



Didactic Booklet

Booklet n°5 June 2005

With the poor, on the road to peace

Trust

**Political
Action**

Coherence

1. Introduction

Developing Guidelines

Two years have passed since the 2002 Nice Assembly, and we have just finished our 2005 Assembly in Santo Domingo. The latter enabled us to draw conclusions and evaluate the application of guidelines, as well as find new paths for our association.

Indeed, during the last assembly, new paths have appeared so that we can truly start on the “road to peace with the poor”. These paths were generated by various presentations, by the evaluation of associations’ answers regarding the implementation of guidelines, by projects presented and more specifically by workgroups during which all these ideas were taken up.

The presentation of Father General “**With the poor on the road to peace**” had a special impact on our work. His remarkable ideas reframed our actions in the Christian and Vincentian spirit, one of AIC’s priority characteristics. In this booklet, we shall take up again the words of the Father General in order to lighten up the various concepts which help guidelines reach the poorest. That was the main goal of the Assembly and it is also the main goal of this booklet.

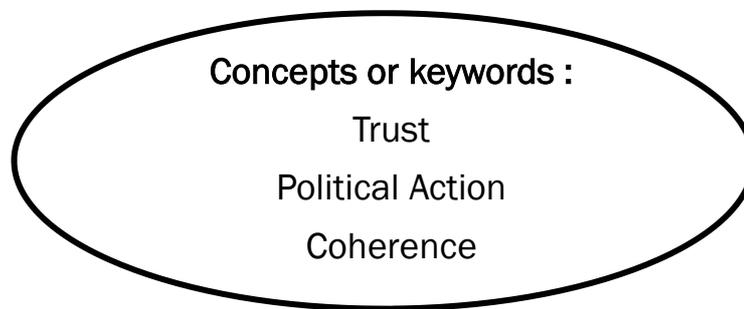
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2. New paths generated by the Assembly for the application of Guidelines

These paths were proposed by participants in workgroups. It is important to take them into account in order to reach the objective and so that guidelines are able to change poverty situations and improve quality of life for the poor, with their participation. Key-words and new paths, presented below, have come of the synthesis of conclusions drawn by all work groups.

Concepts or keywords :



New paths towards a real improvement of the situation of the poor :

- ⇒ Strengthening the ability to listen by creating opportunities for participation and understanding of the poor
- ⇒ Individually and collectively being bold enough to dare affirm our AIC convictions
- ⇒ Promoting exchanges of experiences of empowerment
- ⇒ Walking together with the poor
- ⇒ Combine spirituality and political awareness
- ⇒ Put into practice the main idea of AIC shared message : women and poverty

Already in his time, St Vincent showed us these new paths through his way of life. Walking with the poor is quite a challenge! That is why St Vincent will be our source of inspiration to “transform the love of God into concrete actions”.

The key concepts show us new steps to take our guidelines straight to the poor. Each concept can be applied to all our work as AIC volunteers.

In the work groups, each concept was linked to a 2002-2006 guideline.

Trust	↔	Empowerment
Political Action	↔	Social Co-responsibility
Coherence	↔	Institutional Reinforcement

3. Trust and Empowerment

New paths :

- ⇒ reinforcing the listening ability by creating places for participation and by understanding others
- ⇒ encouraging exchanges of empowerment experiences
- ⇒ accompanying the poor through their development.

Trust according to Father General

In order to motivate the poor to search for and find their empowerment, we must generate in them a feeling of TRUST. In order for empowerment to happen, there must be situations of equality thanks to mutual trust. In order for this feeling to happen, we have to, as the Father General says : *“..get closer to the poor, so that we get to know them better, and all aspects of their lives : the good and the bad, what can be improved and what is hopeless, lights and shadows. Through the shadows that we shall certainly meet is the degree of violence in which the poor live, work and fight to survive”*.

It is obvious that in our current society, relationships of equality are not a reality. Frequently we find the dominating and the dominated, the oppressors and the oppressed. Even in so-called “Christian” relationships, there is a lack of equality since there are “benefactors” who act in favor of others, sometimes in a paternalistic mode, and often doing for others what they could quite well do for themselves. This is where the notion of “empowerment” comes in.

The concept of empowerment is a new term within AIC. It is a word which implies leaving the first place to others, those who are our lords and masters.”

Empowerment : one might think that this concept means that “those who have power can give it to those who don’t”. But that is not correct because power is not something one “gives”. What can be “given” is the “decision power”, thanks to a personal relationship which favors self-esteem and autonomy, in a favorable legal context, with appropriate education, equitable work conditions, correct information on markets and places for influence on public policies.

