

Condemning millions to starve?

BY BRUCE DUNCAN

The UN World Food Summit which ended in Rome on 13 June may not have grabbed the headlines like the events of September 11, but on its outcome hang the fate of many millions of lives.

Yet only Italy of the 29 OECD countries made any new practical commitment to the fight against hunger, by eliminating Mozambique's debt of \$US524 million. Despite Italy's call to other lending nations to do the same, none did.

Though 80 world leaders and over 6,600 representatives attended the Summit, Italy and Spain were the only two developed countries to send top-level delegations, reflecting the low priority western governments are giving to UN efforts to halve the numbers of hungry people from 840 million.

Moreover, the efforts of the Summit were undermined by recent huge increases in US agricultural subsidies. OECD subsidies already cost \$311 billion a year. Australia is rightly worried that the new US subsidies will swamp world markets with excess production, forcing prices down and threatening Australia's own markets.

These subsidies and increased protectionism will also wreak havoc in the agricultural markets of developing countries. The excess US production will be dumped in developing countries, undermining their own food production and local markets by the distorted pricing, and siphoning off scarce capital overseas.

Unless developing countries can access world markets, they cannot gain the benefits from increased trade. The World Bank's vice president for Europe said that obstacles to trade imposed by industrialised countries result in losses to developing countries of

about \$US50 billion a year. This is not much less than the total \$68 billion in aid to developing countries.

The bitter irony is that for the first time in history we have the resources to eliminate world hunger, yet it persists, at least in part, because of a lack of political will in developed countries. The level of aid to developing nations from developed countries has dropped from 0.7% of GNP in 1970 to barely 0.22% currently. Australian overseas aid has declined from 0.55% of GNP

developed nations to donate an extra \$US24 billion to reduce by half the number of people in hunger to 400 million by 2015. According to the Australian Agriculture Minister, Warren Truss, who played a significant role in critiquing the OECD subsidies says what is spent on farm subsidies in only 24 days would fund the entire program requested for the Food and Agriculture Organisation.

Pope John Paul on 10 June said the goals of the 1996 Food Summit had not been met because of a lack of ethical commitment. He insisted that the world had a duty to guarantee the right to nutrition for everyone, 'an enormous challenge ... to which the Church too is fully committed.' He appealed for a speedy resolution to this problem, 'one of the gravest facing the human family'.

However, the US delegation opposed the concept of a global right to food, and the final communique could not reach agreement on the notion. The communique lamely was forced to study the concept for two years.

Despite the hundreds of millions of lives at risk, world hunger is rarely examined in the Australian media, despite the efforts of our schools, Caritas and other development and aid agencies. Why is this? Thousands of Australians have worked overseas in development and business projects, yet their concerns are not reflected in keen public debate in Australia. And why are we not producing prominent figures shaping public opinion on these issues? These should be painfully worrying questions

not just for Catholics but all people of social conscience.

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in 1969-70 to 0.25% in 2001-02 (\$1.725 billion).

As the Nobel-Prize winner and expert on famine relief Amartya Sen has written, famines are so easy to prevent, it is a wonder they are allowed to occur at all. Yet famine now looms again, particularly in Africa.

The UN Food Summit asked the de-