

Feeding the world

In the pages of the Majellan we aim to treat issues that concern individuals and families in their daily lives. In this article, Fr Bruce Duncan addresses a problem that faces millions of individuals and millions of families around the world – the problem of hunger.

Here is a message of astounding good news: that we could end global hunger and the worst forms of poverty in a matter of decades, if we seriously set our minds to it. Not only that, but we could do it relatively easily, by dedicating less than one percent of our growing economic wealth to the task.

This may sound too good to be true, and we might suspect that such claims were merely pious hopes or the utopian dreams of some wild-eyed do-gooders. But these are the views of leading development economists and form the basis of a global plan agreed to by all the member states of the United Nations.

To save the life of a child, many people would go to great lengths, perhaps even to risking their own lives.

Yet we might feel powerless to save the lives of children in developing countries. Estimates vary, but leading agencies say perhaps 1200 children are dying every hour from poverty-related causes, certainly more than 20,000 a day.

Hunger unnecessary

The shocking truth, though, is that these deaths are unnecessary, since the world has abundant resources to feed the approximately 850 million people in chronic hunger and to lift about 1.2 billion people out of the most severe forms of poverty – existing on less than US\$1 a day. What has been lacking is the political will to marshal the expertise and resources to eradicate global hunger.

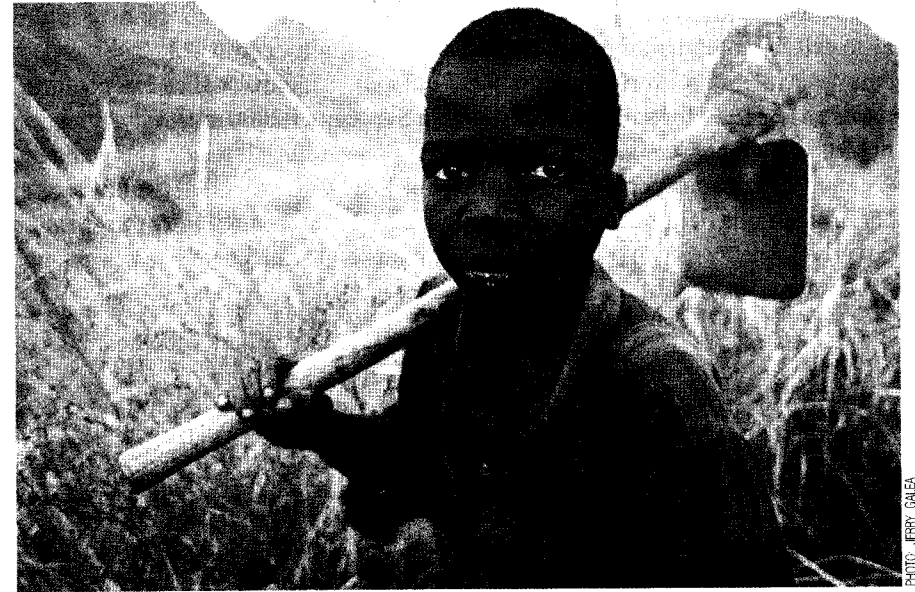


PHOTO: JERRY GALES

Development experts have been saying this for years, yet the message is still not getting through to many people. The leading expert, Paul Streeten, wrote in 1995: “It is the fact that hunger today is unnecessary that makes its continued existence so shocking.”

More recently, the Nobel Prize-winning economist, Amartya Sen wrote: “What makes this widespread hunger even more of a tragedy is the way we have come to accept and tolerate it as an integral part of the modern world, as if it is essentially unpreventable”. Sen is a world expert on famines, and has insisted that they are “so easy to prevent that it is amazing that they are allowed to occur at all.”

The world has the opportunity to save the lives of not just hundreds of thousands of children in the next ten years but up to 30 million children from cruel and unnecessary deaths. In addition, the United Nation plan aims to deliver 250 million people out of chronic hunger and lift 500 million out of the most acute deprivation.

Never before in history has the human race been offered such an opportunity and faced with such a clear moral responsibility. Pope John Paul II constantly appealed for urgent action, declaring that eradicating the poverty of billions of people is “the one issue that most challenges our human and Christian consciences.”

In January 2005, John Paul went so far as to call the toleration of mass hunger as a “war of the powerful against the weak”. He called for a great mobilisation of human consciences: “How can we keep silent when confronted by the enduring drama of hunger and extreme poverty”, when we have such a “capacity for a just sharing of resources”?

*Every day, more than
20,000 children are dying
from poverty-related causes.*

And what could be closer to the heart of the Gospel than exerting ourselves strenuously on behalf of the most afflicted?

This is the central issue in St Matthew’s picture of the Last Judgement. “The king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father . . . for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink’.” (Matthew 25:31-46)

Millennium Development Goals

Coordinating the UN campaign is the eminent economist, Jeffrey D Sachs, of the Earth Institute at Columbia University. He has outlined his views in a landmark Penguin book in 2005, *The End of Poverty: how we can make it happen in our lifetime.*

The United Nations plan revolves around eight central “Millennium Development Goals”, which 189 countries in September 2000 solemnly agreed to support and implement. The goals are not just vague aspirations, but aim at specific outcomes, with progressive targets and strategies to achieve them.

