

**ATD Fourth World: A Pioneering NGO Working All Together in Dignity  
(Mid 1950s-2009)**

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*“We can serve only 150 children, so we take only the sickest ones. Some 99% of those we can help go home. But some parents never come back for their children. When the children have tuberculosis or AIDS, the parents usually do as well, and they probably died after bringing their children here. Then there are children who are dying when they arrive. Some parents may not return because they cannot afford a burial.”*

– Health center worker, Port-au-Prince

*“When Jocelyne’s mother had no more money to feed her, Jocelyne, then 7 or 8, was sent to live with her father and then with her grandmother. She was able to go to school. When she was 12 or 13, she had to leave the village to go work in the capital. Her grandmother sent her to a lady’s home where Jocelyne did the housework, cooking, fetching of water, and babysitting. But then Jocelyne fell ill, and the lady sent her back to her grandmother’s. [...] Now, 15-and-a-half years old, Jocelyne is alone in the city. She has not seen her parents in many years and knows they cannot afford health care for her sickness. ATD Fourth World helped her to get health care, and she asked them to tell her mother she was in the hospital. Her mother visited and Jocelyne said, ‘My mother cried because I am ill. She will come again. She loves me very much, even if she hasn’t been able to do much for me.’”*

- ATD Fourth World Volunteer, Port-au-Prince

*“We went to see children who had never been to school to register. When they came, barefoot and with holes in their pants, not a single child made fun of them. There were a lot of hidden children who never used to go out. We had birth certificates made for them that they would never have had otherwise. In every five houses we would find 10 or 15 children with no legal existence. So we knocked on every door and spoke with people. Adults would say, ‘Well they could go to school, but they have nothing to wear and no shoes.’ We said there would be no*

*problems if the children came as they were. So now they go to work in the fields first, and then hurry to get ready for school.”*

- Teacher, Fond des Nègres

*“One day, the school offered to admit the three oldest girls and their younger brother the following year. The father [a landless man with no schooling who begs for a living] was astounded. He agreed, even in the case of his oldest daughter, a valuable helper to her mother. Because of malnutrition only the oldest daughter was able to finish the school year. Despite the period of mourning due to the death of one of her younger brothers, her father allowed her to take her final exams, which she passed. For her father, this was an immense discovery. His eldest daughter succeeded, and will be able to write for the family. This meant that all of his children could potentially succeed. He began coming to the parent meetings. There was a time when he spoke with his head down. Now, he shows his face when he speaks. You can look him in the eye. He is a different man.”*

- ATD Fourth World Volunteer, Port-au-Prince

*“People experiencing extreme poverty tell us over and over again that a human being’s greatest misfortune is not to be hungry or to be unable to read, not even to be jobless. The greatest misfortune of all is to know that you count for nothing, to the point where even your suffering is ignored. The worst blow of all is the contempt on the part of your fellow citizens, for it is that contempt which stands between a human being and his rights. It makes the world disdain what you are going through and prevents you from being recognised as worthy and capable of taking on any responsibility. The greatest misfortune of extreme poverty is that for your entire existence you are like someone already dead.”*

*“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.”*

- *The very poor, living proof of the indivisibility of human rights, ATD Fourth World’s contribution to the French national human rights commission, 1989*

## **INTRODUCTION**

These vignettes offer some insight into the circumstance of the families that ATD<sup>1</sup> Fourth World supports through their health and education work in Haiti. ATD Fourth World is an international, non-governmental organization with projects worldwide. It works in partnership with people in poverty to engage with individuals and institutions to find solutions to eradicate extreme poverty. ATD Fourth World's human rights-based approach focuses on supporting families and individuals through grass-roots activities and involvement in disadvantaged communities. They operate projects in urban and rural areas in Northern and Southern hemisphere countries, creating public awareness of extreme poverty and influencing policies to address it. It has no religious or political affiliation. This case begins with a brief history of this international organization that features its programmatic approach and its financial situation. It is followed by a description of the organization's work in Haiti and concludes with discussion questions and sources for further information.

