

Pushing the Boundaries of Hunger in Victoria

I've been battling hunger most of my adult life.

It started in 1976. I joined World Vision and was asked to compile a Fact Sheet about world hunger. It was a fact in 1976 that the world produced enough food to feed everyone on Earth. Another fact was producing food was just one thing. Delivering it to hungry people was a more difficult problem.

These facts surprised me. And I was also surprised to discover that the whole world population could fit onto Tasmania. Mathematically, anyway.

After a couple of decades with World Vision, and some other excursions en route, I now find myself CEO of VicRelief Foodbank. And I discover some things haven't changed a lot in thirty years.

The world's population has doubled since 1976. But we could all still fit on Tasmania. Mathematically, anyway. Seven billion people. Sixty eight thousand square kilometres. We'd each have ten square metres of our own. Hardly comfortable. Some of us would be in the middle of a lake.

But one thing seems quite unchanged. The world still contains a lot of hungry people.

And maybe that's not very surprising to most of us. But more surprising is how many of those hungry people live in Victoria. And, more surprising still, how many more hungry people there are this year than last year.

VicRelief Foodbank has just released a report—*Pushing the Boundaries of Hunger in Victoria*. We distributed about \$18million of food across Victoria last year. Most of it free to agencies and groups like the Salvo's, Vinnie's, Anglicare, neighbourhood houses and churches providing emergency relief to Victorians. People who could not afford to put a meal on their family table that week. According to a Deakin University report, one Victorian family in twenty were in that situation at least once during the year.

This year we distributed 30% more food than last year. But no-one knows what the real demand is, because every gram of food we get in is eaten, and staple foods like rice have to be rationed because we simply cannot get enough. The number of agencies and groups wanting to access food through VicRelief Foodbank grew by 16% to over 600. In Maribyrnong alone there are 32 agencies operating in the emergency relief space.

And these are figures from mid-year—*before* the Global Financial Crisis.

While demand is ramping up, supply is drying up. Australia's major food producers and grocery retailers donate food to VicRelief Foodbank. But two things are happening to reduce donations.

First, these companies are getting better at what they do. More efficient, fewer mistakes. Better forecasting of what their customers want, fewer stock errors.

Second, companies are finding new ways to turn disposable product into cash. A market in *seconds* has emerged, providing cheaper food to Victorians. In most cases, that is food VicRelief Foodbank once got for free. And gave away for free too.

One can hardly blame the companies for this. It improves their financial bottom line. Unfortunately, the impact on the social bottom line is not so well measured yet.

The result is a hunger crisis, right here at home in Victoria, as severe as anything we have seen since the years of the Depression. And, if the conversations we have with the people who come through our warehouses in Yarraville, Dandenong and Bendigo are a guide, it is getting worse.

That a State as prosperous as Victoria should have 20% of its people experiencing a food crisis every year is a scandal. And the fact that so few Victorians are scandalised by the fact of home-grown hunger is scandal upon scandal.

Another thing that hasn't changed since 1976 is the way we take the scandalous for granted. It is not hard to understand why. Most of us feel powerless to do anything about it. Without the hope that we can make a difference, it is easier to accept bad things are inevitable.

And there's another thing that hasn't changed since 1976. We know how to fix the problem. We haven't really tried to fix it.

That's not to say that many people are not trying. They are. We are. What is lacking is a proper plan, and the political will (read *money*) to deliver it.

A recent VicHealth report *Food for All* shows that many local councils are hard at work. Improving access to nutritious food. Tackling food insecurity. Hundreds of people are providing emergency relief through agencies, neighbourhood houses, churches. This is good news, but much of this work is disconnected from other services that can help people get off the poverty treadmill. And most of these agencies are staffed by volunteers and work with budgets of less than a few thousand dollars a year.

The result is a piecemeal, uncoordinated approach that provides temporary relief. Needed in the moment, but providing little in the way of long term solutions.

An example of what is required comes from the United States. A coalition of agencies has produced its *Blueprint to End Hunger*. The group, the US National Anti-Hunger Organisations, not only identifies all of the sectors that need to take action, they also specify what those actions need to be. The result is a comprehensive plan that, if followed, would achieve the goals of the *Millennium Declaration to End Hunger*.

The plan may be comprehensive, but it is not very complicated. It calls for two things to be done.

First, put enough resources into national nutrition programs and to strengthen charities. The result would be an all-out war on hunger, reducing it rapidly.

Second, attack the long-term issues of poverty and economic security, because usually people are hungry because they are poor. Although, the reasons for their poverty are likely to be complex.

Such a plan looks to be a long way off in Victoria. Or anywhere else in Australia. But, even after battling hunger for over 30 years, I have not lost hope.

In the meantime, there are some practical things anyone can do. While we work on the big problem, let's not forget that individual action matters. Just because you can't do everything, doesn't mean you can't do something.

In the next few weeks, thanks to a grant from the Department of Human Services, VicRelief Foodbank will distribute 5000 Christmas hampers to families affected by the drought. The cupboard may be bare again by mid-January.

You can help by taking non-perishable food directly to an emergency relief agency in your local area. Take a food pack to them for distribution to people in need. It would be most welcome.

Your gift of food provides real relief now. And it also shows that there are enough of us who know that a solution is possible. If only we have the will to deliver it.

Philip Hunt is CEO of VicRelief Foodbank, and a former CEO of World Vision Australia

The VicRelief Foodbank report, "Pushing the Boundaries of Hunger in Victoria" is available at www.vrfb.com.au

Blueprint to End Hunger and The Millennium Declaration to End Hunger are available at www.bread.org/learn/us-hunger-issues/national-anti-hunger

Submitted by:
Philip Hunt
CEO
VicRelief Foodbank
Tel: 03 9362 8300