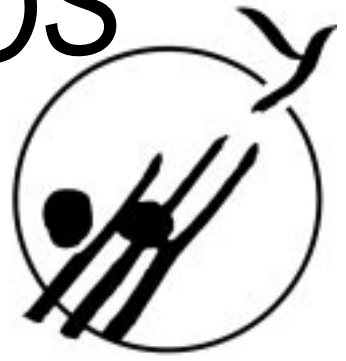


LETTER TO FRIENDS AROUND THE WORLD

Permanent Forum on Extreme Poverty in the World



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

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Editorial Our path lies before us

IN LATE SEPTEMBER 2005 SOME 50 PEOPLE FROM TEN COUNTRIES around the Mediterranean basin took up the challenge consisting in taking steps towards each other to live together and think for four days about the shared theme of concern about the situation and future of the poorest. This happened at the La Baume Centre in Aix-en-Provence (France) at a seminar entitled **“Contribution of very poor families to cross-cultural dialogue in the information society”**. We told you about this seminar in number 61 of Letter to Friends around the world.

In his speech to participants, Eugen Brand, General Representative of ATD Fourth World, identified the challenges: *“The path before us is made up of questions and concerns that we need to share with you. Your experiences of life, actions and thoughts will make it possible to examine these issues in greater depth. (...) At a time when throughout the world we constantly hear about the importance of participation, do we know what is meant by the authentic participation of the poorest? In our societies it is still very unusual to seek to understand the way of thinking that very poor people derive from their experience - not only to change their living conditions but also to contribute to the future of humanity. Your written contributions demonstrate your long-term commitment. You emphasise that this meeting should not be thought easy, something that can take place at the drop of a hat. In reality it is necessary to have the support of people who commit themselves and take action to enable participation of the poorest, which is a guarantee of everybody’s participation. (...) What can we do to ensure that this meeting between the very poor and the rest of society becomes a long-term process and produces a transformation, originating from this very meeting? Everywhere we hear the same questions: who am I; who are we when faced with the families’ insecurity and extreme poverty? Behind this pressing question, for each of us there is the painful question of suffering. Who am I when faced with the suffering of others? This is when loneliness that is unbearable and destructive if it lasts for too long can accumulate within us and between us. (...) When we dare to take the path that leads us into the heart of the despair felt by the poorest, we have to agree to go beyond our frames and points of reference, whatever they may be. We have to accept we may not always have the words needed, we have to accept silence, and we also have to accept that we will come to know ourselves. On this path, we need to be supported and guided, together with others. Isn’t this where we should create links with the*

information society? (...) For the poorest and for all of us, what is at stake is an information society that is able not only to associate data but also becomes capable of bringing people and countries together in a single destiny (...).”

All the participants, be they representatives of associations, academics, locally-based players, social workers or trainers have in common their commitment to very underprivileged people and families. The way they have joined together is like a jigsaw puzzle, each piece of which bears witness to their efforts to come together, to be available for each other. Each participant’s qualities were revealed during the various stages of this Mediterranean seminar: plenary sessions, working groups, creative workshops, commemoration at the Place de l’Espérance in Marseille around the Commemorative Stone in honour of victims of extreme poverty and visits to other associations.

Messages of support were sent by Dr Ismail Serageldine, Director of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt, and also by the UNESCO French National Committee (see page 2). In his welcoming speech, Mr Pierre Rastoin, the President of the La Baume Centre said: *“La Baume is a centre for training, listening, unfettered debate. It is open to all, without exclusion. (...) Our centre is extremely pleased to welcome your inter-regional seminar, the aim of which is to understand how the poorest families can make a contribution to the dialogue between people from different cultures, because this is at the heart of our own project. (...) Your presence amongst us sows peace, a peace that is so fragile and priceless. The poorest, who are often the first victims of conflicts, must have a leading role in the dialogue between all men and women of goodwill, which is the only way to achieve peace. Your Permanent Forum is the ideal place for this dialogue. The presence of your seminar in our house is a great blessing”*.

In addition, Permanent Forum correspondents from Africa, Latin America, Europe and Asia sent their thoughts and descriptions of their experiences linked to the seminar’s theme.

The volunteer interpreters were both discreet and very much present. A dynamic and highly competent ATD Fourth World team from the PACA region (Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur) provided reception and logistics services, absolutely vital for the success of such a gathering.

This edition of the Letter to Friends explains how this challenge was taken up, and describes this fragile and encouraging exchange of experiences, achieved thanks to the determination of each person involved. Our path lies before us.

