

Enlisting Citizens to End Hunger: Bread for the World at 35

BY ART SIMON

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In May of 1974, a small number of Catholics and Protestants, myself included, launched Bread for the World to help fill a void – the lack of an organized outcry by citizens against world hunger.

In November 1974, six months after Bread's beginning, a U.N. World Food Conference called upon nations to establish an early warning system for emerging famines and a network of food reserves. It also challenged rich nations to increase development aid, especially aid that would help farmers in poor countries produce more food. U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger proposed, and the conference resolved, that within a decade no child should go to bed hungry. Kissinger pointed out that the world now had the ability to end hunger, and failure to do so would reflect not inability, but a lack of political will.

Bread for the World began by enlisting people to become part of a collective Christian voice to urge U.S. decision makers to enact policies that would address both the immediate and long-term hunger crisis. We wanted Christians to see that using their influence as citizens in overcoming hunger is an urgently needed expression of faith and love, and that passive citizenship in the face of hunger is neither loving nor faithful.

STARTING WITH A "RIGHT TO FOOD"

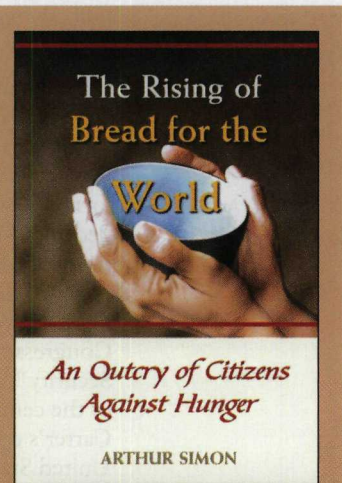
In our first major campaign, we persuaded Congress to pass a "Right to Food" resolution. We wanted to arouse the nation's interest and put

Congress on record as affirming policy steps toward ending hunger. We secured the backing of religious leaders, ranging from Billy Graham to Cardinal Terence Cooke to Rabbi Marc Tannenbaum, and probably generated more than a hundred thousand letters to Congress. The campaign gave a big boost to the idea that citizen advocacy could shape public policy and move the nation to act against hunger. It became a rallying point for churches that were beginning to see hunger as a policy issue and gained Bread for the World recognition as a new and important advocacy group in the faith community.

We immediately followed that victory with campaigns that got Congress to enact two grain reserves, one of them a reserve for international emergencies that over the years has been tapped 13 times for enough grain to feed 100 million people for almost five months. God alone knows how many lives this has spared and how many others were given hope in the face of crippling circumstances. Those who benefited had no idea of the link between their survival and messages to Congress by a lot of ordinary U.S. citizens.

BETTER FOREIGN AID

In 1978, Bread helped craft an "Aid for Self-Reliance" bill that called for an overhaul of U.S. foreign aid. The campaign for its passage – only partly successful – began the first of our persistent efforts over the years to reform and increase assistance to poor countries. As the title of the bill suggests, we sought the kind of development aid that would lead to self-reliance, and the kind of food aid that would not undermine the livelihood of developing country farmers. We wanted especially to assist small-scale farmers and the rural poor. That kind of aid became a constant theme with many specific variations – boosting micro-enterprise, fully includ-



Art Simon is the author of several books, and recently finished an autobiographical account of the launch and development of Bread for the World. The book will be published by Paulist Press this year.

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Bread for the World founder Art Simon (left) is pictured here with his brother, the late U.S. Sen. Paul Simon, D-Ill., during a 1991 event.

ing women in development projects, and targeting more aid to help the poorest of the poor, to cite just a few. And starting in the early 1980s, Africa became a special focus, as famines increased and per capita food production there declined. Another drumbeat in our quest for more and better aid was the conviction that major initiatives against hunger would strengthen U.S. and world security. In 1980-81, we urged Congress to pass a “Hunger and Global Security” bill, the heart of which sought approval of the central recommendation of President Carter’s commission on world hunger: that the United States make the elimination of hunger the primary focus of its relationships with developing countries. Some of the bill’s reforms were enacted, and even though the central recommendation was not, the fight for it influenced the thinking of many in and outside of Congress. A decade later we fought for a “Harvest of Peace” resolution in Congress to shift funds away from a collapsing Cold War to peaceful development.

I wish I could report that these and similar efforts during the 1980s and 1990s were stunningly successful, but the truth is more sobering. U.S. aid did improve in some ways, as we and others in the largely religious anti-hunger coalition fought for reforms. The hunger crisis of the early 1970s, together with growing citizen advocacy, did prompt large increases in assistance between 1974 and 1980. But then aid took a downward turn that for almost two decades required repeated

campaigns to fend off cuts. Fighting cuts is not much fun, but without it many more people would have gone hungry. Despite this pinched environment, we did achieve gains of substance, even a few dramatic ones during the 1980s and 1990s. Perhaps the most successful was getting Child Survival established as part of U.S. foreign aid. This program has played a prominent part in reducing by about 5 million a year the number of deaths worldwide from hunger and disease of children younger than five. People wrote and Congress acted. The toughest and arguably the most important work, however, was swimming against the tide: cushioning losses, getting incremental reforms and occasional gains, and keeping the needs of hungry people in Africa and throughout the world in view. This kept consciences and hope alive. And the Bread-initiated “Africa: Seeds of Hope” Act of 1998 halted a long decline in poverty-focused development aid to Africa.