A **key aspect** of empowerment is that it is rarely a natural process. Indeed it implies a change in personal relationships to the advantage of those who have less power. Success will depend on desire, motivation, ability and effort from those who want this empowerment and the ability of volunteers to create conditions of trust, self-esteem and freedom of decision, including the freedom to make mistakes. It will then become essential to understand what type of aid is most appropriate to enable the empowerment process to get started and then develop its own dynamics.

Trust in oneself and others is a required condition. Without trust, it is not possible to start developing or ensure possibilities for empowerment. To this end, we will have to fight systems of exclusion, repression and submission, by creating conditions for individuals to develop their potentials fully.

Trust is the cement of our actions : trust in God, trust in St Vincent, trust in oneself, trust in our partners, trust in the association, trust in the poor.

The Lord trusts us, he gives us freedom of decision, moreover he trusted us women with the fundamental mission to transmit life in His work

Trust in oneself : just as the Lord trusts us, why not trust ourselves, use the talents and abilities which He has given us, take responsibilities, be ready for leadership, testify in public...

Empowerment means “creating a balanced system of power”, but we must be balanced too... Trusting ourselves, our convictions and our actions. This personal trust gives us the daring to go ahead, the certainty that the situation of the poor will change.

Trust in the poor : without trust, it is not possible to empower the poor : first they will trust us and later themselves. This reaction of respect and listening is the proof that we trust them, as created in the image of Christ our Guide.

Trust in the association : the relationship of love and respect automatically implies trust in our sister volunteers, our partners in this project. Because without trust nothing can be achieved. Volunteers will feel co-responsible in an atmosphere of trust when “they fight together”. If the climate is unhealthy, full of mistrust and conflicts, no result can be expected.

From beneficiaries' empowerment to participation

The final objective of a relationship based on empowerment, that is, a relationship between equals, is to achieve real participation by people in need : by

establishing with them a real partnership; by promoting everyone's access to resources, rights, citizenship, goods and services; and by acting to mobilize all agents.

Examples of projects and experiences

We wish to specify that for each project presented to the assembly, we find new paths for applying the guidelines. However we had to pick a few for training purposes, to illustrate these paths and define projects with a key word.

**Project for children's nutrition, presented by AIC-Dominican Republic,
AIC Group of Villa Duarte, Santo Domingo.**

AIC-Santo Domingo presented a project of children's nutrition, which evolved little by little and eventually involved the children's mothers in the project management. Initially the purpose of the project was to provide meals to ill-nourished children. Then, when the volunteers realized that these school-age children did not attend school, they decided to include in the project basic education and catechism for the ill-nourished as well as other children of the community . Volunteers took steps and the Ministry of Education recognized their small school.

This project could be a model, especially for the application of the **empowerment and social co-responsibility** guidelines. They transformed the project, which took an important turn when the volunteers decided, after some training, to leave the project in the hands of mothers. At this point, beneficiaries really became empowered and turned into co-responsible agents of action. The project managed to generate both empowerment and social co-responsibility and transform a situation of poverty.

Two mothers, beneficiaries of that project, spoke with enthusiasm of the change they felt when they became in charge of the project. Their lives changed when they became aware of their responsibilities as mothers and their roles in the community. Indeed the community needs its better members in order to defeat poverty and misfortunes and build a better life. Their husbands and their communities esteem them more, they are very happy with their children's progress and take credit for it. One of the mothers, Nancy, motivated by these results, decided to go to school too. Other mothers were encouraged to do the same, as did AIC volunteers.

New paths proposed to the assembly and applied in this project :

⇒ **Accompany the poor.** Volunteers did not only provide meals for the children and organize the project. They were also able to accompany the mothers and walk, not ahead of them but alongside, sharing hopes and fears, successes and difficulties on the way. They went down the path together and faced difficulties without being defeated by failures, pursuing efforts until the end.

⇒ **Reinforce listening abilities, by creating places for participation and by understanding others.** Volunteers decided to listen to beneficiaries, to know their abilities and limits in depth, their motivations and wishes. That was possible thanks to group meetings where time is devoted not only to the quantitative evolution of the project but also to dialoguing with mothers, in order to know their feelings and worries. The volunteers' ability to listen helped to determine the moment when mothers felt able to take over the project. The trust that volunteers placed in them helped them feel strong and able to get involved in work that is vital for them, their children and the whole community.

⇒ **Encourage the exchange of empowerment experiences.** This project for children's nutrition in Santo Domingo, a model of empowerment, was shared during the Assembly and several national presidents committed to exchange experiences related to this guidelines.

Other examples of projects :

We present below several examples, and impressions that show us how volunteers are able, around projects, to lead beneficiaries to deciding to fully participate in society's life.

We would like for these exchanges to create sparks, new ideas and new commitments which will enable us to contribute at our level, our measure, with our good will, our rhythm, to go ahead along this important road of beneficiaries' participation and their real implication in a society where excluded people can become less so and where exchanges of ideas and initiatives bear fruit.

