



4.2. PROJECTS

The Fourth World People's Universities and the merging of knowledge

Starting up a political process

The founders of ATD Fourth World, Joseph Wresinski and the families of the “homeless camp” in Noisy-le-Grand near Paris, started out in 1957 with a political objective: a better life not just for them, but also for their children, and for no one ever to have to suffer from poverty as they did. Their entire life experience had taught them that they had no chance of achieving that aim alone – others had to stand full square with them, and it would take political action. Since then, thousands of extremely poor people from all continents have joined together with people from all walks of life to take up that challenge and be part of a global aspiration for justice.

Knowledge overlooked

While in many countries commitments to tackle poverty are relatively strong, most initiatives focus on the same hurdle: institutions, politicians, academic researchers and professional providers, even with the best of intentions, devise solutions based on how they see the causes of poverty. Too often, the women and men who are experiencing extreme poverty are seen only in terms of their problems and of what they do not have and need. Because their understanding is overlooked, they become the object of other people's action, excluded from helping to develop our common future, outside the realm of democracy. They have to work with solutions that others have devised for them, solutions that, developed with a disregard for their experience and vision, too often never work out in the long term.

The Fourth World People's Universities

Believing that action can be effective only if it includes what those living in extreme poverty know, ATD Fourth World founded the Fourth World People's Universities in 1972.⁵² The belief that people experiencing the severest poverty have knowledge derived from experience about themselves and their condition, of the world around them that makes them experience these situations of poverty, on how things need to be to halt the exclusion of the most vulnerable,⁵³ was not enough. The means to enable that knowledge to emerge and become communicable had to be put in place. The Fourth World People's Universities are run in multiple stages: reaching out to the most vulnerable people in the places where they live, seeking their opinion, drawing out their experience. There is a gradual realisation of the fact that they contribute, that they have things to say that are of interest to others. This awakening is vital for those who have always been ignored to dare to participate in local meetings. These meetings are the second, equally important, stage in which, in a climate of trust, everyone attempts to give voice to what they think and feel, has the experience of not feeling judged and are taken seriously however clumsily they may express themselves. They find that others are in the same boat. That prompts further self-reflection, overcoming shame and guilt to venture new thoughts. This is done by sharing news about their daily life, and working on a very wide range of specific topics. A monthly regional meeting brings together participants from different local groups, people from other walks of life who have made preparations together or individually, and often one or more invited “guests” relevant to the topic discussed. Local groups give feedback and a dialogue is created with participants. These topics are chosen out of local groups' discussions or with reference to topical events. Fourth World People's Universities or very similar processes are currently run in a number of European countries. They are held every two years in a European Fourth World University where members of European institutions are invited, as well as NGOs.

52. Ferrand F. (1996), *Et vous, que pensez-vous ? L'Université populaire Quart Monde*, Editions Quart Monde, Paris.

53. Wresinski J. (2007), “La pensée des plus pauvres dans une connaissance qui conduise au combat”, in Wresinski J. (2007), *Refuser la misère, une pensée née de l'action*, Editions Le Cerf/Editions Quart Monde, Paris.

Merging knowledge and practices

The Fourth World People's Universities gave rise to experimental programmes on merging knowledge and practices, where people experiencing extreme poverty, ATD Fourth World activists, academic researchers and training professionals compared their questions, worked out propositions, shared their knowledge, combined their insights and finally produced a body of jointly written work on issues critical to the fight against extreme poverty. Merging knowledge is not "giving a voice" to those experiencing poverty first-hand. Everyone is a co-protagonist and co-researcher in the process from start to finish. Everyone has input into the final output. Merging knowledge and practices is played out in training, research and action. Dozens of co-training sessions have been held since 2003, bringing together up to 15 professionals, a number of people who have experienced extreme poverty and exclusion, and a training team of at least two people – one with a professional background, the other with a background of poverty – responsible for putting in place the preconditions for merging. A co-training session involves work on communication, perceptions, time for getting to know one another's realities, writing and analysing accounts of experiences from different angles. It highlights and puts into practice the essential conditions for participation and partnership.⁵⁴

The work is interactive and assumes personal involvement by all. As noted by participants who have experienced poverty: "The professionals' priorities are geared to housing, food, heating, health ... Our priorities are more general: our children's future, for them to have a good education, the ability to choose what is most important to us ... They need us to discuss this with them because we don't see things the same way. They talk about will, control, vital needs; we talk about struggle, freedom, privacy, rights". Professionals made the following remarks on the process: "We became aware that the conditions of the meeting were different: in an office, those living in extreme poverty demand and expect to get something. In a co-training situation, we have come together to develop through listening to one another. The members of the ATD Fourth World group are training up to speak on behalf of other people experiencing extreme poverty".

