

Stéphane Hessel receives the UNESCO/Bilbao Prize for the Promotion of a Culture of Human Rights



The Director-General of UNESCO, Koïchiro Matsuura, today designated Frenchman, Stéphane Hessel, as laureate for the UNESCO/Bilbao Prize for the Promotion of a Culture of Human Rights, on the recommendation of a jury that met in early November. The international movement, ATD Fourth World, received an honourable mention.

The international jury, which examined the 36 individuals or institutions nominated for the Prize, emphasised “the life-long commitment and extraordinary contribution of Stéphane Hessel to the promotion of a culture of human rights, justice and dignity,” as well as “his personal involvement in the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

Born in Germany in 1917, Stéphane Hessel moved to France with his mother in 1925. A member of the French Resistance in the Second World War, he was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to the Buchenwald and Dora concentration camps, but escaped when he was being transferred. In 1948, he helped draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As a close associate of French Prime Minister, Pierre Mendès-France, Stéphane Hessel held a number of diplomatic posts, notably at the Headquarters of the United Nations in New York.

A tireless advocate of human rights, he created in France the Association for Training of African and Malagasy Workers (AFTAM) in 1962. A member of the French Higher Council for Integration, the French National Consultative Commission on Human Rights and the French Higher Council for International Cooperation, he was also – at almost 80 years of age – a mediator during the occupation in 1996 of the Saint-Bernard church in Paris by illegal immigrants.

The international movement ATD Fourth World, which was founded in 1957 by Father Joseph Wresinski, now has branches in 30 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. It works to support the most disadvantaged and socially excluded members of society, helping the poorest of the poor with administrative paperwork, while also providing informal education, developing pilot projects to give access to basic rights and, in particular, to ensure that poverty does separate parents from their children.

The UNESCO/Bilbao Prize for the Promotion of a Culture of Human Rights rewards the efforts of institutions, organizations and individuals that have made a particularly important contribution to the promotion of human rights through education and research, and through efforts to raise the awareness of decision-makers and the general public. It replaces the UNESCO Prize for Human Rights Education, created 30 years ago.

The Prize, which is awarded every two years, is funded by a donation from the city of Bilbao (Autonomous Community of the Basque Country, Spain).

The award ceremony will be held at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris on 10 December at 3 p.m., on the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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