## **HISTORICAL EVOLUTION**

ATD Fourth World has its roots in France in the mid 1950s. Joseph Wresinski, a young Catholic priest and the future founder of ATD Fourth World, became the chaplain to 250 homeless families living in an emergency housing camp near Paris. He had grown up in poverty himself and knew its damaging effects on personal dignity and feelings of self-worth. As he worked with the families in the camp he became committed to making lasting changes in their lives and those of other poor families. Together they developed an innovative approach to poverty eradication, moving away from traditional charitable assistance to a real partnership with those who had first-hand experience with poverty. They replaced soup kitchens and the distribution of old clothes with a library and a nursery.

Soon other people heard of Wresinski's work with families in the camp and came to help. The project grew into an organization that they named ATD<sup>2</sup> Fourth World. Those who came to help formed a non-denominational volunteer corps and lived within the community they served and made a full-time, long-term commitment to working with poor families. In the 1950s and '60s new programs were started in other European countries and the United States. In 1979, volunteers went to Guatemala to start the first project in a southern hemisphere country. Teams of full-time volunteers now work in 30

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<sup>1</sup> The organization is called the International Movement ATD Fourth World in international settings, the Fourth World Movement in the United States, ATD Quart Monde in France, and other translations depending on the language where the organization is. For simplicity's sake it will be referred to here as ATD Fourth World, to reflect a direct translation from French.

<sup>2</sup> ATD stands for Agir Tous pour la Dignité, All Together in Dignity, though it is not currently much used.

countries on five continents. ATD Fourth World's primary objective, regardless of the particular project or locality is to reach the poorest members of society and to involve them in the development of their community. This is achieved by building relationships of trust over time. Once this trust is established, projects are initiated in partnership with those living in poverty according to their various needs and hopes.

ATD Fourth World has grown and developed internationally by setting up small teams of volunteers in countries covering Africa, South and Southeast Asia, Australia, Europe, North America and South and Central America. From the outset, ATD Fourth World's work has been based on three priorities: learning from the most disadvantaged families, understanding how they become trapped in persistent poverty, and planning and developing projects with them.

## **PROGRAMS**

ATD Fourth World's core work includes:

- grass roots initiatives promoting human rights-based development;
- gathering information and conducting research on poverty;
- collaborating with public authorities, organizations and institutions as a way to ensure that the rights of people living in extreme poverty are respected and to give them a voice in the decisions that affect their lives; and
- creating awareness of poverty in society at national and international levels.

A key aspect of ATD Fourth World's work is building bridges between different segments of society. Their approach to reaching out to supporters is to start from the perspective of society needing to understand the lives, histories, struggles and strengths of the poorest, rather than considering it the work of the poorest to meet the normative expectations of society. Volunteers aim to engage people in different strata of society – particularly academics and politicians, people with voice and influence – to meet the poorest, listen to them, and take up their struggle. ATD Fourth World has organized delegations of people living in poverty to visit the General Secretary of the UN, the Pope, and they are currently preparing to meet President Obama.

ATD Fourth World represents people living in poverty throughout the world. It has been granted consultative status with the United Nations, UNICEF, UNESCO, ECOSOC, the International Labour Organization and the Council of Europe and has a permanent delegation at the European Union. ATD Fourth World has worked with Amnesty International, the International Federation of Human Rights, and the France Libertés Foundation.

ATD Fourth World projects are run by four hundred full-time volunteers who come from countries all over the world. They are men and women of different nationalities, faiths and philosophies, ages, professions, and backgrounds and can be either single or with a partner, with or without children. Many are long-term volunteers; over 60% have been involved for 5 years or more and nearly a quarter for 20 years or more. Volunteers

interchange roles throughout their career within the organization, which enables them to bring their skills to different projects and to develop new skills and experience. This helps to build a truly international volunteer corps whose members continually learn from one another. Practically, this means that at times volunteers may live alongside families in neglected, impoverished communities, shantytowns, or rural village and undertake small-scale educational, cultural, and civic activities and projects in partnership with residents. At other times during their career with the organization, they will take a step back from direct work with families and take on administrative responsibilities, working in national centers to establish links and alliances with politicians, civic leaders, and the general public. All volunteers work to ensure that the projects of the organization remain faithful to the needs of those who are most deeply entrenched in poverty, while enabling people from all walks of life to come together in a common cause.