HUGUETTE REDEGELD, VICE PRESIDENT

Mediterranean Seminar : “Contribution of very poor families

MESSAGES OF SUPPORT

The French National Commission for UNESCO:

“ (...) The focus of the Seminar beginning today is on giving the underprivileged access to culture. By remaining as close as possible to the daily realities experienced by people living in extreme poverty, the aim is not only to enable us to deepen our knowledge about these people, but also to give them access through culture to dialogue and communication, and in this way help to change the way they live. (...) The French National Commission for UNESCO therefore offers its unreserved support for your Seminar (...). Via this message the Commission would like to join you in encouraging all the participants to continue the extremely fruitful discussions begun by ATD Fourth World, and in expressing the hope that your conclusions will reinforce the future work of UNESCO in this field.”

Dr. Ismaïl Serageldine, Director, Biblioteca Alexandrina, Egypt, greatly regretted that he was not able to be present at the seminar:

“ (...) It is a great honour for me to send you a few words to express my unbounded support for your work discussing these vital matters which are so important to worldwide society in its entirety. (...) Access to knowledge and information are the most decisive means for bringing peoples together to promote understanding and awareness, in other words a common commitment. (...) A worldwide partnership must link up the most underprivileged with the world’s networks, and the partners in this struggle must also penetrate into these deprived communities. By establishing a record of the local initiatives, and consulting people about the questions that concern them, a platform would be constituted to develop a shared vision of the resources that need to be implemented. (...)”

MONDAY 26th SEPTEMBER 2005: “LIVING TOGETHER, or the daily intercultural dialogues”

In the small working groups, we began the discussions with the theme “living together”, that is to say whether or not the very poor find their place in the community in which they are living, whether or not they mix with the other groups of people in their surroundings: groups which belong to another social level than theirs, or another area, another country. The object of the discussions was to see how the intercultural dialogue is lived between very poor people and others in their environment, how the very poor begin to get out of extreme poverty by already coming out of their confinement. Here are extracts from the discussions of the various working groups.

● With whom are we committed? Who are those who suffer, who live with us and who preoccupy us most?

As a basis for our exchanges, we who so wished, in the seminary, to meet us on the human level, have joined the humanity of those who preoccupy us because of their extreme poverty. We made them exist by naming them. Here are a few examples:

– “I think that the hamlets near my home are the poorest because the people have no work. Most of the children leave school at 7 years of age. Many children die because of the toxic waste, and the hospital is 10 kms. away. At present we give reading lessons and now the situation of some of the women has begun to improve. They begin to know how to read names so as to be able to take the bus and go to the hospital. People suffer very much because they have to go several kilometres to get water. I have created a small café and when we have the time we meet the youngsters and talk about what we want to build together.” (Hassan)

– “With me, I think that the poorest are the refugees. From the health point of view the rest of society’s way of looking at the inhabitants of the camps is not very positive. There they only receive the most basic medical services. In the biggest camp, less than 1 square kilometre, there are 11.000 inhabitants with only one dispensary and one doctor. There

is only one school for boys and one for girls.” (Wafa)

– “95% of the lepers are the poorest of the poor. They are always very isolated because of the traditions and customs of society resulting from the time when leprosy could not be cured. It was also considered to be due to a ‘curse’. This isolation results from several factors: family, psychological, economic, cultural.” (Nader)

● But to live together, must we not simply first “exist”? Exist officially:

“Some people are too poor to register their marriage because it costs too much (for the medical examination, and for the required papers).” (Hala)

We have estimated how this absence of civil recognition is serious, also because it is transmitted to the children:

“A woman married without registration cannot give birth in the public services because she is officially a spinster. These children have no rights at all except that of “the right of prison”. (Thérèse)

“These children are not included in statistics. In our programme, we can say that we have approximately 3% of the poor children we meet, who have no identity. This number gets bigger from generation to generation.” (Hala)

to cross-cultural dialogue in the information society”

But also and above all else, exist in the eyes of others.

For the very poor to exist, they must be able to give. For the very poor to give, we must learn to receive:

– “During a meeting, fifteen years later, young gypsies said that the school which they hated before, they loved because they had been recognised in an essential part of their identity, Music.” (Claude)

– “It is important to exist for somebody and to express oneself to others: to be able to say who I am, where I come from, what I would like. For me the very important moments have always been those when one could share, where the sharing was two-way: one human being is before another human being. When I see people stretching out their hand, I always think of an African saying: “The hand of the one who gives is always above the hand of the one who receives”. When people can shake hands, it is different: there is no hand above and no hand below.” (Jean-Pierre)

• We find ourselves faced with dilemmas

People’s living conditions move us, and the question is: How far can we accept them?

