

OPINION

Engaging global values

Noel Preston, 8 August 2005

The undeniable fact of life confronting humanity on this planet is that there is gross inequality. Twenty per cent of more than six billion human beings live in absolute poverty, described by Robert McNamara in his time as president of the World Bank, "as a condition of life so limited by malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, squalid surroundings, high infant mortality, and low life expectancy as to be beneath any reasonable definition of human dignity".

In such critical conditions, people do terrible things to survive. Families sift through garbage for old corncocks, the food for pigs. Others strip bark from trees, grind it, and eat sawdust just to feel full. The World Vision letter I received a little while ago tells me of tiny Munneranji from Malawi who is seven-years-old. She is too weak from hunger to stand for more than a moment, or even to hold her eyes open. Her father is dead, and mother, Kalimanda, despairs that she is helpless to save her daughter. The story behind the story is that under pressure from creditors, the Malawi Government exchanged maize - the people's staple diet - for dollars.

These are the underclass, the Fourth World, who are falling further and further behind as the elite and affluent expand their repertoire of luxury holidays, jet-setting, endless gadgets, exclusive entertainment, and executive or celebrity salaries. By and large, the lifestyle of the affluent is predicated on consumption rather than conservation, resulting in the fact societies like ours produce a disproportionate amount of global pollution. A child born today in an industrialised country will add more to consumption and pollution over his or her lifetime than 30 to 50 children born in developing countries.

This is the reality which moved Sir Bob Geldof and his associates to mount their Live 8 concerts coinciding with the G8 gathering in Scotland. But though Geldof's initiative stirred passions, organising a show and bringing about a revolution are very different challenges. Perhaps Live 8 impacted on the G8 meeting, although as the communiqué from the Make History Poverty campaign said afterwards, the tentative steps towards increased aid, fairer trade and the removal of debts were a long way short of the campaign's expectations.

The fact is global poverty is a complex problem with no easy solutions. It is a mistake to think simply of rich and poor nations. The overall picture is not so neat. There are ghettos of gross poverty and impoverished environments in the most affluent nations, while there are rich elites in most of the poorer nations. Indeed, there are too many instances where poverty and hunger are a consequence of totalitarian oppression and corruption within a national economy, further exacerbated by intolerance, drug and people-trafficking, conflict and the arms trade.

Alongside this picture we see the impoverishment of the natural environment. The challenge has moved beyond one of social justice to eco-justice, which integrates concerns for human rights and just communities with ecological sustainability. Though the G8 outcomes are deficient, it is promising that European leaders among

the G8 insist global warming and African poverty are joint agenda items. The deadly links between environmental degradation, poverty, and human ill-health are undeniable. Every year between five and six million people in developing countries die, from water-borne diseases and pollution. Poverty is poisoning the planet, triggering civil war, terrorism, mass migration and environmental degradation. For instance, African forest animals are being killed for bush meat five times as fast as they can reproduce. These animals are the main source of protein for tens of millions and they will be gone within 50 years.

The suggestion there is a technological fix to global hunger, which will also repair the environment, is at best a dangerous half-truth. The warning of one scientific commentator, Fritz Capra, bears repeating. He speaks of "an ill-conceived biotechnology that has invaded the sanctity of life by attempting to turn diversity into monoculture, ecology into engineering, and life itself into a commodity". To say this is not technophobia but rather a restatement of the wisdom that what we need is appropriate technology.

From the perspective of eco-justice, the conclusion is unavoidable: globalisation (i.e. the current global economic arrangements and the institutions which support them), does not advantage the most disadvantaged human and non-human species. The question persists as to whether the current form of global capitalism is ecologically and socially sustainable and hence is politically unviable in the long run.

If the global community is to make poverty history we must urgently move down the long and costly highway to eco-justice. It is a road of many pathways. Fundamentally this journey requires new ways of global governance which fairly represent the interests of the vulnerable and which are premised on our common citizenship in one world. The shortcomings of the United Nations must be seen not as an impediment but as an invitation to design better decision-making forums.

The conversation that is now beginning about re-jigging global institutions is welcome, but it must be supported by a cultural, spiritual and ethical global revolution in human consciousness. As the recent London terrorist bombings remind us, ideas and visions matter. Nurturance of the human spirit and will to maintain a commitment to eco-justice is essential. In a real sense the Live 8 concerts were part of a consciousness-raising movement.

Another hopeful sign that there is a new global consciousness emerging is the **Earth Charter Initiative**. The Earth Charter is a comprehensive global ethics statement of 61 clauses grouped in four categories: Respect and Care for the Community of Life; Ecological Integrity; Social and Economic Justice; and Democracy, Non-Violence and Peace. More than a "green manifesto" its goal is eco-justice. Those who drafted it hope it will become as significant in the 21st century as the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human rights became in the 20th century.

The genesis of the Earth Charter initiative was reaction to the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 when the then US President Bush told delegates, "the American way of life is not negotiable": a statement which carries within it a major part of the explanation of the conflicts, injustices and ecological threats we now confront. At Rio many delegates realised the way forward to a world of eco-justice could not be entrusted simply to governments and that it depended chiefly on a people's movement promoted mainly through civil society.

Though many governments, national and local, have endorsed the Earth Charter, it remains primarily a vehicle of education and consciousness-raising which has inspired numerous projects for sustainability around the globe while providing a searching inventory of social and environmental responsibility for many organisations. On the last day of sitting, before the Howard Government assumed control of the Australian Senate, a motion was passed commending the Earth Charter especially as a tool within the forthcoming UNESCO decade of education for sustainability (though, through their leader, government senators recorded their dissent).

In a world pre-occupied with the so-called war on terror, the Earth Charter is one significant ingredient keeping our focus on a vision for new possibilities. It is an antidote to the tendency for societies under threat to selfishly close ranks, forsake the capacity for self-critique and to overlook how the interconnectedness of life on planet earth requires policies based on global democracy and justice. After all, it is indeed better to light a candle than to curse the darkness!

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