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« En duo contre la pauvreté »

FIGHTING POVERTY TOGETHER

**DARIA ROBINSON &
DENIS VON DER WEID**

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At Antenna, she assists him; he wishes to continue working to disseminate technological, economic and medical solutions to the most disadvantaged populations.

The octogenarian is not about to bow out: “I’ll retire when I’m horizontal,” he says.

Daria Robinson is preparing coffee as she opens the door at the Antenna Foundation. *“I was in New York to see my 19-year-old son. I arrived in Geneva this morning,”* announces with tired eyes the foundation’s new director as a preamble.

The astrophysicist has recently joined the office of Denis von der Weid, a slender octogenarian with a gaunt face and white hair standing on end. Thirty years separate them. The founder of Antenna, an organisation recognised as a public utility that has been disseminating technological, economic and medical solutions to the world’s most disadvantaged people for thirty years, was looking for someone to take over.

The office is a veritable cave full of trinkets, Haitian paintings, loose folders, hibiscus capsules – which help fight high blood pressure – and objects that seem to have been made on the corner of a table. Yet these are not gadgets but tools that can save lives.

Salt water becomes drinkable

An example? There is an electrolysis device named Wata that local populations can connect to a solar panel. This technology transforms a saltwater solution into sodium hypochlorite, which is chlorine capable of making water drinkable. Such decentralized production allows users to be independent of external supplies and to avoid transport and storage problems, such as in cases of infectious epidemics.

Antenna invented the WATA device about 10 years ago and has disseminated them in some 100 countries. Antenna estimates that it is facilitating access to drinking water for 20 million people. *“Charities or donations do not make it possible to disseminate a technology widely. It takes a viable business model with local partners to have a real impact. When a start-up decides to commercialize our ideas, we are delighted. We also promote the autonomy of the local population,”* says von der Weid, who has been, among others, a professor of development economics, president of the Berne Declaration (now Public Eye), director of a large pharmaceutical company, head of research in an Indian leprosarium, a university professor in Bogota and the father of seven children. *“I adopted five orphaned brothers and sisters in Mumbai [formerly known as Bombay]. Today, I am the grandfather of 18 adopted grandchildren.”*

“Why don’t major research institutions cede a few crumbs from their budgets to solve North-South challenges? Eighty per cent of the technologies developed benefit only ten per cent of the world’s population. This divide will cost us dearly,” says an indignant Denis von der Weid, who opened his door last September to Daria Robinson. But he is not about to bow out. *“I’ll retire when I’m horizontal,”* he says. She smiles. *“It’s like a tango that you have to learn to dance as a couple. He is sometimes stubborn. It’s both a shortcoming and an asset,”* she confides. *“But I fell in love with his energy and the causes he defends. I like being able to improve the conditions of [those in] extreme poverty thanks to science.”*

This interest did not come about right away. At 16, her heart beat only for space. Becoming an astrophysicist was obvious. Her career led her to the European Space Agency where – thanks to her energy and charisma -- she won over various actors. She also founded and led Science & Space Bridges, a company building bridges between science and technology, governments, industry and society.

Mister Spirulina

“At Antenna, I feel like I have fallen back into a familiar world. I have come back to the source,” adds Daria Robinson. In her family, scientists were an unknown species. Her mother was a psychologist; her father worked for the World Trade Organization. *“Mine was the head of the Swiss cavalry,”* notes Denis von der Weid, who was sent to boarding school in Bern as a child and only returned home once every three months. *“The issue of hunger was already a real concern. You had to clean your plate. We were told that the Chinese did not have enough to eat. But we did not even know where China was.”*

Today, according to a United Nations report, some 821 million people face chronic food deprivation, one in nine people worldwide. Operating with a budget of about 4 million francs, the Antenna Foundation aims to solve part of the problem. For example, through its daughter company Elephant Vert, it has developed biostimulants – an alternative to chemical fertilizers and pesticides that allows farmers to lower their production costs – for several African countries. The Antenna Foundation is also a pioneer in the production and distribution of spirulina, a high nutritional value microalga, a few grams of which daily can lead to improvements in the nutritional state of malnourished children. *“We could do a lot more. Our actions are only a few drops in the ocean,”* concludes Denis von der Weid.

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