



Looking the other way

BRUCE DUNCAN writes on the feasibility of and obstacles to overcoming world hunger.

Frederic Ozanam would be ecstatic to hear about current proposals to reduce the extent of poverty and hunger throughout the world. In 2000, 189 countries signed the Millennium Declaration in support of the UN Millennium Development Goals to improve the lot of the world's poorest people. According to Professor Jeffrey Sachs, who has coordinated the work of hundreds of development specialists on behalf of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, the Millennium Goals aim to:

- save the lives of 30 million children by 2015
- rescue 250 million people from hunger
- lift 500 million out of the most severe poverty.

Readers will see immediately that the Millennium Goals gel closely with key aims of the St Vincent de Paul Society. What could be closer to the heart of the Gospel, as reflected in the Last Judgment scene in

Matthew's Gospel, than feeding the hungry and improving the conditions of the poorest people on the planet?

The Millennium Goals are grouped under eight headings with the first to halve the number of people in hunger and extreme poverty by 2015 (see inset box on page 9)

Because the Millennium Goals are secular, all the great religious traditions can support them wholeheartedly. Just imagine the difference it could make to international relations and dialogue among the major religions if the whole world, with the vigorous support of the richer countries, focused its energies and resources on alleviating hunger and poverty everywhere. This would send a much more humane and appealing message than any pre-emptive strikes or wars for democracy.

Hunger not inevitable

After teaching courses in economic development for nearly 20 years, I have shared the frustration and anguish of many development

experts that not enough is being done to eradicate hunger and poverty in the third world. In many parts of the world, the last two decades have been extremely tragic for millions of people.

It is a critical moral issue for the rest of us since leading economists have for years argued that hunger and severe poverty are not inevitable. As Paul Streeten wrote in 1995: "It is the fact that hunger today is unnecessary that makes its continued existence so shocking." Amartya Sen, a winner of the Nobel Prize, wrote that famines are "so easy to prevent that it is amazing that they are allowed to occur at all."

This is astonishing good news. The world has the resources and skills to ensure that everyone is adequately fed and lifted out of the most extreme poverty. It is the first time in history that we have been able to say this. Hunger and poverty persist largely for political factors that distort and undermine good economic processes.

However, the United Nations

has set more modest targets as it has worked out detailed aims and methods within current political possibilities. Economists assure us that the targets are feasible and not utopian. Indeed, the required contribution of the richer countries is modest and can be made without notable sacrifice. In other words the targets of the Millennium Goals can be achieved relatively quickly, without placing unrealistic impositions on the richer countries.

Military vs economic aid

Zanam would be shocked to learn that despite their pledges many of the richer countries have not contributed the funds where needed. The world is spending 20 times more on the military than on economic aid, and the rich countries lavish six times more subsidising agriculture than on aid. This is utter madness. The result is that for all their wonderful promises, the UN plans to overcome hunger are likely to fail unless the richer countries do their part quickly.

The late Pope John Paul II constantly urged support for the Millennium Goals. In an unprecedented statement in October 2003, he called the drama of world hunger "a war of the rich against the poor."

The deepening crisis over the failure of richer countries to adequately support the Millennium Goals is a historic collapse of moral

responsibility. The issue is of such importance as perhaps to rival the abolition of slavery as a decisive turning point in human progress.

Australia has been particularly slow to respond to the urgent situation. Despite the generous response by our government and the public to the Asian tsunami in late 2004, Australia's overseas aid over the last five budgets was the lowest of the previous 35 years. At 0.25-0.26% of Gross National Income, it is about one-third of the UN target of 0.7% GNI. (The response to the tsunami raised our overseas aid perhaps to 0.30%, but this is still a long way short of what is needed if we are to seriously support the Millennium Goals.)

Pope John Paul II repeatedly called on Catholics and all people of conscience to rouse the social conscience throughout the world; the political will must become so insistent that politicians and nations are compelled to rally to the cause of the hungry and most deprived. As John Paul II said in his World Day of Peace Message in 2000, the poverty of billions of men and women is "the one issue that most challenges our human and Christian consciences." ■

Bruce Duncan CSsR co-ordinates the social justice studies program at Yarra Theological Union in Box Hill, Vic.

He has recently written a 38-page booklet, **Ending Hunger – How far can we go?** on the UN Millennium Development Goals. It is available from the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council in Sydney or Catholic Social Services Victoria.

ENDING HUNGER
How far can we go?
Bruce Duncan CSsR

Millennium Development Goals by 2015

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Secure a global partnership for development



Millennium Goals

Halve the number of people in hunger and extreme poverty by 2015.

Achieve universal primary school education.

Promote gender equality and empower women.

Reduce under-five child mortality by two-thirds.

Improve maternal health and reduce maternal mortality by three-quarters.

Halt or reverse the spread of infectious diseases.

Sustain and improve the environment.

Develop a global partnership for economic development.

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