*** Extracts from a discussion:**

– “It was striking, the examples, especially from your country, how much the bureaucracy, the official laws and regulations destroy the attempts of the people to live a family life. And I see the same effects in my own country. It’s common everywhere. We should look at the effects of bureaucracy... (Vincent)

– For me, it raises the question how much we accept unjust truths and try to look at them as if they are like the reality. And when we look at the families and with the people, should we direct our energy into trying to change the rules? What would be more helpful for the people? Sometimes it seems that to try to change the rules and to do social activism towards a political change is an effort that is useless. And sometimes it makes changes that are more profound and more helpful to the people. And so for me, as a social worker, it is a question that I ask myself: how much do I want to work in institutions that are working with a legislation that is not for people who live in poverty? And it is not so helpful to work with a low cost budget... (Adi)

– It is quite evident that it serves no purpose to vote a new law which is not suitable: we must work on laws while working with people. Both are necessary. (Thérèse)

– We can add the nuance that what is perhaps the most efficient is to work in proximity with people about laws, while using the means and tools so that the people effectively concerned can give their point of view and surround oneself with competent people who interpret in legal terms (Martine).”

* – “There are some problems that could be connected to the difficulties of the rest of the population. For example, there is a general problem of lack of occupation in the population. But then again with the poor, it gets powerful! Sometimes I feel, as a social worker working in the municipality, in front of a big dilemma. Because for example when a client of mine is disconnected from water, it is like one part of the body that I am working in that is doing it! (...) It is a big dilemma because you are part of an organisation that is doing, having the law of ostracizing people. There is

the humane situation that you have to really give the solution and there is the other side which is a problem.” (Rachel)

• Around which initiatives have you seen the inhabitants of the same districts, of the same zone unite?

Which are the moments where a child, an adolescent or an adult living under very difficult conditions have made you discover another way of living together? How did these discoveries influence your outlook, your thoughts, your actions?

Here are four intense moments of discussion by four different working groups, moments which illustrate extraordinary instants of shared humanity:

* “Our association works with children who have left school and find themselves in the street and begin to sniff glue, and to steal. Great importance is attached to dialogue, rather than to social action projects which help with large budgets and which do not succeed. The association began its work with these children by asking the children in the district to offer time for playing by means of workshops of theatre, drawing, and marionettes. Behind each workshop, we try to transmit such values as “working together, will power, development, solidarity”. We begin to see changes in the children’s behaviour. We have succeeded in the reintegration of some children in school. This action is developed within the school to bring about a reaction between the children already in school and those outside. We try to have a critical outlook with the children, i.e. to analyse what is going on in society, to talk about actual problems, and to think together about what can be done. This project is called ‘Education through art’. (Sameh)

* “My native village is poor like most of those in developing countries where there is no real difference between rich and poor. The village is isolated, there is no road, no school, and no drinking water. In this community as in most rural communities, they are used to managing their own affairs. They are organised communities which function, which have institutions, know-how, and shared values. They share irrigation water, they manage the Mosque, the community’s business, and village relationships. There is a way of doing things. But at the moment of the start of the project, after the drought of the ‘80s, there was a terrible shortage of water. Villagers went 10 to 15 kms to find water. They called upon solidarity. They contacted people who originated in the village but who were working elsewhere, like me. Coming back to the village gave me the chance to reflect on how the people, with their own institution, had started a project for drinking water. In a much more modern way, we created an association, but an association of all the villagers: i.e. including the village children who live elsewhere. The contribution of these external people was in money and technicality. Moreover they are people who manage to solve inter-community conflicts because they are a bit fringe people. It is a way to bring back the skills gone to the towns, to give a helping hand to the village. That is why community work is so important for the success of a project. The villagers wanted to solve the problem. We, the villagers living elsewhere, said to the families: ‘Here are today’s modern methods of organisation and the way to modernise your institutions, the way to invest your values in modernity’. This allowed us to make the young people participate in the

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community’s management, the women also had their say in the projects: drinking water, it must be in the house not in the well. For us, we need to be there, to support the community in doing the work, not doing it for them.” (Ali)

* In one of the working groups, the question arose about young people and the importance of better understanding the person. One of their conclusions: Listen to the young, go out and meet them. Here are a few extracts:

– “What I hear from the full-time volunteers of our association, is their suffering faced with youngsters who are really cooped up and who have difficulty taking part in the projects proposed to them. They set things up and then perceive that these youngsters stay at home and never go out. (Pierre) (...)

