

Escape from poverty is the great exodus of our time

Chris Herlinger | Aug. 17, 2011

EXODUS FROM HUNGER: WE ARE CALLED TO CHANGE THE POLITICS OF HUNGER

By David Beckmann

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Probably nothing in my experience as a humanitarian journalist -- reporting on Darfur's displacement camps, Haiti's tent cities or Afghanistan's shattered infrastructure -- has made me angrier than seeing malnourished children in flood-afflicted Pakistan last September.

The floods, of course, simply made a bad situation worse. But the visible signs of hunger in children -- coinciding with other health problems, as well as massive poverty and illiteracy -- were examples of long-term neglect begging for permanent solutions. Such solutions can only be found by governments committed to ending this sad and unnecessary assault on human dignity.

Fortunately, solving the problem of hunger has become less abstract than it used to be. Fault the United Nations and its Millennium Development Goals for grandiosity, but not the idea of achieving tangible goals, such as the aim to reduce extreme hunger and poverty by 2015. Idealism can undergird action, but it is what that is done concretely that matters most.

David Beckmann has successfully navigated the worlds of idealism and concrete action. The Lutheran pastor, one-time World Bank economist and president of the Washington-based advocacy group Bread for the World, won the 2010 World Food Prize for his anti-hunger advocacy.

His *Exodus From Hunger* is not an example of scholarly rigor or "objective" journalism. But those failings, if they are failings, are really beside the point. Beckmann's book is a clear, passionate and hopeful call to arms aimed at Christian congregations and parishes that seek a better understanding of global hunger problems and look for helpful ways to undertake anti-hunger activism.

Beckmann professes optimism that change in ending global hunger is not only possible but is already under way. I know about his optimism firsthand. After returning from Pakistan I heard Beckmann on a panel of scholars, experts and advocates gathered at the Church Center for the United Nations to reflect on the success or shortcomings of the Millennium Development Goals and other hunger- and poverty- fighting programs.

To my journalist's ears, the more pessimistic members of the panel made convincing cases for a somber view of the problems. Yale Professor Thomas Pogge, for example, said that world's poor continue to face an "enormous headwind," and cited U.N. findings that chronic undernourishment has been increasing.

Beckmann's longer and clear-eyed view was equally compelling. He is "profoundly hopeful because hundreds of millions of people have escaped from extreme poverty in the last 20 years," and called progress "the great exodus of our time."

The exodus image undergirds *Exodus From Hunger*. Its strengths are found in those sections where Beckmann describes legislative and policy victories -- where the tireless, even unrelenting, efforts of advocates paid off with real results. Those at the grass roots, he writes "people like you and me ... can often sway Congress to make changes that help millions of hungry people."

One example is a new anti-hunger initiative by the Obama administration that has not received much attention beyond the world of humanitarian and development work. The new policy direction, called "Feed the Future," takes into account what advocacy groups have been saying for years: that globally, U.S. development policy needs to provide more pronounced support for farmers in poor countries hoping to boost the production of their crops so that they can better feed their families and communities.

Advocacy by Bread for the World and other groups is paying off in other respects. The new U.S. initiatives are focusing on undernourished children. As Beckmann notes, a landmark 2008 study in *The Lancet*, a British medical journal, provided much-needed clarity "about what interventions are most effective in reducing death and disease due to under-nutrition," Beckmann writes. These include "focus on babies and pregnant women, promote healthy family habits (such as breast-feeding and hand-washing), get special foods to severely undernourished children, and add a few key vitamins and minerals to foods that everybody eats (iodine in salt, for example, and vitamin A in cooking oil)."

This new emphasis and direction just didn't happen magically. It happened because Bread for the World and supporters of other advocacy and humanitarian groups understood change was needed and made a case that it was good for U.S. policy.

While it might take years for this initiative to take off and help the kids I saw in Pakistan, this new direction is part of a hopeful trend, a trend Beckmann passionately describes.

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