

Making Hunger History

The 'soggy Left', as described by Christopher Pearson in last Saturday's *Australian*, wants to end global hunger by changing political and social structures that support an international system prepared to stomach the preventable deaths of 8000 children every day. "Soggies" here include Cardinal Edward Cassidy, Bp Jeremiah Coffey, Kofi Annan, Bob Geldoff, Jeffrey Sachs, John Paul II, and the leaders of all 191 UN member nations.

by Bruce Duncan CSsR

Once many people thought it was impossible to abolish slavery, since societies had always had slaves, and maintaining living standards required slaves.

Today we think such views not just ignorant, but too accommodating to a great moral evil. Attitudes to slavery changed because of the campaign by religious and humanitarian abolitionists that the issue was fundamentally a moral one. There was no economic inevitability about slavery.

Today the greatest moral issue of our time, in the view of Pope John Paul II among many others, is the persistence of mass hunger and the most severe poverty for one-fifth of the human race. Yet leading economists assure us that hunger persists not for economic reasons, but because of other political and social factors.

This is the surprising theme of Jeffrey Sachs in *The End of Poverty: how we can make it happen in our lifetime*, and the premise of the UN Millennium Development Goals that Australia signed on to in September 2000, along with 188 other countries. At the request of the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, Sachs has been coordinating the work of hundreds of specialists in drafting the detailed planning to mobilise resources to lift living standards among the poorest people on the planet.

Among the Goals are plans to:

- * halve the number of people in hunger or desperate poverty (living on less than about \$US1 per day) by 2015,
- * reduce infant mortality by two-thirds,
- * reduce maternal mortality by three-quarters,
- * achieve primary education for all boys and girls,
- * reverse the spread of infectious diseases, including malaria, TB, HIV/AIDS, and
- * sustain the environment.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his Chancellor Gordon Brown have strongly promoted popular awareness of this historically unprecedented opportunity greatly to reduce mass hunger from the world. They have been strongly supported in the popular and youth cultures by media personalities, Bono and Bob Geldorf, especially in the lead up to the meeting of the Group of 8 leading industrial powers (Britain, France, Germany, Japan, the United States, Italy, Canada and Russia) in Gleneagles, Scotland from early July.

With the involvement of Church, aid and development organisations, the *Make Poverty History* coalition formed to mobilise public opinion, highlighting the fact that richer nations must not turn their backs on this great moral issue.

Is the message being ignored?

But why is the message that we can eliminate hunger entirely not getting through to public opinion? It is astonishing good news that one would think people would be glad to hear. My guess is that it sounds too good to be true, and that many people are wary of exaggerated promises and the disappointments of the past.

Moreover, certain stereotypes have become established in public opinion: that third world governments are corrupt and any aid will be stolen or misused; that people in developing countries are lazy, or irresponsible in having too many children; or that the least developed nations are somehow at fault for their poverty.

Sachs answers these objections. He insists that developing countries must indeed be the primary agents of their own development, and that they must meet certain criteria in good governance and planning to be eligible for international assistance under the proposals for debt relief and increased aid. It is not a matter of pouring good money after bad.

Need for leadership in business community

But developed countries have a central role to play, especially in funding. What is desperately needed in Australia and other richer countries is a much more informed conversation about the possibilities of eradicating hunger and poverty. As indicated by the generous Australian response to the Asian tsunami, there is a great deal of good will among individuals and also in businesses.

Yet there seems little awareness in business circles that companies could be playing a much more proactive role in contributing from their immense expertise in so many areas. Partly the difficulty is that the activity of businesses is focused and precise, and understandably they do not want to waste time or money investigating how they can contribute. What is needed here is some sort of clearing house that can match the expertise of businesses and staff pro bono work with detailed projects in development assistance.

Government aid critical

The contribution of individuals and businesses of course is far from enough. The major 'lifting' can only be done by governments with their immense resources. Here again in Australia our contribution to development has been 'very ordinary'. Though our official development assistance after the tsunami has risen slightly to 0.28 per cent of our Gross National Income, this is about half the level of 30 years ago, and a long way short of the 0.7 per cent GNI that Australia signed on to 35 years ago. The United States is even more miserly, only giving 0.15 per cent of its GNI to official development assistance.

To have a reasonable hope of reaching the Millennium Development Goals, Australia needs to double its aid, along with the other developed countries. At the moment, there is little sympathy for this with the federal government. And much of the aid we do give is not focused on the elimination of hunger and poverty but on enforcing security, as in the Solomons and Papua New Guinea.

It is unlikely that the policies of the Commonwealth Government will change unless there is wide public support. The business community especially surely realises that it is in our long-term national interest to expand the global market by raising living standards in the poorest countries. Where would the global economy be today if India and China had not embarked on rapid development?

Resources available to end hunger

The second major surprise in this debate is that the developed nations can fund their contribution to the Millennium Development Goals relatively easily. As Kofi Annan keeps insisting, this is not a utopian project, but eminently achievable.

The funding shortfall could be met by shifting a mere 5 percent of global arms spending into the development effort. It is surely incomprehensible that the world spends 20 times more on arms than on development assistance. The United States spends 30 times more on arms than aid.

Can the richer nations afford increased aid? Sachs answers definitely yes. Even for the US to increase its aid from 0.15 percent of GNP to 0.7 percent would mean an extra tax of 0.55 percent of GNP. If the US GNP continued to rise at 1.9 percent a year, 'the extra amount represents less than one third of a single year's growth of GNP' (p. 304).

Various other proposals have been floated to raise the extra aid funds, including putting an impost of \$1 on all airline tickets; Gordon Brown's International Financing Facility; selling off gold held by the IMF; or the 'Tobin tax' proposal to place a small tax on the movement of speculative capital. The point is clear. The developed countries could raise the extra funds for the Development Goals relatively easily.

Professor Sachs insists that the objection against increasing aid - that 'trade, not aid' is the way to promote human well-being - is greatly mistaken. Many of the poorest countries are not able to trade, lack infrastructure and investment, and will gain very little from global trade reforms (unlike Australia). As Sachs writes of the WTO negotiations, 'almost all of those gains accrue to the richest and the middle-income countries, not the poorest countries, and especially not the poorest countries in Africa.' (p. 281).

Lack of public leadership

Sachs identifies public leadership as critical to mobilise support in richer countries for increased development assistance, especially to inform the public about the importance of extra efforts at this time.

The churches too need to agitate strongly, following the example of Pope John Paul II and his predecessors. As a matter of the utmost urgency, the *Make Poverty History* campaign needs to inform all our networks in schools, parishes, health and welfare sectors. To ignore this momentous moral issue would constitute a most cruel betrayal of the Gospel call to feed the hungry and care for the afflicted.

Most Australians would go to great lengths to save the life of another person, especially a child. The Millennium Development Goals intend to save the lives of perhaps 30 million children under five in the next ten years, and lift hundreds of millions out of hunger. Can we Australians, with any honour, walk away from this historic opportunity to save so many lives?

*Fr Bruce Duncan coordinates the program in social justice studies at Yarra Theological Union in Melbourne. His 17,000-word booklet, **Ending Hunger - how far can we go?** (published by the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council) was launched by Cardinal Edward Cassidy in Melbourne on 15 June.*