ATD Fourth World volunteers all agree to lead a simple lifestyle. After the first year working with the organization, all volunteers – regardless of their training, education, type of responsibility, or length of service – receive the same, equitable living stipend, in accordance with the standard of living of the country where they are located. Not only does this allow the organization to keep costs down, but more importantly living on a low wage enables volunteers to in some way live in solidarity with the families they are working with.

### ***Tailored Long-term Projects***

When volunteers first arrive in a new community, they do not immediately start working on a pre-determined project. Rather they live there for a period of time, maybe even years, taking time to find the most excluded families and building partnerships with other agencies and institutions. Often they go where they have been invited in by members of that community or others who are working closely in them. Once they have engaged excluded families the team of volunteers will create a project with them, depending on the specific priorities of the families.

While the ATD Fourth World projects are uniquely adapted to the needs of the particular community that they are engaged with, the organization has some core activities that have proved to be successful for meeting new families and bringing supporters on board (e.g. street libraries and policy forums).

Street libraries, also called field or doorstep libraries, engage children and parents around books, computers, and art in neglected, under-resourced communities. They developed from the principle of reaching out to a community's aspirations with the aim of sharing knowledge in the heart of the community. The format is simple: colorful blankets on the ground, reading and stories, often followed by an activity promoting discovery, highlighting skills, and encouraging creative expression. Street library workers – usually a mix of full-time volunteers and project volunteers (called supporters or friends) – arrive at the same time every week, week after week. They invite all children, but make a special effort to engage those that seem to have the most difficulties. They solicit and rely on input and support from parents and other community members. The simple actions of

street libraries build a consistent, long-term, and trusted presence in low-income communities and with families struggling with persistent poverty. This relationship leads to further projects and partnerships that promote positive changes at different levels of society for families and communities in poverty.

Another core activity is the policy forum, also called Open University (*Universités Populaires*), or just simply gatherings. They are meetings for adults of different backgrounds to come together to work on issues relating to the experience of poverty and to contribute to efforts to eradicate it. They can take different forms depending on the task at hand; they can be an opportunity for people experiencing poverty and those working in anti-poverty initiatives to discuss the effects of poverty on education, housing, family cohesion, employment, and to generate ideas around successful initiatives. They provide the space to contribute to specific policy work, such as responding to government consultations by working on an international report on poverty or simply a forum for people in poverty to speak out and gain confidence in working with others to affect positive change.

## **FINANCE AND GOVERNANCE**

ATD Fourth World is led by the International Leadership Team comprised of three people who ensure world-wide coordination of the organization's work and are elected by volunteers who have been working with the organization for five years or more. The choice of Leadership Team is then presented for approval at the Administrative Council of the organization.

The International Leadership Team supports the work of the full-time volunteers so that each is conferred a role that best suit his or her skills and ambitions. They also work to ensure that all individual projects constitute a coherent global approach to fighting extreme poverty. Since 2008, the International Leadership Team has been Eugen Brand (Switzerland), Director General, and Isabelle Perrin (Belgium) and Diana Skelton (United States), Deputy Director Generals.

The International Leadership Team is aided by six regional delegations that support work in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, North America, Asia, Europe, and countries bordering the Indian Ocean. Each of these delegations coordinates the actions of the organization in its region and contributes to developing exchange and common work between different countries and with the International Leadership Team.

Projects in each country are managed by national ATD Fourth World associations or Associations of the Friends of ATD Fourth World. In several developing countries, they are managed by the Association ATD Quart Monde - Terre et Homme de Demain.

Where possible ATD Fourth World has created a national association in each country where teams of volunteers work to ensure public, administrative and financial responsibility in the country. There are fourteen ATD Fourth World national associations: Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Guatemala, Luxembourg, Mauritius,

the Netherlands, Peru, Poland, Switzerland, Spain, and United States. The Foundation *Aide à Toute Détresse* in France provides financial support to all of these national associations. The association *Terre et Homme de Demain* provides administrative and financial support in every country outside of Europe and North America where ATD Fourth World is located.