Project for single mothers

These mothers got organized into associations after having been accompanied and trained for several years by volunteers. In order to defend their rights within society, they don't call on volunteers like before, they assert themselves and show self-confidence. During campaigns of coffee handling or other local produce, they rebel as soon as they suspect irregularities at hiring. They dare to denounce injustices, because they now know their rights, they are not afraid of speaking in public. They earned the respect of their peers. From shy, quiet women, they have become full fledged citizens. They take part in the social life of their neighborhood or town and are listened to by their community.

Project for the homeless :

This is a project of social participation started to promote communication of the homeless with their community, because one of their problems is that they feel excluded from society. This project enabled the homeless to establish exchanges with the children of the elementary school of their neighborhood. A film called "Just Like Children" was shot on the basis of this experience. The homeless who

participated in this project are very proud of it, which has given them some dignity back.

The project's beneficiaries told us in their own words, how much this movie and the look on the children's faces had changed the attitude of neighborhood people towards them and how they too are changing their attitude and starting their social reinsertion.

Project FEM : Job search for underprivileged women

The goal of this project is to accompany women in their search for jobs. In cooperation with professional, they use the method of learning to choose, a non-directive method in which the trainer loses his expert status. The learning happens in two stages :

The first stage lasts 4 months part-time : the women form a group, rediscover and master some of the restraints of life as a group : being on time, looking presentable, respecting other's speech, listening, expressing themselves, discovering their own resources through confrontation with the group, learn specific facts on the job market, visit businesses and offices.

The second stage intends to put them in real work situation : search for a real job, interview, evaluation. It lasts 6 months and women get a real salary.

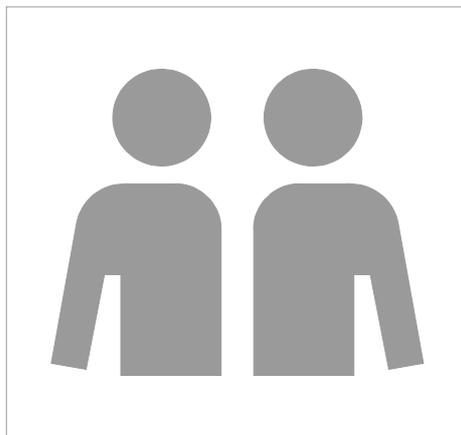
What seems interesting to us in this project is the evaluation of the volunteers' role by a professional : "In this project volunteers play a very important role in the validation and generation of trust among beneficiary women thanks to :

- their encouraging and positive outlook,
- the creation of personal relationships : they set up friendship bonds, worry about the women's health, go see them at home, go along for certain errands, think of them even when they are apart...
- the fact that they are on equal footing : beneficiaries freely chose to be part of the project, thus they are in a voluntary path, not bound to a work contract.
- a warm atmosphere which enables the women to feel comfortable right away
- their help to better understand professionals; during training, the volunteers facilitate exchanges, explain comments, encourage communication, give examples, bring in their experience."

Participation becomes Law

In France, beneficiaries' participation had an interesting evolution. The 2002-2 Law, of January 2nd, was promulgated to protect the fundamental rights of users of social premises and services. This law cancelled the hierarchical relation between professionals/volunteers and service users, and generated an action of defense of human rights of the aid demanders, as opposed to a relation of assistance. This enables an egalitarian relationship between professionals/volunteers and beneficiaries of projects, which is fundamental to really change the emergency situation of beneficiaries.

This fact shows that it is possible to sensitize institutions to incite them to aim for beneficiaries' participation.



Proposals for concrete actions

- ⇒ think of how better to integrate our beneficiaries so that they become full-fledged actors, develop self-esteem and win the trust of their communities;
- ⇒ reinforce our ability to listen and empathize in order to better know poor people, their strengths and weaknesses;
- ⇒ reinforce their potentials through actions and projects (literacy, micro-credit etc)
- ⇒ organize them into structured associations;
- ⇒ provide training in order to promote human dignity (workshops on rights and duties of citizens):
- ⇒ encourage exchanges of experiences among national associations (mail, assemblies, Info AIC).



