Argentina. Last year we took part in a social inclusion programme set up by the town authorities entitled “Youth Leaders”. This programme trains young people from different organisations so that they can disseminate information at the local, regional and national level and in turn run activities within their own organisations.

We are a group of about 12 young people aged between 14 and 19 who live in the Villa Nueva area and who want to bring some life into our neighbourhood. We got off on the right foot. We offer free classes to children from the area three times a week. Those who receive this additional tutoring are aged between 6 and 12 and they face the same difficulties as us, financially speaking. There are currently more than 40 who come.

Since April, we have been running a clown workshop at the youth centre. Young people from different colleges in the town are now offering to give us a hand, although for three months we had to struggle alone. And it is very difficult to respond to all the many demands. (...)”

THE YOUNG PEOPLE FROM THE YOUNG PEOPLE’S CULTURAL CENTRE OF VILLANUEVA, ARGENTINA



★ **‘GOLD UNDER THE BRIDGE’**

“IN MANILA, AS PART OF THE CELEBRATION of October 17, International Day for Overcoming Extreme Poverty, a book entitled ‘Gold Under the Bridge’ was launched at the Philippine Women’s University. The book aims to share with a large public the reality and the courage of people living in extreme poverty.

‘Gold Under the Bridge’ tells the life story of the family of Mercedita, which also represents the many families I have known living under the Bridge of Quirino Avenue, in the cemetery, along the canal, and beside a busy highway, who continue to search for solutions to get out of poverty. Their untiring search for a solution concerning their situation is clearly reflected in their daily activities, from regular conversations I and other ATD Fourth World full-time volunteers have had with them. The book tries to capture these details as elements of knowledge of their expertise on fighting poverty, from what Mercedita’s family chose to share over the years, from a relationship of joint action with her family through the actions of the street library, the monthly forums and the regular presence in the community. It also tries to give elements of understanding through Mercedita’s different reflections concerning their situation, and a full-time volunteer’s reflections as a witness to the different events in her family’s life and her resilience towards these problems.

A few days after the book launch, Mercedita, after years of fighting against tuberculosis, passed away. I strongly remember her words on our last conversation when she got hold of the book: *“I am very happy with our book. Now, even if I die, I will remain alive, especially for my children...”* True enough, she will continue to inspire me and hopefully other people as well to continue to search for people like Mercedita and to take them as essential partners in fighting against poverty, rather than as problems to be solved.”

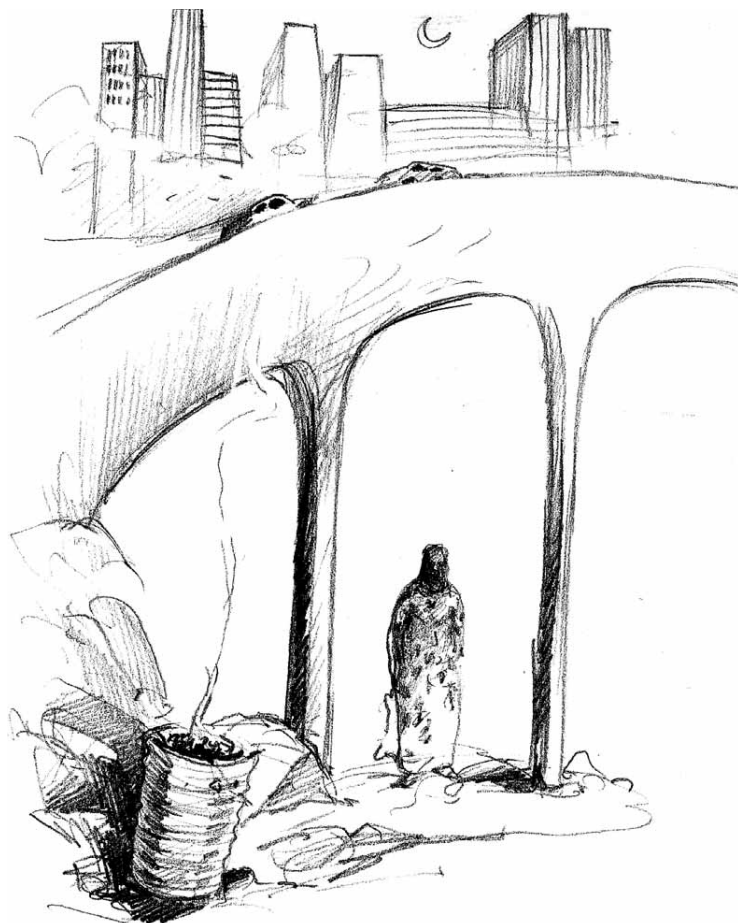
MARILYN GUTIERREZ, AUTHOR OF ‘GOLD UNDER THE BRIDGE’, ANVIL PUBLISHING HOUSE, 117 PAGES

★ **“THERE ARE PRESENTLY 10 BABIES** in the Motherless Babies Home at Nsukka being run by the National Council for Women Societies, Nsukka Branch. With some happenings around, one would think people do not bother themselves anymore with the needy and the underprivileged. When one, however, takes up the donation entry in the Motherless Babies Home one could notice that people go in there everyday and some, several times in a week or in a month. They do donate things, and I am sure, seeing the babies in good health gives them some joy. The matron and the other workers in the home are not paid much, because the money is not there. Nevertheless, they do not actually complain because of the babies, though, they at times request the possibility of wage increase.

