

Address of Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy

at the launch of

Catholic Social Justice Series No. 53

Ending Hunger - How far can we go?

**Melbourne Town Hall
Wednesday, 15 June 2005**

Introduction

It would seem that the Statement *Ending Hunger* which we are launching today, as a contribution from the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council and Catholic Social Services Victoria, to one of the most pressing and urgent problems facing our world in this the twenty-first century, comes at a most opportune moment. Neither leaders of nations nor those involved in seeking to make the world a better place for all its inhabitants remain unconcerned at the fact that more of our brothers and sisters in so many countries continue to die of hunger than from Aids or other causes.

Prime Minister Tony Blair will be urging the July 2005 G8 summit at Gleneagles to take seriously the question of debt relief and the exploitation of natural resources in African countries. Bob Geldof is organising huge Concerts in several Western capitals to awaken public interest and concern in the millions of people who are dying in Africa and elsewhere from hunger.

The United Nations and the Millennium Development Goals

The Statement *Ending Hunger* wishes to draw attention to the campaign by the United Nations Organization “to eradicate poverty and hunger by half in 2015”, and to suggest those questions that must be challenged if this goal is to be reached. In a document to be presented to the meeting in Scotland, Professor Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University makes it clear that the practical solutions to this age-old problem of hunger and grinding poverty “exist. The political framework is established. And for the first time the cost is utterly affordable. All that is needed is action.” The Secretary-General of the UN has confirmed this statement: “The goals are not utopian. They are eminently achievable”.

A combined joint effort

If that is the case, and I sincerely believe from my own experience in Africa and Asia over a period of twenty-one years that it is, a joint effort will have to be made.

People in developing countries and their leaders, must do most of the work. But without the support and contribution of the developed countries little will be achieved. "The challenge is a profoundly moral one for the people of the western countries, who are asked to commit just a tiny fraction of their unprecedented economic prosperity to alleviate the acute suffering of hundreds of millions of people elsewhere in the world" (*Ending Hunger*, 2).

Professor Klaus Schwab, President of the World Economic Council, insists after years of research and study by the Council on ways to overcome hunger and eradicate poverty in the modern world, that these evils can only be eliminated by a great partnership of the private and public sectors, backed by private organizations, Churches and popular support among the peoples of the developed countries. No one of these can succeed alone.

An ethical responsibility

Ending hunger and eradicating extreme poverty are not to be seen, as they frequently are, as simply a means to avoid war, terrorism and other social upheavals. The obligation arises from much deeper principles, for it is one that touches the very essence of humanity. There is an ethical or moral responsibility involved, and a solution will largely depend on how people and their Governments in developed countries consider their neighbours in developing and needy communities. Do we see the hungry and poverty-stricken African, for example, as just one of "the others" for whom we have no moral responsibility, or do we see that person rather as a "brother or sister" in need? For me this is at the heart of the problem. This latter understanding is at the centre of Catholic social doctrine, and was particularly well explained by the late Pope John Paul II.

You will find several quotations from that Pope in *Ending Hunger*. He called for a globalisation based on the principles of social justice and the preferential option for the poor, and singled out the problem of impossible international debts. His description of the global struggle against hunger and poverty as a 'war of the powerful against the weak' is unprecedented. (*E.H.5*)

This understanding of the neighbour as a brother or sister is not alien to our own Australian history and experience. This nation was built upon a deep sense of social justice and the need to help the 'underdog'. The extraordinarily generous response of the Australian people to the tragic consequences of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami is surely to be explained by such an understanding.

The need now, however, is to look at situations that are not the result of such natural disasters or tragic events, but the consequence of centuries of human exploitation of the powerful against the weak. As our Statement rightly claims:

The Asian Tsunami has taken about 300,000 lives, but a far more destructive tidal wave of hunger and inhuman poverty has been pounding many developing countries for decades. As many people die every week from poverty related causes as from the tsunami. (p. 4)

As the United Nations declared in the 1986 Declaration on the Right to Development, almost twenty years ago, the right to development is an inalienable right:

The right to development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized.

Global Hunger is preventable

I believe it is important for us to insist on this fact. This is not a wild claim made by Father Bruce Duncan in *Ending Hunger*, but has strong support from serious authors, such as C. Ford Runge and others in *Ending Hunger in our Lifetime: Food Security and Globalisation*. They maintained that ending global hunger is possible in our lifetime. They quote a specialist of famines and Nobel Prize winner, Amartya Sen, and I would bring his words to your special attention:

The contemporary age is not short of terrible and nasty happenings, but the persistence of extensive hunger in a world of unprecedented prosperity is surely one of the worst. ...What makes this widespread hunger even more of a tragedy is the way we have come to accept and tolerate it as part of the modern world, as if it is essentially unpreventable. (E. H. 11).

As Pope John Paul II has pointed out, the struggle against poverty must not be reduced simply to improving the conditions of life, but to removing people from this situation, creating sources of employment and *adopting their cause as our own*. (E.H. 6)

The Millennium Goals

How are we to go about achieving this goal? The first of the eight Millennium Development Goals presented by the United Nations Organization to its members and people in general is "Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger by halving between 1990 and 2015 the proportion of people on income of less than \$1 a day, and halving the proportion in hunger. Fifteen of these years have already passed, and just ten remain. How much has been achieved?

When you are on a long journey or engaged in a difficult task, it is always good to look back from time to time and see just how much progress has already been made.