Volunteers and beneficiaries
in Santo Doming, Dominican Republic

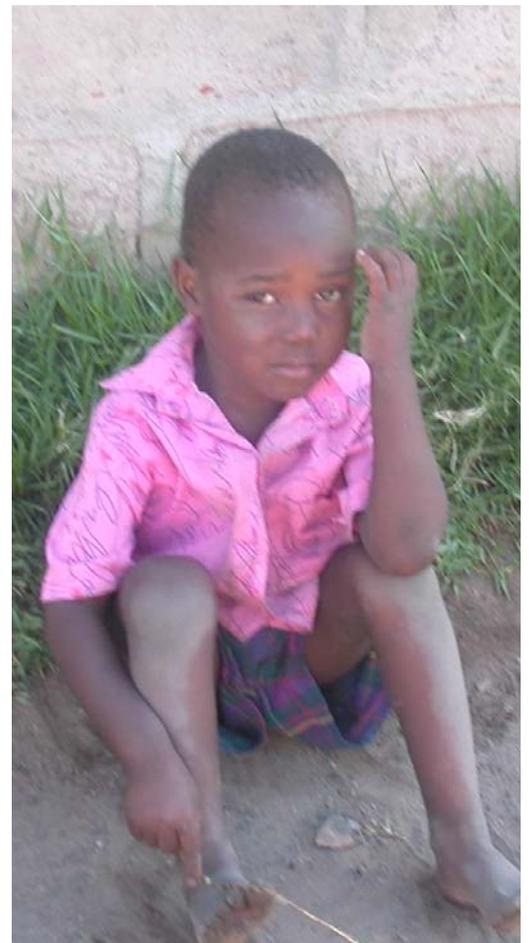


Paths for personal and group reflection

Reflect on methods to approach the poor, to concretize these various actions :

“no one ever trusts me because I’m poor” : we have often heard these words, what do we do about it?

- ✚ don't we tend to be paternalistic with the poor? Do we trust them enough and can we walk along with them towards a world of justice and peace?
- ✚ what do we do when conflict situations due to lack of trust? Because lack of trust can generate conflicts. Can we look for causes? Can we manage those situations?
- ✚ trust is based on faith, does our faith irradiate into real action of daily life and according to guidelines? How?



4. Political Action and Social Co-Responsibility

The word “political” is of Greek origin and is synonymous with community. A political action means “anything that impacts the situation of a community” –local, national or international.

Consequently, what we do as volunteers is “politics”, not partisan politics but the kind that impacts community life, in which we feel co-responsible. If we, Christian and Vincentian volunteers, visit elderly people, if we organize a soup kitchen or a literacy course, it is a political statement. We bear witness to a situation of poverty, we prove that we must act against that poverty and we get involved. As soon as we act in the public and community domains, we already are involved in politics :

- ⇒ vis-a-vis the elderly
- ⇒ vis-a-vis hunger
- ⇒ vis-a-vis lack of schooling etc...

Through concrete and targeted political action, we go further, we take an important step; we not only work at improving the poor’s situation, denouncing societal dysfunctions, but we also commit to eliminating the causes of poverty, where we live, where we detect them, with our means, and if possible with partners committed like we are.

At the General Assembly in Santo Domingo, the Superior General spoke to us about this. We discussed it in work groups, which included various cultures and languages. All insisted on the importance of political action, which was finally voted in as key-word and new path for AIC.

For our political commitment, we can start from essential bases :

- ⇒ Christ, who during his life amongst men was political through his involvement with the weak, women, children and the handicapped.
- ⇒ St Vincent too took the side of the poor, not only by helping them but also by getting involved for their rights at a political level.
- ⇒ the Church never confined itself to spirituality but also fought against poverty; as an important political agent, it took the side of the poor; since the 19th century, this commitment was expressed in major social encyclicae and in the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church.

Within AIC too, political action is a well-known domain. Many associations and member groups have been involved for a long time and successfully, and this tendency is on the increase. This tendency expresses itself through our guidelines too, ever more targeted and destined to transforming actions, which invite us to social co-responsibility and networking.

The Superior General’s words on political action and co-responsibility

“We are all called to feel concern for our brothers and sisters, especially those most marginalized by society, because we are all one and the same human family, even though we might live at different ends of the world. In order to bring about right relationships between peoples, we are called to take action, especially political action in order to confront the causes of poverty and rally in solidarity for justice for the poor, who are often made poor by the unjust systems, whether social, political, or economic, generated by the selfish hearts of men”.

As we work to renew hearts, we are also called to renew systems, institutions and methods in order to live in this world with equality, in a sense of global solidarity among those who have and those who have not, in mutual trust and fraternal love. At times, for some people, the word “political” seems to be incompatible with charity. That may be when we understand “political” as politicizing. A challenge for the International Association of Charities would be to continue to work politically to change unjust structures.”

Example of political action and co-responsibility, presented at the assembly :

**Social Reinsertion of elderly
AIC-Peru, Miraflores Group (Lima)**

AIC in Miraflores, Lima (Peru) presented the project **Social reinsertion of a group of elderly people**. This project shows us the need to act, not in isolation, but in a co-responsible way, to favor political actions, really transforming actions.

Description and progress of the project

The volunteers in charge of this project are preoccupied with the physical and moral well-being of elderly people, as fundamental element of the project; they make sure these people feed themselves, take care of their physical and mental health, and watch over their reinsertion in society. They achieve all kinds of activities and therapies; they sensitize them to their responsibilities and their rights; they favor the development of their self-esteem and their empowerment. The elderly of Miraflores are useful to society, they have a great desire to live and achieve at all levels.

