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ETHICS AND HUNGER: A NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION (NGO) PERSPECTIVE

INTRODUCTION

*The poor you will always have with you* (Mark 14:3–9).

Is hunger an inevitable part of the human condition? With 840 million people suffering from hunger across the world, is it fanciful to imagine a scenario where hunger is substantially reduced, or to dream of a day when hunger is eradicated?

In recent years, profound economic and political developments have brought these questions into focus. For many developing countries, strong economic growth has reduced the number living in poverty and driven an overall decline in world hunger from one-fifth to one-sixth of the global population. Elsewhere hunger – the most extreme manifestation of poverty – has persisted. This is most striking in the case of Sub-Saharan Africa, which has been accurately described as being in a ‘development crisis’ (Sachs et al. 2004). Here the scale of hunger is climbing and is increasingly compounded by conflict, poor governance, and HIV/AIDS. These contrasting fortunes have motivated the international community to reassess its approach to development thinking and practice. A critical response has been to place poverty reduction at the center of the new global agenda for development. At the heart of this agenda lies the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which aim to substantially reduce poverty and increase human welfare by 2015.

The purpose of this chapter is to assess how international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can contribute to this agenda. The chapter focuses on how best to integrate ethical perspectives into food security interventions, paying special attention to the experience of Sub-Saharan Africa. The chapter examines this question by drawing on emerging policy processes that are shaping efforts to increase food security in the world. In particular the chapter draws on the findings of the UN Millennium Project Hunger Task Force.

The chapter also draws on the case-study experiences of Concern Worldwide, an international NGO founded in Ireland in 1968. In the intervening years Concern has worked on many of the large-scale humanitarian disasters and has been engaged in long-term development work. At present, Concern operates in 27 least-developed countries, with programs in livelihoods, health, education, and HIV/AIDS, mainly in Sub-Saharan Africa and in Asia.

The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section examines key related changes in development thinking and practice in recent years. It focuses on
TOM ARNOLD

the role of international NGOs in a changing political landscape, where the responsibilities of State and non-State actors are firmly embedded in the Millennium Development Goals. Here a confluence of conceptual, legal, and political factors is seen to impact upon contemporary approaches to reducing hunger. The emerging policy framework regarding food security is then presented. It is argued that the NGO perspective can add a valuable dimension to this policy framework. In particular the NGO experience can focus on how best to integrate an ethical perspective into food security interventions.

The second half of the chapter explores the NGO perspective in greater detail. The need for civil society space is emphasized, particularly in developing economies where governance and institutions are often weak. Drawing on this proposition, this section outlines what lessons can be applied from the grassroots experience of NGOs to reduce food insecurity. The analysis identifies key policy issues spanning across the main dimensions of NGO work, including emergency response, sustainable development processes, and advocacy. This is supported by case-study evidence from Concern’s experience.

DEVELOPMENT THINKING AND PRACTICE: NGOS AND FOOD SECURITY

Over the past two decades there have been significant advances in development thinking and practice. A confluence of conceptual, legal, and political factors has combined to strongly influence current approaches to food security. These issues shape the context through which the NGO perspective is framed and discussed in this chapter.

NGOs and the Global Agenda for Development

The role of NGOs has substantially changed over the past 20 years, with international NGOs now playing a significant role in the political landscape for development. The NGO distinctiveness in this arena is driven by grassroots experiences. NGOs play an important role in both bearing witness, particularly in emergencies where human rights may be abused or under threat, and in communicating the realities in developing countries to the decision-makers and public of the developed nations.

The growing influence of international NGOs has been influenced by a combination of political as well as economic factors. According to Lindenberg and Bryant (2001), the growth of the Northern international NGO sector became a torrent in the 1980s and 1990s due to six important factors:

1. The public fiscal crisis which occurred in the early 1980s in the wake of the world recession
2. The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, which created a vacuum into which Northern international NGOs were pulled
3. Democratic ‘openings,’ with some countries moving to elections and a developing democracy

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