The sources of annual revenues (approximately \$10 million Euros in 2004) include donations and legacies (approximately 50%), government funding (approximately 25%), interest on endowments (approximately 10%), and other sources (approximately 15%). The annual expenditures (2004) include staff and administration (approximately 40%), stipends for volunteers (approximately 30%), research along with publications and training (approximately 20%), and other expenses (approximately 10%).

## HAITI

### *Issues for Families of ATD Fourth World*<sup>3</sup>

ATD Fourth World in Haiti operates health and education projects in Bolosse-sous-Dalle, one of the poorest areas of the capital city, Port-au-Prince and preschool activities in a rural community 120km to the west of Port-au-Prince. Rent is cheap in neighborhoods that are mostly inaccessible by car and often only accessed by foot with difficulty. The natural environment is so depleted and degraded that it has resulted in significant consequences for the health of residents.

The political crisis in 2004 left the country shaken with violence. The situation has now improved in many places, but there are still major issues with gang violence in the poorest districts (this case was written before the devastating earthquake of January 2010). The rest of the country fears the inhabitants of these areas because of their association with the violence of the gangs, which has contributed to the country's near total disregard of the conditions in which poor families are forced to live. The situation has been made more precarious by reoccurring financial crises. Most people are working in informal, ad-hoc employment. When conditions deteriorate for the whole country, for example after the cyclone season of 2008 that devastated crops and resulted in a country-wide famine, the families in the poorest districts feel the impact that much harder. The families who attend ATD Fourth World's health and education projects have said that the thing that keeps them going is the hope that life will improve for their children.

Poverty destroys the health of the residents of these areas. In 2001 the life expectancy in Haiti was 45 years for men and 54 years for women; for those living in areas such as Bolosse-sous-Dalle it is very likely lower due to a lifetime of malnourishment, hard labor,

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<sup>3</sup> To read more Haitian context in which ATD Fourth World Works see chapter two of their publication, *How Poverty Separates Children and Families*, which can be downloaded from [www.atd-fourthworld.org/IMG/pdf/howpov.pdf](http://www.atd-fourthworld.org/IMG/pdf/howpov.pdf)

and the mental stress of just trying to get by. Health is the biggest factor in the lives of poor families, and yet it is the one thing that allows them to survive; without health there is no work and without work there is no life. The need for health care is seen as so essential that ATD Fourth World is often protected by the community in order to enter high poverty areas in order to provide services that no other agency provides and the roving gangs leave them in peace to do so. However in 2005, the ATD Fourth World team of volunteers had to leave the Bolosse-sous-Dalle neighborhood temporarily due to the dangers of the civil conflict. During their absence of several months, other members of ATD continued much of this work, and by 2007 the health and education projects were completely back in operation.

### ***A pre-school in Fond des Nègres***

In 1981 the first ATD Fourth World volunteers came to Haiti at the request of a catholic priest who wanted to build a school for 60 children from very poor families. Together they started a pre-school in Fond des Nègres, a rural area 120km to the west of Port-au-Prince. The school is still in existence and is currently run in partnership with a local school, l'ecole la Famille (the Family School). While working in the school, the volunteers realized that some of the children that had the most difficulty coming to class came from the same isolated region in the area and so, within a few months of arriving in Haiti, the team of volunteers started to operate a "field library" in the region. By sharing books and taking time to talk with people the volunteers were able to reach out and engage with the children and families in the area. Over time some of the older children started taking on responsibility for the field library project, including attending training on facilitating activities around books and starting up new field libraries in other isolated areas near Fond des Nègres. As the volunteers met new children who were not attending school, they worked with their parents and teachers to get them into school. These activities helped to expand the original school, with small "satellite" schools set up in isolated communities.

### ***Health education and access to health care***

In 1984 volunteers started a street library with the children living in Bolosse-sous-Dalle, one of the poorest areas of Port-au-Prince. The team started to meet families through that activity and soon realized that there was an immediate need to work on access to health care and education. This led to a health promotion project to provide health care for poor families to operate in partnership with two Haitian organizations, le Centre du Santé du Service Ocuménique d'entraide (the Ecumenical Mutual Aid Service Health Center) and the St. Michel Clinic. Approximately 400 families access health care through health cards, with 150 families receiving a special card for children. The cards entitle them to significant price reductions on consultations, treatment, and medication. Families are invited regularly to meet with the clinic staff and the ATD Fourth World team to discuss health related topics.