However, the volunteers went even further and their project improved tremendously because they were able to encourage co-responsibility. Not only in the neighborhood of Miraflores, but in all of Lima and in various organizations, public as well as private, national and international. They achieved political actions, and thanks to that, they were able to influence public policies in this sector, sometimes so socially marginalized. Political action, which they exerted through sensitization and pressure on governmental structures, not only sensitized the concerned structures and society in general, but it also contributed to the passing of laws in favor of the elderly. If they had worked individually, they would never have achieved so much.



They promoted networking and now they cooperate with various sectors. This enabled them to improve quality of life for older people, not only in Miraflores, but also in other locations. Networking offered new opportunities to the association. Contacts with other entities and associations enabled them to participate in other projects to help the elderly. It also enabled them to develop technical skills and their experiences. Volunteers were granted two scholarships to get training abroad, one in Chile, one in Peru. Those who took the training passed it down to the rest of the group. They also achieved twinnings with neighboring entities, exchanging gifts and services for the beneficiaries.

New paths applied to this type of project :

⇒ Being bold at a personal level, as well as at group and AIC levels, to affirm our convictions :

The Miraflores volunteers were able to achieve transforming actions, because they had the courage to defy existing patterns, point out mistakes and weaknesses of existing treatments of the elderly, to denounce, to propose. Apparent failures never stopped them, they were never afraid to denounce unjust and disrespectful structures, through which society and various institutions stop older people from continuing to feel useful to society and worthy of trust and support.

⇒ Combining spirituality and political conscience

The volunteers in charge of the project state that they would never have been able to implement a project of such scope without strong spiritual training. Their spirituality, rooted in Christian and Vincentian values, led them to get involved in structural change where the rights of the poorest are respected, where the last come first. The sisterly relations within the group, resulting from its spirituality, were essential for developing and continuing the project.

⇒ Favoring exchanges of empowerment experiences

This is another important aspect of the project. Volunteers exchanged their knowledge and experiences with the elderly and the latter returned the favor. As far as AIC is concerned, the group of volunteers of Miraflores, a model of social co-responsibility, shared their experience with AIC and the national associations of Latin America. They created a twinning with the Mexican association, in order to exchange empowerment experiences, and thus both associations grew.

⇒ Accompanying the poor along their path

Volunteers and elderly progressed together. The elderly take part in the planning of activities, they testify on the changes in their lives, they participated in the creation of

a video whose goal was to sensitize the community to demands and needs of the elderly.

Examples of global political actions undertaken by AIC :

- ⇒ international campaign against violence towards women
- ⇒ participation in the campaigns “Fight against Malaria” and “Fight against Hunger” launched by the Vincentian family.
- ⇒ development and spreading of a common message for the whole association “**Women and Poverty**”.

International Campaigns

On various occasions, we spoke of the “**International Campaign against violence towards women**” and we believe it generated a lot of interest and participation by AIC volunteers throughout the world. The impact is hard to measure but we know that volunteers did not ignore this call by AIC. In Latin America and Europe, volunteers gave much emphasis to this initiative, especially after the Madrid and Fortaleza (Brazil) seminars. The initiatives undertaken throughout the world, be it to celebrate International Women’s Day or other occasions, were never taken in isolation. Volunteers started political actions of denunciation and support to women’s causes, always in cooperation with neighboring groups and with wide participation of the various layers of civilian society, especially women.

Everything that regards the participation of the campaigns of the Vincentian Family, “**Fight against Hunger**” and “**Fight against Malaria**” is also familiar to us. In both campaigns, AIC insisted on the need to get involved at the level of structures and reach the roots of these social plagues. This motivated AIC volunteers throughout the world to insist on the need to eradicate poverty and other resulting evils. We must “**be bold at personal, group and AIC levels to affirm our convictions.**”

AIC's new political initiatives :

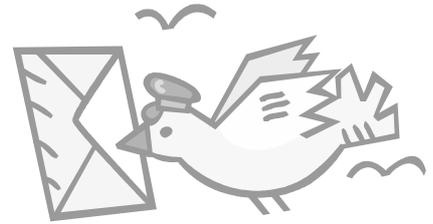
- 1) **Launching of common message for all of AIC :
"Women and Poverty"**

AIC, as we know, has various representations at international organizations. In cooperation with AIC, the latter reached the conclusion that AIC must be identified and recognized through a common message worldwide. This message must enable people to identify by emphasizing an important aspect of its action. They decided that the most representative aspect was to be seen as an association that deals primarily with women's poverty, their promotion and their rights. Therefore we suggest to capture the attention of organizations and institutions on the theme "**Women and Poverty**". This shows our focus on the problems of poor women.