Ending Hunger provides encouragement for the future efforts needed. It admits that the results of the past 30 years of development effort have been mixed, but states that “painting too dark a picture would not only be unjust, it might undermine the political will to learn from past mistakes and maintain the effort rapidly to eradicate hunger and the worst poverty”. It rightly claims that “though there have been setbacks, some astonishing results have been achieved, especially in South-Asia, South-East Asia, and parts of Latin America and the Middle East”:

- Improvements in health, especially through immunization, have eradicated smallpox, eliminated polio in 110 countries;
- child deaths from diarrhoea were reduced by half by the 1990s, and infant mortality brought down to below 120 per 1000 live births in all but 12 developing countries by 2000;
- hunger and malnutrition dropped 17% between 1980 and 2000, except for sub-Saharan Africa and the number of people with access to safe drinking water increased by 4.1 billion to 5 billion;
- In East Asia, the number of people living on less than \$1 a day halved in the 1990s, and China has lifted 150 million people out of extreme poverty.

The overall result was that by 2000 the life expectancy increased to 60 years in 124 out of 173 countries.

The Road Ahead

There is no doubt, however, about the need for greater and more concentrated effort by the world community in the coming years. Despite progress elsewhere, by 2000 – after a decade for some of despair – people in 46 countries were poorer than in 1990. On present trends, sub-Saharan Africa will not reach its goals for poverty reduction until 2147, and for child mortality until 2165. More than 10 million children die from preventable diseases each year, 30,000 a day. Of the world’s 42 million people with HIV/AIDS, 39 million are in developing countries. One billion people still have no access to safe drinking water and 2.4 billion lack safe sanitation. Kofi Annan issued a dire warning to the UN General Assembly in August 2004 that the Millennium Goals were in peril because many of the richer countries had failed to contribute adequate funds.

Addressing the 61st session of the Commission on Human Rights in March this year, Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the Vatican’s Permanent Observer to the UN in Geneva, stated that while much has been done in implementing the Declaration on the Right to Development, “a renewed mobilization of efforts is called for since the achievement of the Millennium Goals appears at this point a very elusive target for the least developed countries”.

While the Statement on *Ending Hunger* stresses in particular the first of the Millennium goals, all eight are closely connected and support one another. I am convinced that the second of these goals, to “achieve universal primary education for boys and girls” is an essential element in eliminating hunger and poverty. The person who we found most difficult to help change his social condition for the better in Bangladesh in the 1970s was the one who had no land and no skills. On the other hand, we saw how education changed the lives of families from just one generation to the next – and it all cost so little compared with education in this country. Education of both boys and girls has also proved by far the most effective way of countering population explosion in these already seriously over-populated countries and in promoting democracy.

Conclusion

Surely these figures and comments are enough – although more will be found in *Ending Hunger* - to justify the present appeal by the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council for Australia to take a closer look at what it is doing to play a significant role in bringing the Millennium Goals to a fruitful conclusion.

The figures presented in the Statement show that the Australian aid contribution remains surprisingly modest. There seems to have been a tendency on the part of our Governments to consider aid as primarily a deterrent to terrorism and lawlessness, especially in the Pacific area. The Australian Government response to the tsunami disaster was, however, most generous and certainly worthy of praise and national support. The Commonwealth Budget for 2004-2005 increased the Official Development Assistance (ODA) by A\$ 239 million to A\$1.894 billion – a healthy sum, but still according to *Ending Hunger* only 0.25% of the Gross National Income. The UN target for aid by developed countries such as Australia is 0.7% of the GNI, a figure that has been reached by Norway (0.9%) and the Netherlands (0.7%).

There would appear to be a great need for a campaign to make Australians more aware of the problem and of our duty to respond more adequately. I have so often told my friends abroad that Australia is a truly blessed country, with enormous resources, natural beauty and a sound economy. It is a great place to live and has enjoyed 13 continuous years of economic expansion. I would like to see our Government in the first place follow up the generous tsunami assistance with a greater national contribution to other areas of development, especially Africa.

The Government will of course need the support of the Australian people. For this it should work together with the media in informing the people of this country of the situation so well explained in *Ending Hunger*. What is needed for the Millennium goals to be realised is “an international sense of social justice”, and the media have a vital role to play in creating such a consciousness.

But we must not leave it all to the Government. Earlier I spoke of the need for a great partnership of the public and private sector. This is much more developed, I

believe, in European countries, where the public and private sectors are engaged in joint projects, some of which encourage private industry to invest and undertake development projects in developing countries, having Government guarantees to fall back on in case of serious unforeseen problems that may have to be faced. Not all projects have to be at first on a large scale. Perhaps one example may encourage others in this country to think about their own possible contribution.

One man, the Bangladeshi professor Muhammad Yunus has become internationally admired for the Grameen Cooperative Bank that he established in Bangladesh in 1976 as an experimental project to combat rural poverty by providing credit to the poorest of the poor. In 1983 the bank was able to provide small, collateral-free credit loans to poor people for income-generating activities. By August last year it had disbursed \$ 4.6 billions in loans to 3.8 million borrowers, 96% of whom are women, with a repayment rate of 99%. He found that some of the poorest have hidden talents and skills and gave them an opportunity to use those talents to change their lives and those of their families. The bank has since gone to other countries, such as the Philippines, and the success stories are truly remarkable and encouraging. If the will is there, I am sure that our private and public sectors, supported by well-informed and generous Australian organizations and people, could find ways to work together for the communities most in need and make their world – and it is also our world – a better place in which to live.

In launching the Statement *Ending Hunger*, it is my hope that it may contribute to the UN campaign and, in the words of a fellow Cardinal from Latin America “make poverty history”.