– When we understand a person better, we have another view of the things, our point of view changes. (...) Because we know better or otherwise the lives of the young or poor people, we are able to change the project so that it is nearer to them. (...) (Susie)

– A youngster can share with me during the apprenticeship. It is at such a time that I can learn things with him, from him. Everyday we can learn from young people. To a youngster, we must teach discipline because in the street there is no discipline. There is a master or teacher who is there to give him something for himself. There are two intervals during the day and in one of them we talk about what the youngster has done: “-What did you do yesterday? –I saw a film. –What film?” A discussion follows. Another time, during Ramadan, a young boy was absent for three days. I knew he was from a very poor family and that they had a problem with their accommodation. They lived in a shanty town. He had a badly treated flu which had degenerated into pneumonia. He invited me to have tea with him. I was impressed by the decoration of his lodgings and by the surroundings. At that minute I found out his real self. And that made its mark on me because this young boy who was ill kept smiling. When he saw me he wanted to get up as a mark of respect: “My teacher is here”. I think that he never imagined that one day, I would be there in his house. His surroundings had to be seen, degradation was everywhere... but with a smile and keeping the tradition of welcome. (Si M’hamed)

– That means that such a reality cannot be seen during

working time. And it is because you went to meet him where he lives that you knew him.”

* “Every Wednesday afternoon in a district I have a street library with the children who are there. There are 300 lodgings. One third of the families are from the Maghreb, another third from Turkey and the rest are very poor French families. The last week in July, in the middle of the summer holidays, we suggest workshop sessions where those who know something can share it with those who don’t. This is the sixth year in which we have such a lively time. There are two things which I find admirable: the first is the fact that young people are coming to take part in the organisation. They are from well-to-do surroundings and we don’t even know them: they are about forty to arrive, simply for the sharing and meeting. The second thing is that for the first time in the year, all the communities, everybody, will be together to participate in this great time. And there, cultural differences vanish. We have 300 children and their parents; we don’t know where they are from and this moment spent together has nothing to do with money. Money has disappeared which is rare in our society. This year the final fête was greatly appreciated because a group of young people did country dancing, the whole district danced! While they used to say that the young people of this district were hopeless...” (François)

Concluding the day, one of the working groups was pointing out:

“We want to switch from “acting for” to “acting with”.” (Jona)
“For me the question of “complete integration in society” begins with myself. I must mix with others, but it begins with me. To work together I must really accept to change my outlook, my way of thinking, in order to dialogue with someone else.” (Tahany)

– “Accepting to work with the poor and, in order to do so, being completely available. – Working on and experiencing a real partnership with poor people so that they integrate themselves into society. – And the last point, which is the most important: working so that the poor are proud of themselves and become self-confident. Poverty is no disgrace.” (Nouraldin)

THE CREATIVE WORKSHOPS

Getting to know people does not happen just through words. It can also take place through an activity that you do together. **During the five workshops available each day, we were able to experience ‘doing together’** through theatre, wire sculpture, new technologies, calligraphy and painting, **through the work of our hands and our bodies.** We explain below how these workshops enabled us to have a shared experience and strengthened us to go forward together.

In the calligraphy workshop, Nourredine, a professional calligrapher, suggested that we should “open up a space, mix styles of writing (Latin, Arabic, Hebrew) and arrange it in a way which could later be seen as movement, as calligraphy, which could be interpreted as graphic art”. And so, without even knowing the letters that we were writing, each person practised writing beautiful letters, for example writing ‘speech’ on an individual sheet. Then, together, we interwove our writings together on a single, very large white sheet. It was at the interlacing of each person’s piece of writing that the meeting took place.

Dan expressed the treasures he found **in the painting workshop** he was running: “From my point of view, I really believe that the time which we have spent together was very positive. Each person set aside their differences when they crossed the door of the seminar, concentrating on what they had in common with the others – the willingness to be at the side of the poorest, and the desire to see how we could work together to build a better world. The fact that people found themselves face to face created the conditions for discussion and interaction. During a meal, someone said, ‘In my country, we would not be able to be seated like this around the same table.’ Someone else had painted a group of people of different coloured skin near the ocean in the sun. Beside the sun was a dark image of the Earth in chains, with some countries coloured red. The painter said of his painting, ‘The world, dark and in chains, is the past; difficult times, bad times for my country. Look how the borders are very prominent. In the ocean there are no borders. The water freely reaches different countries. All the peoples are different, but equal, if they refuse to take up arms, and open themselves to a better future.’ And during an open-air workshop, someone added, ‘It’s wonderful to spend time together in silence’.”

