

## **Senior citizens for the Third World**

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Our association was founded on 18 November 1993 after a lengthy period of consultations with public and private entities, including many professional associations.

The association was created with a very clear idea: retired persons with a sense of social responsibility and solidarity joined forces to find an outlet for their concerns by working to fight hunger. Not just physical hunger for food, but also all kinds of hunger that afflict humanity. Hunger for education and culture, hunger for justice, hunger for understanding between different races and cultures, etc.

We drew up proposals which the Constitutional Assembly adopted in full as our statutes; the constitution was signed by 61 retired persons.

Our association or non-governmental organisation is apolitical and non-confessional: it welcomes all types of people and its activity is not associated with any political beliefs, race or religion.

To avoid duplication, for those activities suited to our members but carried out by other bodies, we see no problem in our members belonging to other associations which undertake such activities.

Our ever-present goal in the fight against hunger is to deal with borderline situations. To give you a clear example, if we cooperate with the association "Amies de la Gent Gran" (Friends of the Elderly), which deals with older persons in crisis, we always ask to take care of persons with no family, to relieve the "hunger" for company. Likewise, we deploy directors for social NGOs which may lack certain types of persons.

And there is a fourth element in our statutory objectives, the one that was most controversial, but we are very proud and happy to have maintained it.

We handle no money. I believe we are the only association in the world whose statutes prohibit it from touching money. But that does not keep us from being able to deal with any situation. When the question of money comes up in the context of a project, we act as intermediaries. We go in search of it and when we find the people or entities willing to provide financing, we put them directly in contact with those doing the work who have to be paid. We do our utmost to guarantee the cost analysis and payment, on top of which is the fact that many parts of the project have been handled for free by our members. Our association includes engineers, architects, architects' assistants, lawyers, and so on, who provide their services for free.

As to the cost of our structure -we are all volunteers and have no salaries- sponsors pay our expenses for rent, telephone, fax, paper, correspondence, Internet, etc. through direct donations or upon the submission of invoices. I am speaking only about strictly real expenses... because we cannot accept donations.

Nor can we set fees to be paid by our members or friends of our association. The only disadvantage if we compare our organisation to other NGOs that rely on funds, is that when the assembly approves a request for aid, we have to start looking for money to pay for it, whereas when you already have money the project can get started right away.

But this is becoming less of a disadvantage because we are finding more and more sources of financing and, even in the case of other NGOs, it is very rare that important requests can be fulfilled immediately: verifications and controls are always needed. So our assistance is increasingly provided in real time. I do not deny that there can be delays in some cases, because of personal negligence or slowness in taking steps.

In spite of the fact that aid is provided for the third and fourth world -the latter being poverty within the affluent world- we have kept the name "Senior Citizens for the Third World" because it represents well what we do. But we do have many activities in our own world, which we shall explain below.

What happened? During months of surveys -from March to November 1993- of bodies and associations on the viability of our project, we had the surprise of being welcomed enthusiastically, rather than simply seeing our viability confirmed.

What was happening? In seven years, the situation has changed for the better. But at the time, in Catalonia, it was normal for such associations to be set up with a "defensive" approach: "Defence and Rights of Pensioners" was the leitmotiv of seniors' associations. Well, we came along asking questions about the viability of giving and "giving of ourselves" to our fellow man. A new and positive attitude. Somewhat revolutionary.

I would like to explain to this forum of European senior citizens that retirement conditions in Spain at the time were considerably inferior to those of other European countries and in spite of some improvements, they still are. In fact, to bring to conclusion the tasks that we volunteers of Senior Citizens for the Third World undertake, normally it is best to be free of the financial worries usually related to retirement. And the percentage of those in such a situation is a minority. I dare say that in 1993 it was 10% at most. I believe that there has been some improvement, but a majority of pensioners still get jobs -legal or otherwise- to supplement their small official retirement income.

There is also the cultural theme. Our generation, that of the period following the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939, has encountered a lot of problems giving direction to its life. Franco managed to facilitate access to the "six hundred": a car affordable to most of us, not just the rich. But education reached an unexplainably high drop-out rate in the 20th century. And this represents the mass of working people now. Little money and little sense of solidarity, but getting a small taste of material well-being on a weak cultural support has done nothing but encourage selfishness. This is why we are very motivated by the possibilities our principles offer to the senior citizens of Europe, whose average cultural and economic level is much higher.

Because we believe that this culture and this well-being lead to an attitude of personal introspection that promotes a spirit of solidarity.

But I shall not depart from the subject at hand any longer. The support we were given was spectacular. And we founded the organisation in 1993, with all the enthusiasm this support created.

The fact that we do not handle money has given us a great deal of prestige. I dare say even too much prestige. Because nearly seven years after our founding, we have only around 100 active members. But we are known widely and have undeserved prestige. To a large extent, I believe, because of the issue of money. And 100 active members is not too many... we will come back to that in a moment.

What is happening? We NGOs are very closely monitored by politicians: they respect us and, in a way, they fear us a bit. Any failure by an NGO is examined in great detail: "They lack professionalism" or "They are beginners". And the few failures that do occur are always related to improper use of funds. Well, we are not concerned by that question.

Hunger? We have discovered that there are many kinds and we realise that in our eagerness to apply our professional experience to acts of solidarity we have learned more in the past few years than throughout our entire working life. For prisons alone - hunger for freedom, hunger for justice- we began with visits and conferences and now we are bringing nine different activities to conclusion. And the Secretariat for Justice of the Catalan Autonomous Government has signed a co-operation agreement with our association making ours an officially recognised assignment.

AIDS, drug addiction, pockets of poverty, immigrants, old-age homes with insufficient financing, these are the types of tasks we deal with most often in our fourth world. And concerning the third world, that of poverty in general, we work with several South American countries. In the field of education alone, we work with 14 countries through a major religious association that offers instruction to 1 million pupils: we send wheelchairs to invalids wounded by land mines; we build pedestrian bridges; we provide typewriters and various tools for industry and agriculture; and we seek sponsors for the registration of Bolivian lands in El Beni in the name of nearby communities, thus preventing the appropriation of these lands by local political bosses who hold sway with the government.

And we conduct different projects in Africa -hospitals, irrigation, wells, latrines, tanneries, crops, etc.- from Côte d'Ivoire to Mozambique, Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, etc.

And in Sarajevo, we donated an operating room and the services of a doctor during the war a few years ago.

In addition to these activities, which we could call routine, we are engaged in two major projects: a World Summit against Hunger and the creation of a World Confederation of Senior Citizens as a means of slowing the arms race, racism and any social policy lacking in solidarity. I shall conclude my contribution to this round table discussion by developing these two ideas.

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