### ***Early Childhood Education in Port-au-Prince***

At the same time that the health clinic was launched, another Haitian NGO (the Centre d'Éducation Spéciale (CES) that had been partnering with ATD Fourth World since 1988)



proposed to support those working in early childhood education activities and together they formed a preschool and a *bebe byenveni* (welcome babies) program to help children thrive in their fragile early years (80 children from birth to age three and their parents are involved in this project). Once a month the parents meet without their children to discuss issues around health in sessions facilitated by a health professional. They also use this time to share experiences with one another about the progress of their children or to make simple toys out of household materials.

The pre-school is for 55 children aged 3 to 6, run by an ATD Fourth World volunteer and a Haitian student. The program includes singing, music, and gymnastics, reading books or listening to stories, and playing educational games. The program operates in partnership with a local school, les Mains Ouvertes (the Open Hands).

Both of these projects take place outside with a parent or other adults who want to learn about health issues and activities in the area. The ATD Fourth World team has been able to develop close relationships with the local families in order to help them take advantage of free health advice offered by their health partners in the clinics.

### ***Youth in Port-au-Prince***

In 2009, a project was established for youth aged 15 to 22 in response to the gang violence that disproportionately affects poor young people. The project offers literacy and vocational classes, art, and cultural activities for youth who have few skills, little education or experience or opportunity to move out of poverty. They learn about preventive health issues.

### ***Creating space for solidarity***

In response to the instability resulting from the political situation and the difficult conditions of life in poor areas, the neighborhood residents in recent years have held monthly gatherings in order to “break the silence and share and hope together.” The gatherings continued even when much of the other work of ATD Fourth World and its partners had to be put on hold at the height of the violence. It has remained a place of peace where people can meet and come together despite their difficulties. ATD Fourth World has stayed very close to families without allowing itself to be overwhelmed by the violence or having to take sides, which is a major achievement that has helped to bring about as much of a feeling of peace as possible.

During a meeting with a Haitian association, one woman started out explaining how difficult her life was, how she had to struggle to raise money to feed her family by selling water. Then she said: “*This meeting has enabled me to find my place in society again.*” These opportunities for people to express themselves are very important for ATD Fourth World because it puts the health and education programs into context and helps volunteers and families maintain their anti-poverty mission.

## **FUTURE VISION**

In addition to continuing the work on health, education, and building connections between people from different socio-economic backgrounds, the families who are part of the organization in Haiti want to focus on building a “Fourth World House.” This will be a center where families can drop by, a location to gather and hold activities – a place that belongs to the people in the area. Many of the activities that are currently held outdoors will be moved into the Fourth World House, giving the organization and the needs of the people additional legitimacy. The new center will also house offices and accommodation for volunteers. It will be located in Bolosse-sous-Dalle, close to where ATD Fourth World has been running activities outside for almost three decades. As with many NGOs, finding new and sustainable sources of funding that do not restrict the organization or negatively affect its long-term approach is a perennial challenge. Moving to more center-based activities may present a challenge to hold on to the ethos and dynamism that the organization has built up for over thirty years has taken place outside under the eyes of the community.

ATD Fourth World has no relationship with the political power in Haiti (different from their approach in other countries). They question how they can make a wider impact on the lives of poor families without building contacts with government, which has proved difficult to do due to the instability of the country’s governance structure.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Given that ATD Fourth World in France supports a lot of the international work, will they build their supporter base outside of France to continue and grow their international work in a way that remains true to a long-term approach?
2. Given the ATD Fourth mission to eradicate poverty, are their health and education projects in Haiti bringing transformative change to people in poverty? Who does the Haiti team need to engage to make a difference to people living in poverty there?
3. While ATD Fourth World's workforce is an international corps of full-time volunteers, how are long-term futures assured when volunteers leave the volunteer corps or retire from working?
4. ATD Fourth World's work in Haiti is relatively small scale when compared to the needs of the country. What could be done to help other poor families not in contact with the organization benefit from health and education support?

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