

International Day of Families – May 15th 2011

Message from Eugen Brand, General delegate of the International Movement ATD Fourth World

Dear Friends,

The commitments that you undertake and that you have learned through your families, your villages and your neighborhoods provide encouragement for so many other people in our world. At the same time, these commitments are strengthened by the courage of others.

These commitments that you share are present in all places. We can look from Ivory Coast to Japan, countries deeply shaken by the forces they have faced. There are those striving at all levels to live within a community based on respect for one another, while there are others doing all they can to develop an ecology which is based upon learning how to overcome social exclusion. We can also look from Egypt to Haiti, where there are efforts being made to build a governance with eradication of extreme poverty being at the center of its objectives. There are others who try to face the arrogance of the international community. This is a community that imposes its own knowledge and economic power disregarding the very intelligence and experience of the local people that is needed in order to rethink international cooperation.

All of these commitments, linked to one another, present the beauty in this world, providing a source of strength in our current times. They give meaning and an orientation to the actions that need to be undertaken in a period shaken by unprecedented natural and human catastrophes. They allow us to go further than the limited, short-term emergency responses which are often delivered with a minimum respect for rights as if those concerned were less than human.

These commitments, linked to one another, crossing all borders, build peace between all families and all people. However they never make the headlines of the major newspapers or the media in general - a source of information and dialogue. Violence continues to be part of the image in which all of our societies isolate people in poverty. Even expert analyses maintain those prejudices, raising insurmountable walls between the victims of social exclusion and others in society.

Today, on every continent, men and women are mobilizing to speak out:

"Extreme poverty is a continual violence that affects the lives of our children, our youths, our families and our neighborhoods. The environment in which we are forced to live leads to violence. The only places where we are able to settle down are flooded zones covered in polluted water, condemned buildings, bare shelters, wastelands where the mud renders all construction impossible. Often, our housing is so insecure that when it rains we have to stay awake all night so that we can move our children and try to keep them dry. And when our living spaces are swept away by the water or when we are driven away or evicted, we live the violence of losing everything once again and then having to find a way to start all over again.

"Ignorance causes much violence. Our children and our youth realize very quickly that the life and courage of their families are not understood by their teachers, social workers, judges and bosses. They see that the institutions in society neither care about nor respect the opinions of their parents. How many children, happy to go to their first day of school, are then persuaded that they are not capable of learning? In schools where children are not acknowledged and where their knowledge and experiences are not recognized, their potential does not develop, they can't exercise their minds. This is a violence towards their intelligence and their creativity. The violence that touches us the most - exploding at

times including at the heart of our families - comes from all of the endured humiliations and above all from the fact that we are never free to say what we think when we depend so much on others for our survival."

*" Real violence is one that takes power over your intimacy, your life, your personal and collective identity."*¹

On every continent, men and women refuse to accept this violence and strive to create spaces to meet each other, making it possible to recognize our common humanity and to connect to one another in a world which is finally "free from fear and from want."²

"Violence is not a subject to study, it is a part of our lives and that of others. We cannot leave such an important question in the hands of experts only. We need to find the courage to break the silence. In all our neighborhoods, inhabitants are resisting violence. Aren't they the first actors for peace? There is the mother who gets up every night, knowing that one of her older children has been drawn to a street gang and is selling drugs. She fears that he could get killed. At the same time, she worries for the other mothers whose children might wind up buying drugs from her son and fall into the spiral of misery. There is the father who refuses to send his neighbor's son to jail because he knows only too well that the conditions there could break his lives forever."

It is this determination that led the Movement ATD Fourth World to work on a research project on poverty and violence, since 2008: "Poverty is Violence, Speak out for Peace." This is a work on knowledge and is being led by group of actors in 20 countries. This group is composed of activists with an experience of living in extreme poverty, as well as volunteers, friends and academics. The "merging of knowledge"³ approach is being used for this work. The project will be completed in January 2012 with an international colloquium at the headquarters of UNESCO, the UN body in charge of promoting a "culture for peace" among the international community.

Through a process of dialogue, the actors with this new knowledge will work with people who are in the academic, economic, environmental, cultural, and spiritual fields. They will look to demonstrate and understand together how any objective with the sole purpose of reducing extreme poverty - for example the UN objective to reduce the number of people living in poverty by 50% by 2015 - is an astounding source of violence and is a deep contradiction with the project of civilization seated in equal dignity.

Families faced with extreme poverty carry a sense of what peace is, one of which the world remains ignorant. They know from experience that only sustainable development that forgets no-one will build a sustainable peace. They have unique ways of resisting the violence that social exclusion generates and they dare to find ways towards peace that are not recognized or perceived by our societies. With our current world context, it is those invisible efforts which deserve the Nobel Peace Prize today.

¹ Father Joseph Wresinski – *Violence faite aux pauvres*, 1968, igloos n°40

² Universal Declaration of Human Rights

³ *The Merging of Knowledge*, by Fourth World-University Research Group, University Press of America, 2007