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TUESDAY 27th SEPTEMBER 2005: “The NEW TECHNOLOGIES”

The proposed topic for discussion centred on the ways in which those living in extreme poverty are part of the mainstream of life today, and the ways in which they are being left out. On one side, there are people who are building a veritable highway of information, and who find themselves on fertile ground. On the other side, there are people who remain isolated, cut off from everything and everyone, with a potential that remains unused. What do we know about the tools that the poor possess to open up new horizons for themselves as well? What role can modern means of communication play in their relationships, in their contacts with the broader world?

Our discussions revealed how modern technology can take away the shame felt by the families which are the most isolated, and open up new opportunities, for example untying the bounds of begging or selling on the streets, through looking for solutions with the support of a group and the full participation of those concerned. We underlined that learning the language of the country in which the most disadvantaged people live is an indispensable and fundamental tool – as is learning how to read and write. We affirmed that the most disadvantaged are intelligent people, that they have knowledge and know-how, and that their validation is indispensable if they are to dare to undertake new learning experiences.

“A development based on sharing and socializing with the poorest, is a real step towards success in building a better future. To accept one another is an important step in the development of a society, the society of the poor. It is important to recognize that the poor have capacities and energies that should be utilized.” (Sameh)

• We discussed some positive aspects:

“In my country, an NGO which works in education organized a large-scale campaign to make computers and the Internet accessible to everyone. They travelled throughout the country, to both towns and rural areas, with a truck equipped with computers. Everywhere, parents were very pleased for their children to have this learning experience.” (Burcu)

“Street children have left school. UNESCO provided computers through which the children learned Arabic, learned to read and write. The children liked this. It was called a ‘parallel school’. It works well. From the capital city, they now communicate with other schools, and with street children in another city through cybercafés.” (George)

“The basic technology that everyone uses - the Roma as well as everyone else - is the cell phone. They don’t think of the computer yet as a tool for communicating with the outside; instead they use it mainly to play games. We’ve mainly used cameras – the children themselves used them – to carry out a survey in the neighbourhood. We produced a video, which was widely distributed in the town. It was interesting because it included very different – even opposing – life experiences. It was an extraordinary moment when the children presented the film – they were very proud because they had talked about something that they knew well.” (Emma)

“As for myself, I don’t use the new technologies very much, but I’m ready to take such a step. I work with the homeless, who have closed themselves off as the excluded in society. Our association opened a café where they could come and be part of a group in which they felt respected and supported. Individually, these people now feel stronger. They reach out to the outside world, they’re more open to the community. They’re now taking initiatives: they’re looking for jobs, they contribute to a newsletter through interviews with people in the neighbourhood. For the last four years, the association has offered a computer course.” A member of the working group asks: “Do people who have little contact with others because of their poverty, feel that it’s possible to initiate communication through the new technologies, without first establishing a personal relationship?” The

response was: “The computer course has helped them to adapt to the digital revolution, which appeals to them, and which offers new opportunities. Personal relationships help them a lot. Being listened to, meeting others, helps them to move forward. This is how some people have come to try computers. They wouldn’t have done it otherwise.” (Yves)

“Getting to the point where you can take advantage of the freedom offered by the Internet is a long process. Our country has some very religious families. The women in these families are unknown in their neighbourhoods, they don’t work, they only pray. They’re totally isolated because the men don’t allow them to go out. But they’ve begun to work with computers. And this has given meaning to their lives. It’s a profound change. The results have been surprising. Some of the women benefit from social welfare. Suddenly, they’ve become computer experts, completely outdoing the social workers – we can see a considerable gap between them. I think that computers, modern technologies, open up unknown, unforeseen horizons. We should be glad that they exist and find ways to make use of them, because they can be very helpful to families living in poverty.” (Jona)

• We also encountered negative aspects:

“When I would go to visit families, I would see that they had television. Then the mobile phone arrived. It helped the isolation a bit. But it also created difficulties because it meant more debts.” (Pierre)

“We are faced with a big problem with the cybercafés. Most people don’t have a computer at home and that’s why children from poor families go into these cafés. They go into websites which are not always good or proper. What the young people are talking about now is who has managed to meet a girl through the internet. It’s something very important to them, it’s as if they’re entering into an imaginary world. I think that this is pushing us to have programmes to teach the young people to use the computer properly so that they can benefit later from their education and the people they have met. It worries us to see the internet used like prostitution sites.” (Nouraldin)