European survey on women and poverty

Spain made the comment that the message should be joined with pressure, and this pressure should come with numbers and facts.

During the meeting of European presidents in Lyons in March 2005, our leaders accepted to write a document at European level, which comprises the statistics of AIC actions whose goal is women's poverty. Each national association committed to writing a list of its projects and actions that reached women. It would be useful to collect national data on the level of women's poverty in all countries (search for statistics in each country). **A questionnaire will be sent to each national association.**



AIC

Women

&

Poverty

2) Participation to the Millenium Objectives of the United Nations

As you know, in September 2000, 189 countries signed the UN Declaration for the Millenium. They recognized that progress is based on enduring economic growth which must focus on the poor.

In order to quantify its progress, the UN defined objectives that are measurable and defined in time, to fight poverty, hunger, diseases and discrimination against women. The evaluation of Millenium Objectives is not only done at international level but also at national level, since an “evaluation at country level is indispensable in order to evaluate progress and mobilize resources”. These national evaluations can be found on the internet, but also through cooperation with other civilian or religious organizations. We can thus notice where a country is at, regarding the various objectives and criteria. National evaluation is especially important for AIC volunteers, for two reasons :

It enables them to evaluate and adjust their work with the poor in relation to the Millenium Objectives. For example, if the report reveals a decrease in school attendance of orphans, compared to no-orphans, we can launch projects to help orphans. When we seek financing for these projects, we can refer to the Objectives.

Similarly, a national evaluation helps work at political and public levels, which corresponds to the AIC guideline “social co-responsibility”. If a government signed the Millenium Declaration, the international community checks what each country does or doesn't do. **Civilian society, NGOs like our own can insist that governments accomplish what they signed up for.** For example they can put pressure to generalize elementary schooling and medical care, like was done successfully by AIC-Madagascar.

For more impact, we will have to work in partnership with others, because cooperation is essential for efficiency and creativity, especially cooperation with those suffering from poverty.

The eighth Millenium Objective, **Favoring a world association for development, indispensable to the eradication of poverty**, refers concretely to the need for good management of public affairs, and reduction of poverty in each country, and on an international level, thanks to interaction and commitment by social actors. It demonstrates that participation to social assistance to development thanks to interaction by developing countries and small countries. Only common efforts, co-responsibility of all actors and sectors of society will enable us to reach the other Millenium Objectives, destined to diminish poverty in an efficient and global manner.

This has direct impact on AIC. Our specificity does not imply actions at macro-economic level, but if we want to cooperate efficiently in the eradication of poverty and its causes, we must include all social actors within our reach : national and local governments, Church, associations that fight poverty, similar associations, the Vincentian Family, volunteers, family and friends and of course, the level which is essential to us : the beneficiaries, active subject and essential elements of our actions.

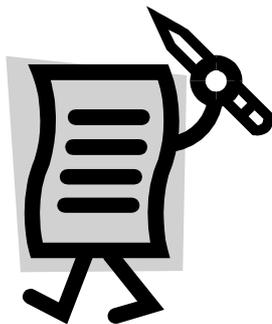
Concrete proposals for action :

- ⇒ continue to search for new **ways to participate to the various campaigns** to which AIC already participated :
 - ⇒ International campaigns against violence to women
 - ⇒ Vincentian Family campaign “Fights against Hunger”
 - ⇒ Vincentian Family campaign “Fight against Malaria”.

- ⇒ **launch the common message “Women and Poverty “** by getting public authorities to focus on poor women’s problems :
 - ⇒ ask them whether their future decisions related to a certain theme take into account the problems and requests of women in difficulties; what consequences those decisions will have on their lives; and how the program in which they think of getting involved can change women’s situations.

 - ⇒ take this message to the various institutions to which the volunteers belong : neighborhood or city meetings, national or international organizations, so that the message goes everywhere and becomes the sign of our action throughout the world.

 - ⇒ take part in **exchanges about empowerment**. To implement exchanges, we ask you to send AIC a report on the political initiatives you have taken, so that the team in charge can publish them in the next Didactic Booklet on political action which will appear in December 2005.





Keys for personal and group reflection :

As a group, think of ways to apply, in our concrete actions, the new paths detected by The General Assembly as listed in this booklet; they could be summarized as follows :

**Boldness of individuals and group;
Spirituality and political conscience;
Walking with the poor.**

-  Do we really feel responsible for the success of the Millenium Objectives? What do they mean for us? Do they have meaning at the level of our volunteer work?

-  Are we satisfied with actions or projects destined to help in eradicating poverty or do we also demand from governments and authorities that they reach those objectives?

-  How did we do it and in what situations? Are we ready to continue?

