

# Christians and the Right to Food: Human Rights and Ending Hunger



## November 2008

Christians have long been concerned about, and taken action to alleviate, the plight of the powerless (including widows, orphans, foreigners, the hungry, naked, prisoners, etc) . We take our inspiration from Biblical passages such as the prophet Ezekiel: *“If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right,... does not oppress any one, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment,... such a one is righteous, he shall surely live, says the Lord God.”* (Ezekiel 18: 5,7,9b) and the apostle John: *“How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?”* (1 John 3:17)

**END HUNGER** 

**Canadian  
Foodgrains  
Bank**  
A Christian Response  
to Hunger

## **Introduction**

The passages from Ezekiel and John seem directed to the individual, giving guidance on how to treat those we personally encounter. But we also have to grapple with the question of how a society is to care for the powerless. Is it sufficient that each Christian cares for those he or she meets, and ignores the plight of others? Or do we have a responsibility to extend our care to those we don't meet? Beyond that, are we also called to enlist the support of those outside the church (such as governments) to ensure that all those who need help receive it? And if so, what tools do we have available to assist us?

The prophet Isaiah addresses this question when he speaks to those who make society's laws. *"Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away? To whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth."* (Isaiah 10:1-3). And in the Book of Proverbs we find this advice to a young king: *"Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy."* (Proverbs 31:8-9). The prophet is clear that justice should not only be practiced by individuals, but also by the rulers and the rules of society.

In modern times, one of the tools the world has developed to deal with the same question – our responsibility for the powerless in society – is the evolving understanding of human rights. This understanding was first formalized in 1948, with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and has been spelled out in greater detail in subsequent documents. Touching on some of the same themes as the prophet Ezekiel, the UDHR recognizes each person's right to life, equality before the law, security and food, among other rights.

The challenge for Christians now is to find common ground between our Biblical understanding of "righteousness" and the modern concept of "rights". This paper will look specifically at the right to food. At Foodgrains Bank, we understand this to be both part of our "Christian response to hunger" and a legal right upheld by international agreements.

## **World hunger and the Foodgrains Bank's response**

Around the world, approximately one person in seven goes hungry on a regular basis, a total of over 800 million people. This is not because there is an absolute shortage of food in the world – there is more than enough for everyone to eat a balanced diet. World hunger is not a problem of supply, but of access. The hungry have neither land to grow food nor money to buy it.

Hunger alone is hard enough for a family to bear, but it brings with it additional burdens. Poorly nourished adults can't work as hard, hungry children don't do well in school, all are more susceptible to disease. In the struggle to grow, find or buy enough food, families may do without needed medicine, pull children out of school to work, or sell their farm tools or other assets. This makes it even harder to escape from poverty.

At Foodgrains Bank, our response to hunger includes donations of food, as a temporary measure for people in crisis situations, such as victims of wars and weather disasters. We also support people in more stable situations as they work to increase food production, through improvements in farming and fishing. And where people are trapped in long term poverty by lack of land or other resources, we support their struggle to gain access to livelihood resources in their own country. (See sidebar: “Advocating for the Right to Food in India”.) This “right to food” work is not only about giving food to people – it is primarily about making sure people have what they require so they can grow, buy or otherwise find the food they need.

### **Leave the gleanings.**

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God. (Leviticus 23:22)

And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor." She said to her, "Go, my daughter." So she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers.... She picked it up and came into the town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gleaned. Then she took out and gave her what was left over after she herself had been satisfied (Ruth 2: 2-3a,18)

## **Justice themes in the Bible**

Both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible refer often to the theme of justice or righteousness. In the Old Testament, Hebrew law emphasized equitable treatment for all, rich and poor alike, and made special mention of provisions to care for those who were less fortunate. The poor had a certain claim on the resources of the wealthy, whether those poor people were fellow Hebrews or “aliens”. In addition, the Hebrews were called to be “a light to the nations” to show those outside the faith the best way to live.