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“There are cybercafés a few kilometres from our place. From my point of view they are not so negative because it’s a question of education and the young people can’t talk about sexuality at home. In their family they have no one to talk to about their problems. The internet is therefore a way of talking about them a bit. But we have encountered one of the dangers just recently. It’s someone who was dreaming about a European girl who was corresponding with him for three or four months, but she was just making fun of him. When she told him that she was going to visit his town, he was all ready to welcome her, but she said no, it was just a joke. When he realised that it was a joke, he committed suicide. It is something which affected us a lot. The work that we must do is important – to inform the young people that the internet is not the real world but that we need to use such tools though to discover the world and what goes on in it.” (Abeldhamid)

● We reflected on the future:

“We talked here about how modern technology can bring people together. I believe that it should also be used much more to “enable experiences to be known”. It was said “knowing people is a treasure”. I think that you could add, when you listen to each of us: ‘knowing what people manage to do’ is a treasure. So how does modern technology, the means of communication, enable this to be known, to be circulated, to be placed in a network? Wafa reported back about **the story of a basketball team**. ‘We have lots of unemployed in our place, and children and young people who have nowhere to play. So they created a little basketball team to play in the streets and in between the houses. They trained a lot and they beat all the teams from the other villages and towns in the region. That was a big shock.’ Sameh recounted **a story about how art had created links**. ‘At the beginning of the project, the idea was to get people out of the village to see other things. This was a very important point. But the only thing which really impacted on the isolation was art. Art can bring people together. We always insisted on taking the young girls to the cinema, the theatre, and art galleries. Before, that would have been unthinkable. No one even thought about it. Despite critics, artists also came to the poor areas to do paintings on the walls. People from other villages came to visit and that created more relationships. Art cannot solve everything, but it is a first step to breaking down isolation.’ **These are the extraordinary stories** which can only give courage to others to themselves dare to do something. I find that at this level there is an absence of links in the area of new technology that we must address.” (Eugen)

“I was in touch with groups of disabled people who were begging in the street. A leader of the group, a woman, one day said in public: ‘I want to stop begging, I want to do something else’. She had been begging since the age of 7 and now she was in her forties. We took the time to understand what she wanted to do. She managed to say: ‘I need to start a small business to get out of this.’ And she knew that in another country there were people who had stopped begging to make a living. She needed to know how these people had done it. We searched together for common solutions, what routes the others had taken to make good. Knowing that people had managed to start up a small

business gave them courage and showed them concrete solutions. Today, the internet allows this: everyone can write what they have done in their own website and describe their experience. All this knowledge, to which we have access, is set out, but the knowledge of ‘how do we get out of extreme poverty’ is not to be found there. What we have is a tool which would permit communities to share a very concrete pool of knowledge.” (Jean-Pierre)

“I am speaking about young people, children, adults who have experienced extreme poverty. As soon as there is something to learn, their starting point is believing that they’ll not be able to do it as they have experienced so many failures and they say ‘I can’t do it.’ Faced with successive failures, it is not enough to remove the fear of humiliation. The experience that I have gained is that it is almost always through sharing knowledge that you can remove shame. When you have valued the knowledge of someone who has experienced this humiliation, fully recognising that he has difficulty learning certain things, but that there is a lot of know-how that life has taught him – that he knows how to get by in hard times, that he knows how to help others etc – if you recognise this knowledge which many don’t consider as being of value, you enter into a relationship of ‘sharing of knowledge’ which values the exchange. And you can therefore introduce and dare to try out new things to learn.” (Bruno)

CONCLUSIONS FROM THE PARTICIPANTS

“During these few days, I was really struck by the great human quality of the people here, and also because I noticed with most – perhaps all – a great happiness, a certain blossoming of the soul. I said that we had received that from the people we meet in the everyday life and with whom we live, and I would also like to say thank you to them.”

“I am going home with plenty of hope because I know that I can rely on all of you. All of the potential here will help me in my work, giving courage to me and to others.”

“I am very deeply impressed by finding out that beyond disputes and war and isolation of each of us in his own small place, there is a framework that I found in this Mediterranean seminar. I don’t know exactly what it means in practical terms but it gives me a great, great comfort, great courage.”