I met a Bank manager last week and we just got talking. His discussion was virtually on humanity and caring for others, for according to him ‘that is what we the privileged should devote time for’. He really talked about encouraging and supporting those less privileged than we are. He was quite sad that for a while he had not visited the Motherless Babies Home due to pressure of work, being in the past a regular visitor. He was just reflecting on things bothering him without realizing that I too have a soft spot for the Home and the Babies.

The Children Centre of the University of Nigeria has just concluded its holiday programme, and one of the projects is ‘Caring for Others’ whereby the children visit and care for the babies at the home, getting them presents, interacting and ‘adopting’ the babies.”

JOSEPHINE A., MOTHERLESS BABIES CENTER, NIGERIA



★ **“DURING THE WEEK OF 17 OCTOBER**, on the occasion of the commemoration of the World Day for the Eradication of Poverty, we organized a series of activities with the three rural learning centres where we work on the theme of Education, Art and Intercultural Relations, in the aim of promoting the self-esteem [of the local children] and validating their ancestral knowledge. We do this through art, as a pedagogical approach which allows people to be more creative and to better understand their social context. It’s a beautiful experience to learn from them and their parents how mankind can live in respect and in harmony with nature. These children lack a great deal on the material level, but they have a grand and noble spirit.

On 15 October, on a local radio station, we broadcast a programme with a group of guests on the theme of poverty, food, family, and assistance and its impact – the extent to which it is positive and to which extent it is negative. Then on the 16th, we organized an encounter for schools in the community of Santa Elena, in order for the children to be able to exchange their artistic works in ceramic, cloth, and paint, and their knowledge through tales, legends, and songs. The teachers had a parallel encounter, likewise sharing their experiences – it was like a symbol of unity.

On 17 October, a similar programme took place in the Lampa de Oro de Andahuaylas, but this event began with a procession through the town streets. We then gathered in the park where a very joyful exchange took place between children from towns and others from rural areas, in the form of songs, poems, theatre. Banners were displayed that declared a respect for our culture and its revival.

We coordinated all of these activities with the Warmayllu Association, which means ‘community of children’. It’s a small NGO whose headquarters are in Cajamarca.”

ALEJANDRO G., PERU

★ ***In the context of the “Associação Qualificar Para Incluir” (Qualification for Inclusion Association), a young person sent us the following text. This association is currently accompanying 180 people in training (165 youths and 15 adults) who had a hard time when they first entered the program “to have a positive self-image.”***

MY NEIGHBORHOOD

“WHAT ARE THINGS LIKE IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD?” They ask me that every time I introduce myself giving the name of our area which has such a heavy atmosphere.

There, you see 13 year-olds who are starting out on the wrong track without seeing the consequences of what they do. They start taking drugs early. They start with a few puffs and end up in dark corners chain smoking joints. Then they do things they never thought they would: when they need to buy more drugs, they steal, and when they are high, they smash windows. [...] But they don’t just get high by accident. It’s their friends’ influence, or their way of escaping problems. I see kids my age or younger getting trapped in this. Sometimes it’s even kids who have done everything to become someone in life, but were curious to try drugs... They end up just as addicted as the others, they want to become gang leaders, they think that if they smoke a joint, steal a laptop and do a girl, they’ll be respected... But no, they’ll be useless, they’ll end up depending on welfare, or maybe in prison. This is how the cycle of poverty never stops, because they’ll be absentee dads, they’ll never be a good example, they’ll be bad examples...

Three years ago, I was on the brink too [...]. The only way I got out of it was with the help of a house where I discovered the true meaning of many words. There, I discovered other people and other ways to spend my time.

Now I can say that I have great friends and I know what unity means. Now I no longer run away from challenges because I’m afraid I “won’t know how.” And I already have a life plan that I am carrying out step by step.

I don’t want to forget my past, [...] I want to keep it as the example of a life I must change, so that I’ll have a better future eventually.”

EDUARDO JORGE F. (AGE 16), PORTUGAL

★ ***Our friends from Lebanon have shared the difficulties they have faced over these last few months.***

“THE POPULATION OF NABAA EXPERIENCED MOMENTS OF GREAT PANIC, especially at the beginning of the war. A major bridge runs through our neighbourhood, close to residences, and so people lived in the fear that the bridge would be bombed.

Because it’s close to Beyrouth, our neighbourhood saw an influx of refugees. There was a constant flow of new arrivals. The residents are very poor, and this influx of refugees only added to the practical difficulties of carrying out their daily lives. We didn’t know where to begin!

First, we tried to calm the panic that was driving people to leave without knowing where to go... The newly arrived refugees were taken in by extended family members, by people from the same village; they crowded into small homes, into schools, into public buildings.