Jesus spoke often on the theme of justice, pointing out that it was more important than religious ritual. In the story of the good Samaritan, he made it clear that our “neighbour” is not only the person who lives nearby and shares our background, but our neighbours are also those of different faith and nationality. As people of the Gospel, Christians are called not simply to model justice within their faith community, but to practice and advocate justice for all. This call to universal justice evokes the modern understanding of universal human rights.

## **Development of the Right to Food approach**

One response to the barbarity of the Second World War was the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), in which world leaders recognized that all people had inalienable rights. Among them, “*Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care...*” (Article 25). The UDHR was adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 1948.

In 1999, the right to food was further clarified by General Comment 12 of the UN’s Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), which states that “*the right to adequate food is indivisibly linked to the inherent dignity of the human person*” and is “*inseparable from social justice*”. The comment outlines the obligations of states, but neither it nor the UDHR is legally binding. Several countries have written and adopted their own legislation on the right to food, which may be enforceable at national level.

It is important to understand what the right to food means. It does not imply that everybody can expect free food. Rather, it means that the government will take steps to ensure that everybody has access to food, either by growing/ gathering it themselves, or by having sufficient purchasing power to buy food in the marketplace. Specifically, the state is obligated to *respect* people's right to food, (by refraining from actions which would take it away), to *protect* the right to food (by preventing others from taking it away) and to *fulfill* the right to food (by taking action to strengthen people's access to food). Only if there are people who still do not have access to food after the above actions, is the government obligated to provide food for them.

Here are some examples of where the right to adequate food may be violated:

- people are forced from their farmland to make way for other activities without ensuring an adequate alternative livelihood
- food is denied to civilians in time of war
- marginalized groups are denied access to government programs that support their right to food (e.g. participation in public works programs)
- a government fails to prevent or penalize illegal market activities like food price-fixing

## **Biblical approach and rights approach: similarities and differences**

The Bible and the UDHR share a similar understanding of human dignity and the worth of each person, though this understanding is phrased in different ways. Article 1 of the UDHR says that *“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”*

### **Are human rights “universal”?**

It has been argued that the concept of human rights is only relevant in western Christian culture, and cannot be applied equally in other cultures. In drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1945, the Human Rights Commission went to great effort to overcome this argument. The four commissioners were Eleanor Roosevelt (American Christian), Pen-Chung Chang (Chinese Confucian), Charles Malik (Lebanese Existentialist) and René Cassin (French Jew), and they drew from a UNESCO-sponsored questionnaire that was circulated to thinkers and writers from around the world.

The Bible reminds us that we are made in God's image, and that God *“shows no partiality to nobles, nor regards the rich more than the poor, for they are all the work of his hands.”* (Job 34:19) God provides for all, instructs his followers to care for all, and gives guidelines for a society in which all people have the resources they need.

Canadian Foodgrains Bank brings a Biblical understanding to the problem of hunger in the world, heeding God's call to *“give bread to the hungry”*. At the same time, we recognize the value of a rights-based approach, which focuses on the rights of those who are hungry.

In a rights-based approach, it is the state which bears responsibility for upholding people's rights. Christians, on the other hand, often understand that it is individuals who have the responsibility to care for the hungry, and this is backed up by Biblical commands such as those found in Ezekiel and 1 John (above). The passages from Isaiah and Proverbs (above) make it clear that God also wants society to be rooted in justice, but that does not absolve individuals of

responsibility. In considering a rights-based approach, we must be careful that we do not shift all responsibility onto the state, and decline to take any individual action.

For this reason, a rights-based approach can never replace a Christian response. However, it can add to it. Christians will continue to respond to the hungry, whether we encounter them directly, or hear of their plight from afar. But our impact will always be limited as our actions are carried out within the framework of an unjust world. The injustices of the state or the international order cannot be corrected by appealing to faith principles: that language does not have currency in discussions of national and international obligations. However, those injustices can be challenged by the language of rights, of which there is a common understanding. Most of the nations of the world have signed onto the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and have agreed to abide by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Christians can use the language of rights to remind the rulers of this world of their responsibilities within the world community.