“The meetings during this conference have enabled me to recommit myself to my personal and collective commitments. The other day, I remembered what a friend said to me: ‘There are more and more people who are ‘managed’ and fewer and fewer citizens.’ These meetings over these few days have helped me to verify that the contrary could also be true.”

“If I had to use one word to tell what I feel most about this event, it is that there is basically an unusual, very rare degree of tenderness among people, within people. And I think in this world of ours where there is a lot of ‘non-tenderness’, to be and to see that there can be such tenderness amongst people is not just a comfort, it is a hope and it is something which cannot but help one to continue being tender in situations when one is not.”

“I would like to hope that the East of the future which we have been talking about would be just like our meeting.”

to cross-cultural dialogue in the information society”

WEDNESDAY 28TH SEPTEMBER 2005: COMMITMENTS...

Ton said that technologies are fine, but we also needed to take human beings into account. This is what led us on to talk about commitment. Nader said “Assistance can take the form of physical items. But it’s something else to give my time, to make a real effort”. So yes, we agreed that it is something else to give of yourself, sharing your strengths and personal qualities.

● We wanted to talk about **the commitment of very poor people** themselves because we are convinced that very poor people have not waited for us to be around to combat their situation. Regardless of their strengths, they are fighting every day simply to survive. Does anybody see these efforts? Are they acknowledged? Are they supported?

“In our countries, there is already solidarity between the poor families, especially in the villages. It’s solidarity rooted in traditions. For example, if an old man is alone and poor, a neighbouring poor family will bring him something to eat. This happens in every village.” (Najwa)
How can we foster this solidarity between poor people? What do we do to make sure projects are based on these efforts?

“The families have six or more children. It’s very hard for them to send their children to school, to buy books, exercise books, everything that’s needed. I know children who tell me they go to school without any books, or just 2 or 3 exercise books and a satchel that’s almost empty. Sometimes teachers try to help them; they photocopy the books at school. It’s very hard for these families to put their children through school. And yet they try with all their strength to do so.” (Zohara)

“In our association, we organise seminars to raise awareness about health issues to do with pregnancy and infants. We always have a list of 100 to 120 women. Each group participates in a seminar once a month for six months. The families have to make a commitment to attend the seminar. But there are women who have other commitments and cannot attend. So the women who have attended must pass on the information from the seminar to their neighbours who could not attend. So it is these women’s commitment to pass on what they have learnt. We ourselves, as an association undertake to keep to deadlines, to run the seminars properly and to ensure doctors are present.” (Mahmoud)

We would like to continue this dialogue with Mahmoud and to ask him what he learns from these women who attend the seminars, and from the others who cannot come. What has he learnt from the commitments or efforts they have already made within their family and in their district in relation to health? What has he learnt from these everyday efforts, which are not seen because they are too discreet, and are therefore not known about and not acknowledged?

● The second area concerned **the commitment from our association, from our group.**

Our association, our group, is not just an “institution”, a machine that works. It also consists of people who are “committed” in the sense that they give their time, their effort, themselves.

What do our associations and groups need at every level for their commitment to be known about, acknowledged, so that it can last?

“Most of the volunteers come from quite well-off families and are not usually exposed to these young people and their living conditions. When they meet these young people, they participate a little in their lives and this changes their way of seeing things, their way of thinking. It also gives them energy, it motivates them, it stimulates them to help other underprivileged young people. They realise that these youngsters are underprivileged not because they are incapable or incompetent, but simply because they’ve been unlucky.” (Nir)

“Our association’s commitment may consist in helping the most underprivileged groups to integrate, to contribute to change in order to improve the quality of life for the entire community. For the poorest to be stronger, they can contribute, and participate as fully-fledged citizens, who have the same rights and also the same responsibilities. They have responsibilities and also have the right to be given the tools needed to participate as fully-fledged citizens. Then it is our responsibility, as people, as an association, to contribute to giving the poorest the tools they need to improve their lives and contribute to improving the life of the whole community, as fully-fledged citizens.” (Latifa)

“My personal point of view about how to help or to be committed about put me in trouble because I’m a representative of an association and I have to go by the rules of the association. And sometimes, I have a trouble. I’m individualist but then again I’m a part of the association. So, what I did in my professional life was to find really the niche or whatever so that I can express my personal point and also not to be lost in rules or in a way that would clash with my personal principles. And the most important thing is really me as a social worker not to forget really that I’m a human being dealing with people.” (Rachel)