Then we tried to organize our everyday lives: food, sleep, personal hygiene, cleanliness ...

We contacted the municipal authorities to ask them to disinfect the streets. We organized activities for the refugee children as well as the neighbourhood children in order to keep them from loitering about in the streets.

We helped some of the refugees to find work, in order to support their families.

And finally, with other associations located in the neighbourhood, we created a Committee for solidarity with all of civil society. We thus learned how to work together and to coordinate our aid. We now have a project to provide school books and other materials to the refugee children, for the new school year.

It’s sometimes difficult to maintain good relations between the local residents and the refugees. The residents of Nabaa are very poor and live in precarious conditions; nevertheless, supported and encouraged by our association, Beitouna, they’ve made the effort to receive the refugees, and to help them install electricity and water reservoirs. It’s very poor people who have offered their services.

We received a telephone call from a very poor woman from the Nabaa neighbourhood who now lives in India. She wanted to have the latest news from her former neighbours, and to express her solidarity with her friends on the other side of the world. She made the effort, in spite of the cost of the phone call and the language problem.

All of these gestures of friendship are an encouragement to us and to the residents of Nabaa to continue what we’re doing.

Working together through the Committee has enabled us to think together. We’d like to continue on this road together.”

SR. THÉRÈSE R., SAKO M., LEBANON

Let's continue dialoguing on modern means of communication as used by those who know poverty. Here are some extracts of the reactions of Forum correspondents to the Editorial of Letter n° 61.

★ **ALIOU S., OF THE SAWADI ASSOCIATION, SENEGAL:** *"it is through communication that the poor meet in small groups to begin dialoguing about social and other communal activities in order to survive. In other words, communication has always been the strength of the poor. (...) The computer and the NET are still a luxury in certain localities. On the other hand, wireless, television, and the telephone are beginning to be integrated into the daily lives of populations quite distant from large urban areas.. (...) I have been persuaded to conduct a literacy programme in a rural area in my place of birth. Use of the "calculator" as a teaching tool has been the greatest innovation in this programme. Participants from poor families have used, for the first time, a "calculating machine". Each learner having a calculator of his own has gone on to practice and become familiar with it and to finally adopt it in his everyday activities. This has also given access to another tool more « prized » today, the digital mobile phone. Through lessons for recognizing and writing numbers, and with the calculator as an accessory, reading is no longer a secret for these people, thanks to the assimilation of numbers.. (...)".*

★ **ESTER C., OF THE M.A.M. NGO (MOVEMENT FOR THE ABOLITION OF MISERY) IN ARGENTINA,** recalls that the only means of communication in their group was by word of mouth. So she has some questions when confronted with modern communication technologies which, in her opinion, forget about the value of the spoken word. Nevertheless she gives an example of the benefit of technology: *"Without a doubt, when the mobile phone arrived, it changed our lives. Distances and emergencies were not the same and this allowed us to integrate into the daily life of the small community. (...) After the death of a baby of one of our group's members, the friend responsible for the community decided to buy a mobile phone to avoid having to live through such a hard time while being so far away. His attitude was an example for all, all the more so since he bought it by credit on his own salary."*

★ **MARTINE B., REPPER NETWORK:** *"... Internet has helped and simplified the network which has nearly three hundred recipients throughout the world and which is concerned with helping street children. Seven years ago, only 10% had Internet. Now, only 20 do not have it yet. Information exchanges are more numerous, more rapid and more efficient. The experiences of some are known to the others and each can draw on the examples with which they are concerned."*

★ **THE KOOGL-TAABA ASSOCIATION, BURKINA FASO:** *"... the association for the moment is preoccupied by the famine which is at the doors of our dear peasants and parents in the village. In many regions, including those which traditionally have always been free from starvation, cereals are rare, if not simply beyond the purses of the poor peasants. (...) The upheaval produced these days in communications assumes, more than a simple technological revolution, the complete re-arrangement of all that humanity understands of the world surrounding it. The new media represent powerful means for education and cultural enrichment, commercial activity, participation in political life, and dialogue and intercultural understanding. This technology can be a means of resolving human problems, promoting the integral development of people, creating a world governed by justice, peace, and love ..."*

*Communications
touch all aspects of life.
Send your experiences and thoughts by the web
forum.permanent@atd-fourthworld.org
or by post.*

HÉLÈNE PERDEREAU'S COMMITMENT IS TO ILLUSTRATE THE TEXTS OF THE LETTER ON A FREE-TIME BASIS.
PAGE SETUP : LYDIE ROUFFET

The "Permanent Forum on Extreme Poverty in the World." is a network of committed people who want to develop friendship and exchange knowledge about what the poor and very poor 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 who want to be part of a movement rejecting extreme poverty worldwide to join it, to rebuild communities with the poorest, 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 and Spanish. The Permanent Forum is run by the International Movement ATD Fourth World, an international NGO whose headquarters are at Pierrelaye, France. Those who join the forum do so in their own right, and are not obliged to become members of the ATD Fourth World. Our e-mail address is: forum.permanent@atd-quartmonde.org
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