

Comfort for the poor

Reverend **Malcolm Damon** explains why faith-based organisations have started a campaign for food security

Every day at work I am confronted by the faces, voices and sounds of the homeless of the inner city of Cape Town. They gather early in the morning at the St George's Cathedral soup kitchen for a warm meal – for many their only meal of the day. On some days somebody plays the most wonderful tunes on the piano. Here they find comfort and company – a haven for a few brief hours from the harsh realities of their lives on the streets of the Mother City.

The desperate reality of hunger is not confined to the cities of South Africa. It happens in Manzini, Maputo, Maseru, Lilongwe and Harare, as well as in most rural areas in the Southern African region.

At the beginning of this year the Economic Justice Network (EJN) of the Fellowship of Christian Councils in Southern Africa (Focccisa) and other faith-based organisations (FBOs), including the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, the Dennis Hurley Peace Institute and Islamic Relief, organised a conference on *Poverty Alleviation in Southern Africa*. This initiative was supported by the Southern Africa Trust. The main aim of the conference was to bring together FBOs from 11 countries in Southern Africa to discuss issues of mutual concern within the context of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and to see how we can alleviate poverty in the region.

Delegates formed a faith-based network on food security and are working together to develop advocacy strategies for the SADC secretariat and other organs and institutions of the SADC.

In addition the EJN organised regional activities in South Africa, Swaziland, Lesotho and Malawi as part of a global campaign on the Right to Food held from October 14 to 21. On International Food Security Day, October 16, EJN, Hope Africa from the Anglican Church in Southern Africa and the Treatment Action Campaign organised a joint demon-



Foodstuff: young activists draw attention to the first of the Millennium Development Goals, as does the poster on the right

stration outside Parliament in Cape Town. A statement was handed over calling on SADC governments to keep their promise to eradicate hunger and poverty as stated in the Millennium Development Goals and to develop comprehensive plans to tackle the challenge of food insecurity in the SADC region.

In the Tanzania Declaration on Food Security heads of state committed themselves to allocating 10% of government budgets to food security. Yet only Malawi is honouring this commitment. Why is it so difficult for governments to fulfil their commitments? Why will most countries in sub-Saharan Africa fail to reach the first Millennium Development Goal of halving poverty and hunger by 2015?

Why does it always seem as if access to food is a privilege and not a right? Article 25.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

WHAT IS FOOD INSECURITY?
This means that people do not have secure access to enough healthy and nutritious food for a long time. They are chronically hungry. 824 million chronically hungry people live in the 'developing world'. 1 in 3 people in Africa south of the Sahara are chronically hungry. 75% of hungry people live in rural areas.

let there be enough healthy and nutritious FOOD FOR ALL in the SADC region

In 2002, most SADC countries agreed to the United Nations' Millennium Development Goal of halving poverty and hunger by 2015. In 2004 they also supported the Dar-es-Salaam Declaration on Agriculture and Food Security in the SADC region. But nearly 12 million people in the SADC region faced starvation between 2003 – 2007. Why?

WHY ARE PEOPLE HUNGRY?
Hunger is caused by wrong policies, corruption, structural adjustment programmes, drought and floods, reliance on one kind of crop, and greedy industrial farmers* who make profits by exploiting workers and the land. Hunger is a result but also a cause of poverty. "Hunger is a social and political problem, and not a problem of production techniques. There is enough food for everybody in the world today." IFOAM

There are 500 million small farms (less than 2 hectares) in the 'developing world'. Small farmers contribute to society:

- food production
- ecosystem conservation*
- traditional knowledge
- cultural and biological diversity

Small farmers* are small farmers - they have uncertain tenure* or title

- depend on the labour of women and marginalised* groups, including children and old people, who do not have a strong voice to defend their rights.

Africa - where the majority of farmers are small farmers - is especially affected by the impact of HIV/AIDS on farmers and farm workers.

Small farmers are also extremely vulnerable to unpredictable weather, especially drought. They contribute the least to global warming* and climate change*, but will be the worst affected by it, and the least able to protect themselves from its effects.

Free-trade agreements forced by rich countries in the North, including unfair prices and subsidies which protect industrial farmers in those countries, drive small farmers out of the market.

Foreign aid investment in agriculture was \$9 billion per year in the 1980s. By the late 1990s, aid investment in agriculture was less than \$3 billion. Most investment focuses on agribusiness (industrial farming), the globalised, large-scale, market-based, hi-tech* way of farming which produces profit for a small group of industrial farmers and traders, while millions of small farmers struggle to survive.

FOOD SECURITY means that everyone in the world has enough healthy and nutritious food to eat at all times.

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY is the right of a people or a nation to grow and consume its own food, without destroying lives or the environment along the way.

words in bold, with an asterisk are explained on the other side of this page

"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of him and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care." The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights goes further in stating that all parties recognise the "fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger", and signatories to the covenant will take the necessary measures to realise this right.

FBOs are actively engaged in making people aware of their right to food. It is not enough for the church to merely provide food in times of need. We need to ask questions and engage at a policy level on these issues. We believe that food is not a handout, it is a hand up. In the words of Bishop Helder Camara from Rio de Janeiro: "When I give people food they say I'm a Christian; when I ask why people don't have

food they say I'm a communist." FBOs are committed to engaging SADC and all governments to realise the right to food and food security for all. Food security means access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. We recognise the importance of addressing policy issues around food production, land, agriculture and the lack of preparedness of Southern African states for drought and other calamities. We are committed to advocating for our governments, the SADC secretariat and its programmes to address the issues of poverty alleviation and the right to food and food security for all.

Reverend Malcolm Damon is executive director of the Economic Justice Network of Focccisa. For more information on the EJN and its activities, visit www.ejn.org.za

Overcoming poverty through inclusive policy dialogue

There are numerous people and organisations working to end poverty, to varying degrees of success. By talking to each other and working together, we are able to multiply efforts aimed at eliminating poverty in southern Africa.

The Southern Africa Trust was therefore established to promote and facilitate regional policy dialogue for an inclusive approach to the challenges of overcoming poverty in the SADC region.

Please contact us on +27 11 318 1012 or go to www.southernafricatrust.org for more details.

