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Catholic Social Justice Series No. 53

Ending Hunger - How far can we go?

**Melbourne Town Hall
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“The UN Millennium Goals as a Godsend”

Thanks to all of you here today, and especially to the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council for inviting me to write this booklet, *Ending hunger – how far can we go?* and to Caritas Australia for their close involvement.

We are here because of our concern to promote the wellbeing of the poorest people on our earth, recognising that the UN Millennium Development Goals represent one of humankind's brightest hopes at this stage in history. I see them as a marvellous godsend, fleshing out the Gospel plea to feed the hungry and care for the afflicted.

I particularly thank our two guest speakers. Cardinal Cassidy is well known to us from our TV sets, and has played a leading role not only in the diplomatic corps of the Vatican, but also in ecumenical and inter-faith affairs. It is wonderful to have him back in Australia, and I wish to give you my heart-felt thanks for flying down from Newcastle to launch this document so thoughtfully.

I also thank Mr Simon McKeon for his contribution. He has long been keenly aware of the human tragedy of hunger and gross poverty. As a prominent member of the business community, he has been involved with efforts to link businesses and community groups to tackle specific social problems. It is undoubtedly true that if we are to make major inroads into global poverty, we must look to the business community for their energy, ideas and expertise. How might we pursue this?

Those with a development background will be familiar with the message of this little booklet, *Ending Hunger*. I wrote it out a sense of acute frustration that many Australians seem not to have heard that *there is no economic need for anyone in the world to be hungry*. Yet this claim is surely astonishing good news. It is the first time in history we have been able to say it.

This message is not just my view, or that of some wild enthusiasts. It is the view of leading development economists. It is the thinking behind the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, which summarise how to move modestly but firmly in this direction.

The message has not yet been taken up strongly in Australia. In contrast to Britain and some of the European countries, there has been no strong movement in public opinion urging Australia to play its full role in this global effort to reduce hunger and the most extreme forms of poverty.

This needs to change. This campaign to Make Poverty History aims precisely to raise public awareness that not only can we do this, but with our current phenomenal wealth, the advanced countries can provide the needed funding relatively easily. The project is not utopian or hopeless. It is do-able in our lifetimes, as Jeffrey Sachs argues in his wonderful book, *The End of Poverty*.

Various writers have compared the eradication of hunger today with the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century. Both projects represent a giant leap of the moral consciousness of humankind.

And this is the point we need to keep highlighting: the challenge for us is primarily a moral one, not an economic one. If we have the political and moral will to abolish hunger, then the economists can show us how to do it.

Throughout history, many people considered slavery unfortunate but inevitable. Many business people and writers defended it on economic grounds. But the issue became for a great many people primarily a moral one.

The same is true today of widespread hunger and the most severe poverty in developing countries. Yet shifting a mere five per cent of current world military spending would provide the funds needed immediately to double aid and implement the Millennium Development Goals. It is time to end this sheer madness in the way we misallocate resources.

Most Australians would go to great lengths to save the life of another human being, especially that of a child. Yet we in the developed countries have the opportunity to save the lives of an astonishing 30 million children in the next ten years, and to lift hundreds of millions of people out of the most severe poverty and hunger.

The generous response to the Asian tsunami demonstrates that there is immense good will in the Australian population towards others in great suffering.

The challenge for us is to stimulate the public conversation about these issues, invite business people and all those with special expertise to help find practical solutions, and

to encourage our political institutions to support the UN Millennium Goals robustly and generously.

Once there was little we could do to help impoverished peoples far away. But today when we see hungry or distressed people on our TV sets, we know that can help them. It is possible to eradicate hunger and the most severe poverty just about everywhere, if we really want to.

I think it was St Basil in the fourth century who said: 'Feed the man you see dying of hunger, for if you have not fed him, you have killed him.' Let us bestir ourselves and our nation to make severe poverty, and hunger, history.