

**Message from Mr. Eugen Brand, Director General
International Movement ATD Fourth World
on the Observance of the World Food Day**

In focusing World Food Day 2004 on "Biodiversity for Food Security," the FAO is striving to ensure that people have sustainable access to enough high quality food to lead active and healthy lives. Through the Growing Connection, the FAO is involving children from different regions in a pilot project linked to this goal.

In New York, the Tabori Children's Network^{*} has involved in this project children living in a temporary shelter for the homeless, as well as children living in a very poor housing project. In the shelter, these children and their parents are not allowed to use cooking facilities. They are completely dependent on assistance from the staff. Food is provided for them, but it is usually pre-packaged, not fresh. The fast food available in the neighborhood they live in reflects the varied ethnic origins of the residents; but it is much harder to find fresh ingredients from the same countries, or organically grown vegetables.

Having a chance to grow their own plants has been meaningful and exciting for the children living in this setting, as well as for their parents and the staff in the shelter. In an interview, Eon, age 10, said, "Maybe there are gardens near where we live, but we haven't been here long enough to find them." The nature of homelessness and itinerancy makes it particularly difficult for these families to have a connection to, or even to find, healthy, locally grown food.

In a very poor neighborhood, another interview about food led a mother to speak about her experience gardening a small plot in the Caribbean where she grew up - and about how hard it is to pass on this experience to her children here in New York where they have no access to land.

Children aged 9 to 14 living in the shelter conducted interviews of each other, of parents, and of younger children. Their descriptions of mealtimes in the shelter, where everyone lines up for food and signs in for every meal, reflect their disappointment with the institutional setting that prevents them from the intimacy and choices linked to cooking for one another: "noisy," "stinky," "sloppy." One mother, asked about mealtimes in the shelter, said: "You want dinner, but the food gets you sick. My son wants no part of this food to eat." And another mother answered that mealtimes in the shelter are: "never anymore for the family."

Others adults and children interviewed voiced appreciation for the communal setting and the efforts made by the staff by saying that the meals are fun, or that they enjoy conversations among so many families. One mother, asked about a good memory, recalled laughing when she was a child because a cockroach fell into a pot of collard greens and her friend's mother told her to eat it! People evoked other favorite memories about food that centered on the pleasure of having enough food to share with others, or of their pride when they are able to cook something for the first time.

In link with the Growing Connection, these children and families are continuing to grow food. They have felt the excitement of putting their hands into dirt and water for planting, and months later the older ones remember that it was important to mix dolomite into the soil and to put down a row of fertilizer. They are conducting taste tests to compare local, organically grown vegetables with ones that are preserved and shipped great distances. They are researching the varied work being done in their community to try to improve the variety and accessibility of food in poor neighborhoods.

As important as it is that the global efforts of governments and NGOs reinforce the FAO's work to put an end to hunger by increasing biodiversity, ATD Fourth World believes it is just as crucial to ensure that the families whose poverty isolates them have the opportunity to be part of the process.

Families experiencing homelessness see threats to food security more concretely than most of us. Their access to healthy, fresh, high-quality food is severely limited. They often lack the physical space and time necessary to grow their own food, to take advantage of the growing number of farmers markets and community gardens appearing in low-income neighborhoods, or even to make the simplest choices about their food. The experiences of these families, which are unfortunately common, teach us not to take anyone's food security for granted. Their experiences illustrate quite explicitly the human costs of limited access to a diversity of foods. This lesson is an irreplaceable building block in fighting hunger and malnutrition.