The many aspects of this global effort are summarised under the headings of these eight key goals:

1. Halve the extent of world hunger and the most extreme poverty by 2015 and completely eradicate them by 2025.
2. Achieve primary education for all children by 2015.
3. Promote gender equality, especially in education, and empower women.
4. Cut infant and child mortality by two-thirds by 2015.
5. Improve the health of mothers, cutting maternal mortality by three-quarters.
6. Reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis and other infectious diseases.
7. Ensure environmental sustainability and halve the number of people without safe drinking water.
8. Secure a global partnership through fair trade, debt relief, increased aid and transfers of technology and expertise, affordable drugs and better governance.

In response to the objection that the task is too difficult or ambitious, Sachs replies that the world has already performed similar transformations in various parts of the world, notably in Europe, South-East Asia, East Asia and many other places. The process needs now to include areas that have so far missed out, particularly in Africa, and in parts of Latin America, the Middle East and South Asia.

Many countries have made great progress in cutting child and maternal mortality, controlling infectious diseases and expanding education and basic health care. The policies are well known and can be rapidly extended elsewhere

if the comparatively modest resources are made available. For instance the cost of vaccine to immunise against the six leading child-killing diseases in poor countries is ludicrously cheap at about US\$1 per person.

*Overcoming poverty is
“the issue that most
challenges our human and
Christian consciences”.*

The Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisations estimates it has saved the lives of one million children in the five years after 2000 and, with



PHOTO: JERRY GALEA

expanded funding from a number of governments and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, hopes to save another five million lives by 2015. This is readily do-able, with political will and comparatively modest financing.

Currently the world spends 20 times more on arms than on development aid. Is this not incomprehensible? Transferring a mere five percent of military spending would fund the immediate doubling of aid needed to reach the Millennium Development targets.

"I was hungry and you gave me food."

Australia's support for the Millennium Development Goals has to date been grudging, despite 14 years of economic expansion.

Our overseas aid languished in recent years at about 0.26% of our gross national income, about half the percentage of 30 years ago. Recently the federal government has declared it will lift our aid to 0.4% of gross national income by 2010, but this is still a long way short of the United Nations target of 0.7% that Australia committed to 35 years ago.

Objection 1: "trade not aid"

What of the objection of some politicians and commentators that it is "trade not aid" that is needed? Sachs replies that the argument is "absolutely wrong. It's a slogan, not a reality. It's aid *and* trade", not either-or. Trade is certainly crucial for many countries, but the most impoverished countries are too poor to enter the circle of fair trade. They are often crushed by impossible debt repayments, lack roads, rail, electricity or ports to move produce to markets, while many of their people suffer from appalling health and nutrition.

One suspects that some countries use the "trade not aid" argument to confuse public opinion and as camouflage to avoid increasing foreign aid. In other words, it is a ploy to avoid honouring the commitments they made to support the Millennium Development Goals. To endorse such a slogan would mean turning a blind eye to the millions of people that we could lift out of hunger and the most severe poverty. The "trade not aid" argument is simply "spin-doctoring" to wash our hands of moral responsibility.

Objection 2: third-world corruption

It is true that much development aid has been lost through corruption, but the Millennium Development Goals

insist on much greater transparency and anti-corruption measures before countries can receive fresh aid. Jeffrey Sachs gives a more detailed response to this objection in his book, *The End of Poverty*.

In the past, foreign aid was given to governments for geopolitical reasons, and western governments, organisations and banks colluded in the transfer of funds with dictators like Mobutu in Zaire. It has proved very difficult to trace or recover these funds pilfered from impoverished peoples who have often been cruelly forced to repay these debts. Some major organisations and banks have profited enormously from this pillage, and have hidden the loot. This corruption is not confined to the developing countries.

What can I do?

Here are some suggestions for what you could do:

1. Learn more about this historic opportunity to abolish hunger. There is a lot of information available through the

internet, through the Caritas Australia site, www.caritas.org.au, for example, or through the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council site at www.acsjc.org.au.

2. Join or form a group in your parish, both for discussion and for common action, particularly pursuing issues where you have special expertise.

3. Write a letter to your local member of parliament to encourage the Australian government to do more for development throughout the world.

4. Live more simply yourself and give as generously as you can to those in need. Live simply so that all may simply live.

Bruce Duncan CSsR lectures in social justice studies at Yarra Theological Union in Melbourne. He is the author of Ending Hunger: how far can we go? (Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, 2005). For copies, phone (02) 9956-5811 or (03) 9926-5710. The cost is \$6.60 plus postage.

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Customer in a shoe repair shop: "I just found this ticket for a pair of shoes I left here in 2004. I don't suppose you've still got them."

Shoe repairman: "They should be ready by Friday."