5. Coherence and Institutional Development

The purpose is to make our association stronger at all levels from the basis to the international, thanks to a better organization, a stronger feeling of belonging, a better relationship with beneficiaries. Again, we join St Vincent who used to say : **“the poor suffer more for want of organization than want of charity”** and **“we must do good in a good way”**. He also said that the poor have a right to competent and well organized partners : that is the respect we owe them.

This makes us have a consistent attitude and take consistent actions. Well-trained volunteers, spiritually and technically, will be more able to face demands of their work for the poor.

Coherence in work, in our attitude to ourselves and others, requires a constant questioning and self-evaluation, a will to transform ourselves at any time and any level :

- ⇒ personal conversion
- ⇒ training of volunteers to AIC identity and spirituality
- ⇒ firm up our convictions
- ⇒ know the social doctrine of the church
- ⇒ know society's laws
- ⇒ open up and believe in the transformation of society and life of the poor.

“Serving the poor with sweaty brows and strong arms” as St Vincent used to say. Serving the poor, **“Our Lords and Masters”**, with whom we must walk to achieve Peace in the world.

In order to be consistent, we must commit to saving The Truth, to save human beings in all their dignity and not fearing disapproval or disturbance. Yet neither must we try to impose them, but we have to affirm and defend them. In one word, live our daily lives with consistency, proclaim our faith, live the service of the poor in the light of the Gospel's teachings.

Words of our Superior General on consistency

During his speech, Father referred to the virtues that St Vincent recommended to his disciples. Father considers these virtues as means to achieve peace, together with the poor. He underlined **simplicity** as opposed to falsity, as **intimately linked to consistency**. On the same topic he told us this : *“The gift of simplicity invites us to be, in our relationships, fully sincere, transparent, open, with the ability to say things as they are, with great compassion. As the Scriptures say “May your “yes” be a yes and your “no” be a no. Sincerity generates trust and trust is another essential element to build peace. Real peace can only be built on mutual trust”*.

Example of a project of institutional reinforcement; consistency between “being” and “doing”.

The project “Migrant Women” was created for a group of Arab women, almost all Muslims, living in Ponte Lambro, one of the poorest neighborhoods around Milan, Italy.



The project was born out of these women’s wish to understand the culture of the foreign country, where they lived in margin. They didn’t ask for food for their bodies, but rather spiritual enrichment, with a strong will to improve their integration in their country of choice.

With the cooperation of a social worker, and of course, the help of an Arab woman, volunteers searched for a group of volunteers willing to pass on (not teach!) in a simple manner, concepts of Italian history, religion, literature, art history, hygiene and food. A real cultural exchange took place between women of the two groups and they weaved bonds of complicity and friendship which only got stronger over time.

The Milan volunteers were busy implement a process of institutional reinforcement and they understood early on that this project was an important element for their personal reinforcement and the group’s. In total consistency with their values, by respecting equality, and cultural values, by letting themselves “be evangelized by the poor”, they had an open attitude which enabled them to evolve with the Arab women in the group.

But everything was not easy from the start. A lot of linguistic and cultural hurdles had to be crossed, and initially the husbands did not want their wives to take part. With time, volunteers were able to apply AIC’s guidelines in this project.

Institutional reinforcement : the Vincentian group which works in Ponte Lambro has come strengthened out of this experience, more convinced of the usefulness of its work, enriched by participatory experiences of social transformation and by cultural and religious exchanges. According to the Arab women, their lives improved at personal and group levels they felt stronger because they managed to communicate more and better with Italian institutions, to better understand various customs and more than anything, they found more friendship and love around them.

The Ponte Lambro volunteers recognized not only that their group was strengthened by this experience **which gave them better consistency with their principles of equality and fraternity and with AIC principles in general**, but also that they are now better AIC volunteers. Moreover, they are happy to have taken part in an “experience

of peace” : *“because we have the feeling that this project is a tiny little drop of water in the huge and wonderful “sea of peace”.*

New Paths applied to this type of project

⇒ **reinforcing the listening ability by creating places for participation and by understanding others.**

The ability to listen appears in this project fully, since the question was for women of different languages and traditions to communicate. Participants in the project, Italian volunteers and Arab women, managed to understand one other through body language. This requires an open attitude of solidarity. The Arab women found, in this project, a place where they could fully participate, share their worries, their successes and difficulties, their concerns regarding their children’s education and their own social insertion. Together, volunteers and beneficiaries managed to build a place of peace and sisterhood.

⇒ **being bold at personal and group levels, and as AIC member, to affirm our convictions.**

The institutional reinforcement achieved by the Milan volunteers enabled them, in this action, to act in consistency with their principles. It is easy to say that one accepts cultural differences, but one needs to be consistent and in agreement with those principles to succeed in the challenge of applying them – not just accepting them; be open to learn about differences. The woman in charge of the project said *“our Arab friends not only learned to eat spaghetti, but we ate them together, and it was a source of joy for all of us”.*

Examples of Institution Reinforcement in consistency with values of our spirituality, AIC’s mission and vision.