### **Advocating for the Right to Food in India**

A 40-year old man lies dead on his humble bed in the middle of the road, covered by a sheet. He has died of hunger, an all too common plight for lower-caste landless people in northern India. Though India has government programs to provide work or food to those who need it, lower-caste people are frequently denied benefits. The dead man's neighbors have launched a street protest to bring attention to this discrimination.

Foodgrains Bank is assisting EFICOR (an Indian NGO) as they work with lower-caste and tribal people in this region of India, to reverse the discrimination they face. EFICOR follows a three-pronged approach of increasing the courage, knowledge and capacity to act among those who are denied their right to food (the rights bearers), reminding government officials of their responsibility (the duty-holders), and public sensitization to the issue through local media. Similar campaigns by other Indian NGOs have succeeded in raising levels of health, education, and employment among disadvantaged people, and enabling them to speak up for their own rights.

### **Implications of the Right to Food approach**

... for agriculture and food policy - The United Nations' Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Dr. Olivier de Schutter, points out that the right to food approach is particularly useful in dealing with hunger, especially during this time of rising food prices. The rights approach improves accountability by guaranteeing that public policy will benefit those who need it most, rather than those with the loudest voice in society. As world leaders draft a new global partnership on agriculture and food, a rights approach would ensure participation of, and attention to, the food security needs of those who are more likely to go hungry, including women, displaced persons, refugees and landless labourers.

**... for food aid** - The Food Aid Convention (FAC) specifies food aid commitments of various donor countries, including Canada. It was first implemented in 1967, has been renegotiated several times since then, and is now (2008) up for negotiation again. While the FAC is based on the principle that donor countries commit to provide a certain amount of food for poorer countries, the failure to meet these commitments has no legal consequences, and donor countries sometimes neglect their commitments. Canada failed to meet its FAC commitments for four of seven years in the early part of this decade. By working to introduce the language of human rights into a new Convention, the commitments by donor countries are reinforced and food aid activities connected to the Convention will take a stronger human rights approach (such as ensuring the participation of food aid recipients in the planning of food aid activities).

**... for climate change** – It is now widely accepted that the primary cause of climate change is greenhouse gas emissions in industrialized countries, and that the worst impacts of climate change will be felt in developing nations, in the form of increased droughts, more flood damage, stronger storms, sea level rise, and spread of human and livestock diseases. Some industrial countries, including Canada, have so far failed to take the challenge of climate change seriously. Oxfam International says this inaction is depriving the world's poor of their right to life, food and health, and recommends the application of human rights principles to compel industrial countries to implement stronger climate change policy, including accepting some responsibility to help those seriously affected by climate change to cope with those changes.

**... for Foodgrains Bank** – In addition to providing food to those who are food insecure in many countries, Foodgrains Bank is working with international partners to implement the human right to food in their countries. We are supporting Action Aid Malawi as they encourage their national government to adopt right to food legislation. In India, our local partner is engaged in advocacy work on the right to food with low-caste and tribal people. Members of our Public Policy Team endeavour to introduce a right to food approach into the FAC and other international agreements.

**... for individual Christians** – Each of us makes daily choices on what to eat, what to wear, where and how to travel and how to spend our money. Our choices are informed by many factors, not least of which is our understanding of “*what does the Lord require of you?*” The prophet Micah’s response: “*to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God*” (Micah 6:8) comes to us quickly, but it may take us a little longer to figure out exactly how to “do justice”. Are my personal actions or lifestyle promoting or violating others’ right to food? Could I take action at a political or international level that would help guarantee others’ right to food?

*All Bible passages are from the New Revised Standard Version.*

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