DEBT RELIEF

A turning point came with the “Jubilee: Break the Chains of Debt” campaign at the dawn of the new millennium. Seizing the idea of an ancient biblical law concerning the year of Jubilee, under which debts were forgiven every fiftieth year, a few Christians in England addressed the plight of impoverished countries saddled with debts so staggering that many of their children could not afford to attend school and people were short of basic health care and adequate food. Why not

release those countries from crushing debts to donor governments and international agencies? The idea caught on, and Jubilee campaigns began to take hold in many countries.

U.S. participation was critical, but seemed unlikely because of a political-ly polarized and cost-cutting Congress. I thought Bread for the World's decision to take this on as a major campaign was exactly right, because the cause was so important, but I also thought it would fall short of success. Though Bread was only one of many groups supporting the campaign, we led the coalition that was responsible for developing legislation and getting Congress to enact it. Letters and emails began pouring in to members of Congress, and voters held face-to-face visits with many of them. The Irish rock star Bono became an articulate advocate, along with Pope John Paul II and other religious leaders. Bit by bit, some of the most conservative senators and representatives were persuaded that the legislation made good moral and economic sense. In the end, Congress approved debt reduction by a large bipartisan majority in both houses.

As I write, 20 donor countries, along with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, have forgiven debts of \$69 billion, giving poor countries almost \$4 billion each year for anti-poverty initiatives. Largely as a result, 20 million more children in Africa are going to school and families in 33 different countries have more food, better health care, and more productive farms and livelihoods.

Bread's role in the Jubilee campaign is only one piece of a much larger story. It took a global grassroots movement. Most of all, it depended upon thousands of ordinary folks who contacted their elected officials in Congress. Without that, other efforts would have accomplished little. The Jubilee debt campaign demonstrated the kind of outcry from various quarters that is needed on an even broader and more sustained basis for summoning the political will to end hunger. Clearly it could be done.

POVERTY-FOCUSED DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

Another turning point has been the establishment of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000

(available at www.un.org/millenniumgoals), when rich and poor nations agreed to be better partners in fighting hunger, poverty, and disease. Then the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the world's reaction to the war in Iraq, awak-

ened many Americans to the folly of ignoring the suffering of poor people. These developments made leaders more receptive to poverty-focused foreign aid. During the George W. Bush administration such aid more than doubled, the first large, sustained increase in decades. In the United States also, while poverty has increased since 2000, nutrition assistance jumped from \$34 billion to \$53 billion.

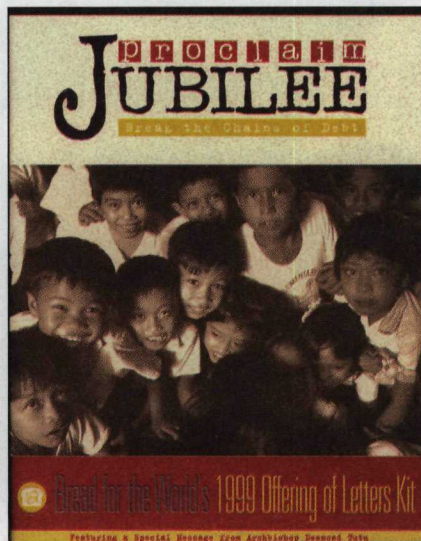
These developments, along with a new president and Congress, provide hope that the nation could, over the next few years, make major strides against hunger both at home and abroad. Bread for the World is stronger than

ever. Churches and private aid agencies are increasingly encouraging people to express their opinions on hunger to decision-makers. Bread has helped establish and participate in several new advocacy organizations, including the ONE campaign proposed by Bono a few years after the Jubilee victory, and the Alliance to End Hunger, a religiously neutral entity for faith groups and various key sectors of society. These are encouraging signs.

This hope, however, is set against a current surge in global hunger. Yes, we face a crisis again, as well as an opportunity to forge ahead with new determination against hunger. Forces of greed and complacency will resist this. We have to assume that political leaders will only champion a bold attack against hunger if people of faith and conscience make known to them in great numbers their conviction that hunger must end. So the direction that our nation and the world takes depends in large part on the extent to which citizens urge our leaders to do what is right for hungry people in the sight of God ■



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The cover of a 1999 report released by Bread for the World.

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The Bread for the World Institute provides policy analysis on hunger and strategies to end it, and educates its advocacy network, opinion leaders, policy makers and the public about hunger in the United States and abroad. The Catholic Health Association is a sponsor of the report. Learn more about the Bread for the World Institute by visiting www.bread.org/hungerreport.