

Why Help The Poor?

General Eva Burrows, AC is a member of the Board of Governors of the Foundation for Development Cooperation and a former world head of The Salvation Army. She has worked extensively with the poor and disadvantaged in many countries including Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka. This is a condensed version of an address delivered by General Burrows at the opening session of the Third Asia-Pacific Regional Workshop on Banking with the Poor held in Brisbane, 21-25 November 1995.

Participants in this major regional event represented more than twenty countries and most of the world's major religions. Citing common human compassion, social justice and our increasing global interdependence, General Burrows' speech was a strong call to action on behalf of the world's poor.

WHY HELP THE POOR? by General Eva Burrows, AC

General Eva Burrows

Why help the poor? This is a subject about which I feel passionately, yet at the same time realistically - with a strong compassion rather than sentimentality. Nevertheless, as I have travelled the world, my indignation has often been aroused by the sights and sounds of human need.

I had the privilege once in Calcutta to meet Mother Teresa at one of her feeding centres for the poor and outcast of that teeming city. When I asked her how she coped with all the fame and adulation she receives, she replied: 'It means nothing to me. But one thing I have done which I believe is important. I have helped people to talk *to* the poor and not just *about* the poor'.



That is a simple but very significant statement which indicates 'the poor' are not just some conglomerate group which can be dismissed as an economically, non-productive sector of society that we are unfortunately stuck with. They are fellow human beings - real people, individuals - for whom we have concern and responsibility.

'I have helped people to talk to the poor and not just about the poor' (Mother Teresa)

General Eva Burrows greets Mother Teresa

That is the first and most basic reason why we should help the poor - because they are fellow human beings, flesh and blood people like ourselves. We cannot turn a blind eye. In this global village, our planet, we are realising more and more that we are interdependent. We are like a global family, albeit a dysfunctional one. We must accept



that we are our brother's keeper. Some people misquote the words of Jesus who said, 'The poor you will have with you always'. They use this to denigrate the poor. But Jesus was not acquiescing to the permanence of poverty or maligning the poor. Rather He was indicating that those who have plenty will always have an opportunity for generosity in helping those living in poverty.

Do we have any idea what it means to be poor? Poverty diminishes people. Extreme poverty is deeply demeaning. I have seen people competing with dogs on the rubbish heaps of many of the large cities of impoverished lands.

You may have *seen* the poor, but have you ever imagined how it must *feel* not to be able to provide food for your hungry children; not to have a shirt on your back; not to be able to help your dying child because you lack access to medicine; not to be able to send your child to school when you know that some education is the only hope of success for that child and for your family.

Despite the phenomenal economic growth of many Asian countries, there are still 800 million lacking basic human needs like food, shelter, work and minimal health care. Yet I have been deeply impressed in the many countries of Asia that I have visited to see the ingenious methods that the poor use to rise above their hopelessness.

In Delhi I saw a shanty dweller pulling through cotton wool and bandages they must have scavenged from hospital dustbins. They were using it to fill pillows to sell to their neighbours. In Colombo I remember an umbrella repair man, remaking and selling umbrellas with his own recycling techniques.

In Manila there are men who cart imaginably large loads on bicycles to earn their daily bread. In hovels in Calcutta I have seen women slaving over pots of boiling fat making small cakes for selling at the street market. These people deserve our help in the most positive ways.

The plight of the poor, unemployed and downtrodden always aroused the fighting compassion of William Booth, the founder of The Salvation Army. Speaking once to a group of parliamentarians in London towards the end of the last century, he used as his illustration the cab horse, which was the main means of transportation around the city in those days. 'What happens', he asked, 'when a cab horse collapses on the roadway? Men do not gather around the fallen creature and say, you stupid animal, you got yourself there, get yourself up! Nor do they gather round and academically analyse the environmental difficulties that caused the horse to fall down'.

No', said William Booth, 'men of goodwill will gather round, put straps under the horse's belly and lift it back to its feet. They will then make sure it has three things - food to eat, shelter and work. And if you will do that for a horse, why will you not do it for a man, who is made in the image and likeness of God?'

The Salvation Army still operates under what may be called The Cabhorse Charter. Translated into contemporary terms, it means that every human being deserves:

- a reasonable standard of living
- a reasonable standard of accommodation
- an opportunity to use his abilities in satisfying work.

Another reason why we must help the poor is the need for social justice - one of the great themes of humankind's thinking about society, and a divine requirement of all religions. There is injustice when a small fraction of the population grows richer year by year, while others ache and suffer for lack of the most basic necessities. There is injustice when there is gross inequality in how a nation's resources are distributed.

Social justice is a divine requirement of all religions

Our difficulty with social justice comes when we try to move beyond our intuitive ideas to put it into practice. But we must try, especially in this final decade of the twentieth century, a time when all the countries represented here are experiencing fundamental economic and social change.

We must recognise that a socially just policy can no longer be considered simply a supplement, an adjunct to economic policy. Indeed, economic and social policy are inextricably interrelated. In the context of an increasingly integrated world economic system, we can see that social justice and the social solidarity and cohesion it brings are essential for successful economic development. You can have - indeed, **must** have - a sound balance between economic policy and social justice strategy. In fact, we might say that the exclusion of large sections of a nation's population from full social and economic participation is very wasteful of human resources.

How do we give the poor the opportunity to rise above their grinding poverty? If lack of normal access to credit that will enable them to create a productive and sustainable lifestyle?

lack of access to credit is a crucial reason why the poor remain poor

I believe **Banking with the Poor** is one such program. It has proved that the poor are good credit risks, especially when organised into self-help groups. Repayment of micro loans has been excellent. Women especially have proved reliable borrowers, and evidence great success in their simple business ventures. This success breeds success and new confidence, and it encourages others.

By facilitating micro enterprise of the indigent poor, and encouraging domestic financial institutions to provide for their credit needs, **Banking with the Poor** is supporting economic growth and financial independence in countries where the poor have been looked on only in negative terms.

It has been said of Mother Teresa that she merely loves, feeds, clothes the poor and treats the dying and does not provide them with the means to fight for their rights - that she treats the symptoms only, and not the root causes.

Well, I don't think the Mother Teresa's of this world are really cut out for that. **But you are.** You are the people who can tackle root causes, who can ensure that economic plans are linked to socially just development strategies, who can play a more balanced, positive, proactive role to sustain and develop your nation's social, human and natural resources.

One simple contribution to that is to support the program of **Banking with the Poor.**

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