“The association that came to our estate helped us to ‘germinate’. It gave us someone to listen to us, it listened to us. Because poor people are always being told to shut up. And that’s all they’ve done all their lives; listen, at the town hall, at the police station, at the hospital. And then all of a sudden someone comes to listen to you and so you really make the most of it, you can’t imagine what it’s like! The people working for this association are experts in the art of taming. Yes, listening is also a result of a meeting. But there has to be loyalty, otherwise it’s pointless. Loyalty puts people at their ease, and that confidence is also an asset. After that there must be action, but the person who arrives must be patient. In loyalty there is also patience. They came to see; we were teenagers. They had the patience to wait for us to grow up. You can imagine the happiness they brought to the estate! They completely transformed us!” (Abdallah)

● The third area of discussion concerned **our personal commitment**. We are people with our enthusiasms, our doubts, our strengths and moments of fatigue. What enables us to obtain recognition for our commitment so that we can carry on in the long term? What enables us to avoid becoming discouraged?

“I too have been in a terrible situation. The social services helped me. I think I’ve pulled through and I can help others now. I can teach them how I pulled through. I know several people who have 5, 6 or 7 children and who don’t speak the language of the country they’re living in. They find they are very much alone when faced with administrative problems. They feel paralysed and unable to solve their difficulties, or ask simple questions. I’m here to help them, to get them to participate, to show them that we can participate.” (Berchiko)

“When parents are condemned to live in poverty, when the head of a family is living in poverty, the whole family will be condemned also with him to live in poverty. I often visit families living in hostels, or in single bedrooms. To see their children, they have to go to another room where their children are living. They tell them it’s only a temporary situation, but they live like that for 4-5 years. Life is very tough for them, in these conditions which do not allow them to live properly. What we want is for their fundamental rights to be granted.” (Said)

“When I talk about the need to support the family, I explain that you have to have lots of children because children represent our security for the future. We have many children because we have no social security, we have no security in our lives. My husband and I both work, so there are two bread-winners in the family. At the end of each month, my husband visits his parents who are not working. When our children see that he is helping his parents, giving them food, we feel that this is our future. In the future, it is our children who will help us. I do the same thing with my parents. There is always this feeling of a commitment that I feel, which I think is very good.” (Wafa)

“I sit here not as somebody who’s working on or with the poorest but with peace. We sit and we are saying we want to find the tools and pay the price. (...) What do we do with my fears? I speak about peace not only because of commitment but because of something real. (...) We speak about communication, but I feel even that words are barriers, not helping but disturbing. And we use to all think that we speak about one thing and it’s so very different and it’s not helping. We get stuck because we use the same words with no meaning.” (Ruth)

“One word we have not used very much is “availability”. Because to be available you sometimes have to make changes to your personal life. To be available also means being in conflict with your institutions, your family, your children, your husband. To be available means going through personal problems, and maintaining commitments to yourself first of all. I believe that commitment is not something you can explain, it’s something you can feel. When you are committed other people feel it, it’s something that is shared a great deal. It’s not expressed in a speech, it’s something that is communicated. The way of talking, of being present and available makes it possible to share the commitment with other people.” (Ali)

“It’s because people have committed themselves that other people have been able to get out of poverty. I remember a lady I met ten years ago. Her social capital - her network of contacts - for me didn’t exist at that time. And yet, it did exist. There were networks of relationships between families that I knew nothing about, that nobody knew about, not even the social services. But neither did I realise to what extent I was a part of this social capital. I think it’s something this lady can assert now but that she didn’t dare show before. And I raise the question: who is going to meet the person in their home? It is this meeting that will reveal the person for what he or she is in herself, his or her humanity. This meeting is not an aim in itself, but it is absolutely vital for these people to be able to raise their heads. Yes, as Yves says, then there is a kind of turning point that is past. It’s like a trigger.” (Pierre)

“In the district where I live, there are lots of different nationalities. I met some young people in the street who have a lot of authority, a strong presence in the street, in the district. I went to talk to two of them. One is a drug addict, the other is in a rather difficult situation because he lives with a family which is not his. I began an employment project between young university academics and them. What motivates me to continue in my commitment is when I see a treasure, pearls inside these youngsters, that must not be forgotten or denied. What still motivates me, after all the attempted projects that have failed, is to see this wealth they have inside them. This really pushes me to keep going. We have created very strong relationships and confidence between us all. So we have become a group. One who wasn’t working found a job. Before leaving for the seminar, we studied the programme, worked on the questions together and it was they who nominated me to share this story with you. For me, to keep going I must remain faithful to what I believe in, and not become disappointed or discouraged.”(Sako)

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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