Process of Reinforcement started by AIC. At present we are in the second stage of this process, which will help us be consistent with our mission and our vision.

Various associations throughout the world have carried out this process . In consistency with the idea of achieving an “AIC of participation and solidarity”, they offered to support national associations which wish to apply similar processes at national levels. The Latin American seminar on “Participatory Leadership” took place thanks to the participation of AIC-Mexico. During that seminar, they underlined the need to act consistently with AIC principles, to favor relations between groups, to develop listening abilities and better communication.

Initiative started by AIC

Another example of consistency with AIC principles : training given to a group of Haitian and Vietnamese volunteers, with the primary objective of reinforcing both associations.

In Santo Domingo, during the Latin American seminar on Participatory Leadership, a team of volunteers from France and Madagascar gave intensive training to a group of eight volunteers from Haiti. Their two spiritual counselors, a Daughter of Charity and a chaplain, as well as an AIC volunteers from Vietnam, also attended. The contribution of experiences and testimonies from Vietnam reinforced the Haitians' convictions.

They tackled the following themes : Volunteerism and Gratuity, Spirit of St Vincent, Riches of Team Work, Development of Projects, Learning Evaluation. These motivated volunteers, who work in countries with major economic and political problems, appeared hesitant at the beginning of training. They did not dare move ahead or act for and with the poor. After three days of training and exchanges, they left with new convictions and decided to sponsor illiterate women who, ashamed of their handicap, refused to go to centers and sign up for the sewing and literacy workshops. This project was already in existence, but they decided to strengthen it and develop it into a project which would generate income as well as informal training.

Those three days spent together strengthened these young volunteers, who are capable and competent and will, in turn, train other volunteers and more importantly, beneficiaries, who need their help to take charge of their own lives. They lacked this manner of acting with conviction and consistency : consistency in our actions gives us impetus to go ahead!



Paths for personal and group reflection

- ✚ Review the coherence between group project and Vincentian project
- ✚ Analyze concrete projects and see whether they correspond to and apply institutional, personal and group consistency.
- ✚ Reflect on various basic elements to create a good climate in the group, between volunteers, with counselors and of course, with the poorest (union and communion, sisterhood, warmth, mutual trust, efficient communication and respect).

Proposals for concrete actions

- ⇒ Undertake, if not already done, processes of institution reinforcement, which will help you be more consistent with AIC's principles, spirituality and mission.
- ⇒ Request, via AIC, the support of national associations which are competent in this type of process.

6. Conclusion

We have searched for new paths, new ways of applying guidelines, which correspond to the very essence of our AIC identity : **together, with the poor, starting from their own experiences, their dreams and their wishes.**

By analyzing various reflections and initiatives presented in this booklet, we see that this is a constant preoccupation of AIC. **“Walking along with the poor”** has become the big challenge. If we really live our Vincentian spirituality, if our actions are consistent with our principles, it would not occur to us to make change for them or impose our criteria. Let us remember *“the poor are our Lords and Masters, and we must consider them as protagonists of their own lives and not objects which enable us to experience our spirituality”*.

In our world, in these turbulent times full of contradictions and violence, the clamor of the poor is heard in many ways, but it is particularly expressed in the shared wish to achieve peace, *“a peace which is a good thing , which is built with good”*, a peace which is conquered day after day, on the basis of dignity and justice, ethics and brotherhood, initiatives and concrete experiences of peace. This is our conviction but we need courage to affirm and defend them. We must trust our own possibilities and those of our brothers.

“Walking alongside the poor is a real challenge, especially when it is a matter of walking towards building peace... Pius XI affirmed “that there cannot be external peace among men and peoples if the spirit of peace has not taken possession of minds and hearts. Minds to recognize and respect the reasons for justice; hearts so that charity is associated with justice and prevails... In the core of the building of peace is charity, and charity is in the very heart of what it means to belong to AIC.”

Let us take on the challenge with firmness, energy and perseverance, and let us get involved in processes which lead to building peace.



A mainly women's association organized
at world level, including
more than 150,000 volunteers
in 6,000 local teams in 50 countries.

Founded by St. Vincent de Paul in 1617
to fight any forms of poverty and
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social and recognized role,
in a spirit of solidarity

Editor:

Agnès Dandois

Tel.: 32 (0) 10 45 63 53

mail: contact@aic-international.org

www.aic-international.org



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Collaborators
for this issue :

Redaction :

*Rose de Lima
Ramanankavana
Patricia de Nava
Marina Costa,*

Translations :

*Hélène Bushen
Marie Caroline Lièvre
Bénédicte de Bellefroid
Ida Tomaschu
Eunice Martins,
Anne Sturm
Christa Foelting*

Design :

Béatrice Dupriez

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