What outputs does this merging have?⁵⁵

This original way of bringing actors together in an encounter gives rise to epiphanies. The joint work helps all those involved develop communication skills and the ability to understand environments alien to them, to forge partnerships. The merging of knowledge deconstructs preconceptions and half-baked, not to say wrong, thinking, to develop a more accurate understanding of the reality, and thereby to change professional, institutional, social and political practices to ensure universal access to rights for all. For people experiencing extreme poverty to become co-researchers and co-protagonists dramatically changes everyone's roles. Merging knowledge looks ahead to a society where everyone has a place.

Testimony – A personal experience of participation

Marie Jahrling-Apparicio has been a Fourth World activist for decades. She has taken part in the Fourth World People's Universities and the Merging of Knowledge and Practices programmes on "People in poverty and academics thinking together" and "People in poverty and professionals training together" and is a member of the International Joseph Wresinski Centre's Ethics Committee. This testimony is from the preface to the book "Merging of knowledge":⁵⁶

"I remember the Noisy-le-Grand shanty town. The mud and the living conditions meant that we never went unnoticed. We were the outsiders – outside the norms, outside society. We very often used to come

54. See the charter on merging knowledge and practice with people experiencing poverty (in French) on www.croisementdessavoirs.org, accessed 26 October 2016.

55. The practical application of merging knowledge and practices and its transformative effects are presented in detail in Ferrand C. (ed.) (2008), *Le croisement des pouvoirs. Croiser les savoirs en formation, recherche, action*, Editions de l'Atelier/ Editions Quart Monde, Paris.

56. *Breaking barriers – Driving change*, pp. 81-6, available at www.eapn.eu/images/stories/docs/eapn-books/2012-participation-book-en.pdf, accessed 26 October 2016.

upon my mother weeping, however much of a brave face she tried to put on things in front of others. Her tears and her ill health are still inside me in the rage I feel against the injustice that is exclusion caused by poverty. I never used to tack the word 'exclusion' onto what my life was, because I felt being poor was my fault. When I left the shanty town, my one concern was not to be noticed. Some hope. The fact is that when I went back, it was like breathing, getting back to my people, a world where everyone is the same – bowed down, but all equal. I took up the fight when I became aware of the injustice that we were experiencing – no longer to blame, but a victim, and then a fighter. Fighting against the exclusion that is poverty. Joseph Wresinski asked everyone to shoulder their responsibilities in the fight, to become aware of their personal value to better appreciate themselves and by getting involved with others, to form a force for attacking poverty. We trained in the Fourth World People's Universities, people from different towns and cities in different countries. We came to recognise ourselves as a people experiencing the injustice of extreme poverty. We learned to understand ourselves as thinking beings capable of reflective thought, to be empowered, to stand up for our ideas, to communicate with others. Then to work with academics and professionals. To have carried out research with them, merged our knowledge, written things together – madness! It started out as beyond imagining, but we actually did it – it isn't a dream! With the academics, it was about encountering knowledge that we didn't have – sociological and historical knowledge; with the professionals, it was about overcoming our fears, prejudices and preconceptions, dispelling the setbacks suffered in our lives with teachers, doctors, judges, social workers, etc. We did it for our people, for a brighter future. Other activists from the poor community are standing up and moving forward. We are still at the beginnings of getting the voices of the poorest heard. A voice to understand which direction we need to take so that everyone has the best chance. We have the experience of what cannot go on. The days of saying that extreme poverty is inevitable are done. It is not inevitable. I have faith in the work we are doing with academics and the different institutions. If we find the resources to train one another together, we can change practices that have largely failed to deliver against extreme poverty."