

Taking Hunger Seriously

Roger Ellis outlines the scope and some of the causes of hunger in our world. He tells how *Caritas*, with the funds and encouragement of New Zealanders, is addressing hunger in our part of the world.

Food is necessary for our survival and flourishing, and the gathering and sharing of food is a fundamental aspect of community. It is the way we show *manaakitanga*, or hospitality, to each other. It is the way we show *aroha* or love.

Sharing a meal is central to Catholic communities worldwide as food is the result of God's gift and human effort – fruit of the earth and work of human hands. Turning wheat seeds into bread, or growing any other food we depend on, is the result of an interdependent chain of natural forces and human work. However, for many families it is becoming an increasing struggle to put food on the table.

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah warned God's people to remove the yoke of oppression, stop evil talk, feed the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted. Matthew's gospel shows the solidarity that Jesus has with the hungry, the thirsty, the lonely, the sick and those who lack clothing, or are in prison. Jesus says that when we see the hungry, we see him. "I was hungry and you gave me food" (Matt 25:35).

When we see hunger we need to take it seriously.

Going hungry in 2016

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (UNFAO) estimates that about 795 million people suffer from chronic undernourishment. This represents one in nine people on the planet. Almost all of these 780 million people live in developing countries, but there are also 11 million undernourished people in developed countries.

In New Zealand 33.7 per cent of the population live with low to moderate food insecurity and 7.3 per cent live

with severe food insecurity. In real terms, this means children arriving at school hungry with nothing for lunch and families with unhealthy diets that don't meet their nutritional needs.

The problem is not with a lack of productive capacity or technological knowledge. We have that. In fact, the world produces enough food to feed everyone.

"We are in front of a global scandal of around one billion people who still suffer from hunger today. We cannot look the other way. The food available in the world is enough to feed everyone," Pope Francis said when launching Caritas International's global, *One Human Family, Food for All* campaign.

The causes of hunger

The main problem is that many people in the world still do not have sufficient income to purchase food or land to grow enough food for them and their families. In economic terms, the problem is not production.

The main causes of hunger today include:

- Poverty – insufficient income to buy food or land on which to grow food.
- Harmful economic systems – systems of oppression that force the poor majority to serve the interests of a wealthy minority.
- Conflict – such as that in Syria which gives rise to displacement and refugee crises.
- Climate Change causing extreme weather patterns like drought and storms which affect crops.

Poverty and harmful economic systems are major contributors to hunger in the world. There is a massive disparity of incomes and wealth

across the world and within individual nations, which is not sustainable. In this environment, political instability becomes a matter of "when" rather than "if". As Albert Einstein was quoted as saying: "An empty stomach is not a good political adviser."

Addressing food needs in NZ and abroad

New Zealand used to pride itself on an egalitarian society where almost anyone could get an education, work hard and flourish. Until the 1980s New Zealand used to be one of the most equal countries in the world. Then in the two decades following the mid-1980s the gap between the rich and the rest increased faster in New Zealand than anywhere else in the developed world.

In that period the average income of a person in the top 1 per cent more than doubled. In contrast, the average disposable income of a person in the bottom 10 per cent is lower now than it was in the 1980s.

In response to this serious issue, *Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand* works in solidarity with those who are struggling to put food on the table through advocacy work. The annual Benefit Impact is one example of this work which helps to ensure that the people most in need can access the government assistance to which they are entitled.

Internationally, *Caritas* addresses today's food problems by working on the root causes of hunger and food scarcity. Promoting investment in agricultural and rural development is one aspect of the social justice agency's work. Another part of the solution to this growing global problem is ensuring that communities are made



Indigenous Cambodian farmers cultivating food. Caritas is supporting rural Cambodians to adapt their farming techniques to a changing climate.

less vulnerable to extreme weather events that are becoming more frequent because of climate change.

An example of the seriousness of these events is the severe *El Nino* weather pattern that is currently affecting Oceania. Beginning in May 2015 with many areas reporting little or no rainfall, the effects have intensified and are predicted to last until at least the middle of this year.

The impact on Papua New Guinea is particularly severe. Drought and frosts are devastating crops and causing widespread hunger, particularly in the seven Highland provinces. PNG Government agencies have reported that 2.4 million people have had their livelihoods, food and water supplies affected.

Caritas is responding to immediate needs in the country and is also continuing to work with local communities on a Sustainable Agriculture and Community Resilience Project. The focus of this project is on assisting ten communities in the provinces of West New Britain,

Bougainville and Manus to improve their quality of life by providing agriculture and fishery-based alternative livelihoods, clean water supply and sanitation and hygiene needs.

Each of the communities is located on small outlying islands that are very susceptible to the effects of climate change. Started in 2013 and running until December 2016, *Caritas* supports this project with financial help from the government's New Zealand Aid Programme. It follows on from a very successful pilot project in Kimbe.

What we can do

Pray for the hungry and the oppressed. Pray that our words and deeds make a positive difference in the lives of others.

Learn more about the hungry of the world and support efforts to help communities become self-sustaining.

Write to your Member of Parliament about this issue.

Presently, our NZ government aid budget amounts to \$4.20 per fortnight for every New Zealander.

Upping that to a weekly total would bring our Official Development Assistance to about 0.5% of the Gross National Income.

Ask your MP to advocate for an increase in the government aid budget.

The Jewish scholar, Jonathan Sacks, reminds us that a better distribution of the world's wealth is good for everyone: "Close to a billion people — one-eighth of the world's population — still live in hunger. Each year two million children die through malnutrition. This is happening at a time when doctors in Britain are warning of the spread of obesity. We are eating too much while others starve." ■

Some links to further information:

- www.caritas.org.nz
- www.wfp.org/hunger/stats
- www.fao.org/home/en/



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