

The importance of cooperation and solidarity in fighting hunger and poverty

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It an honour and privilege to participate in this CAPP International Conference. I was here in May 2018 and spoke as part of the panel *Towards a sustainable food chain: responsibility against the 'throwaway culture.'* Since then, a lot has happened, including the UN Food Systems Summit last month where sustainable food chains and food loss and waste were key topics. Leading up to the Summit, 148 countries organized national dialogues on how to transform their food systems. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we have an equal impact from this year's event in stimulating the world to think and talk about solidarity, cooperation and responsibility as antidotes to fight injustices, inequalities and exclusions!

One of the largest changes since then too, of course, is the COVID-19 pandemic, with repercussions that would almost have been unimaginable in 2018. The pandemic is also the starting point of the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, which, as Pope Francis writes, "exposed our false securities and the inability to work together became quite evident...Anyone who thinks that the only lesson to be learned was the need to improve what we were already doing, or to refine existing systems and regulations, is denying reality."

It has been a sobering period...and the ideal time to re-examine why solidarity, cooperation and responsibility, along with a sense of belonging as a common people, are all absolutely vital.

My contribution on this panel is to speak about the importance of solidarity and cooperation in fighting hunger and poverty. I am speaking to a large extent from my experience in FAO. Created in 1945, it fits the spirit that *Fratelli Tutti* describes very well, in that, as the Pope writes, "it seemed that the world had learned a lesson from its many wars and disasters, and was slowly moving towards various forms of integration."

The FAO founders were visionaries, working towards the goal of *freedom from want*, focused on hunger and poverty, and looking for both collective and individual action to move forward. They were thinking also of some kind of global governance, along the lines mentioned in *Fratelli Tutti*, that would help avoid another downward spiral. This was very much a vision of cooperation and solidarity.

There has been enormous progress globally since then but, as the Holy Father writes, "Our own days, seem to be showing signs of a certain regression...." The global number of hungry had been rising since 2014, well before the pandemic, which in 2020 pushed between 80-130 million more people into chronic hunger. Global poverty numbers were declining prior to the pandemic but inequality was rising, including in many low and middle-income countries. The global decline in poverty and hunger numbers benefitted to a very large extent from China's remarkable improvements, which have now run their course. We need renewal.

I would like to highlight three themes that stand out on we have learned about cooperation and solidarity in addressing hunger and poverty, and which also strike me as coinciding particularly well with the messages of the encyclical and the themes of this conference.

The first theme is that marginalization is at the heart of poverty and hunger. Marginalization is the cause, not simply a characteristic of hunger and poverty. There is a complex knot of factors that lead to different forms of marginalization and hence to poverty and hunger.

Joachim von Braun, our keynote speaker this morning, spoke about it based on his many contributions to this topic. He defined marginality as the condition of an individual or group at the edge of social, economic, and ecological systems, that prevents their access to resources, assets and services, restrains their freedom of choice, prevents the development of capabilities, and causes extreme poverty. The marginalized do not have a voice and are excluded from the economic processes that generate growth. Defining strategies and programmes that address the causes of their marginalization is a key to impact on hunger and poverty.

While this analysis is concerned primarily with developing countries, the description sadly matches very well the research by Anne Case and Angus Deaton on almost the opposite end of the wealth spectrum, the marginalization of the working class in the United States as economic growth has left them behind.

Angus Deaton is also well known to many of you, and he spoke on this topic a few weeks ago at the CAPP event at Fordham University in New York. Case and Deaton wrote about the “deaths of despair,” from suicide, alcohol-related liver disease and drug overdose, which they found to be confined to those without a university degree. The impact of these deaths of despair has been dramatic and sufficient, in fact, to lower life expectancy at birth for *all* Americans between 2014 and 2017, for the first time since the Spanish flu pandemic.

Their research shows the impact of an economy that has increasingly come to serve the “well-credentialed”, i.e., people like us, but not all—with rising inequality that involves more than money and includes self-esteem, life expectancy and social cohesion. As the authors put it: “The corrosive effects on the unsuccessful, who believe—with much justification—that society is rigged against them, leads to a toxic mix of hubris and resentment,” reflected, among other things, in the current political polarization that extends to COVID response.

Marginalization, the lack of dignity and exclusion from the benefits of economic growth are at the heart of hunger and poverty, and much else that troubles us, in both rich and poor countries. Or, as Pope Francis says in *Fratelli Tutti*: “Wealth has increased, but together with inequality, with the result that new forms of poverty are emerging.” This is very dangerous.

The second lesson is that cooperation in addressing hunger and poverty needs to go hand in hand with solidarity, in the sense of appreciating, engaging and listening to the those who are directly involved. Outside help is generally only effective when outsiders listen and communities themselves define and drive the solutions. This is often difficult to accept. It is what Pope Francis refers to as the need for social policies not *for* the poor, but *with* the poor and *of* the poor.

It also points to the immense importance of indigenous knowledge, often overlooked or under-appreciated, which applies at the very local level as well at higher ones. Innovations in policy and programmes almost always involve a coalition of people who are directly involved, generally supply the innovations and who ultimately are invested in the solution. In my FAO experience almost all the really good innovations started out locally from a group who needed some additional advice or visibility from us to get something off the ground and into policy or widespread adoption.

There is a role for outside cooperation, but it must be combined with respect and solidarity. We often use the term “development cooperation” to mean funding, but more often than many realize, cooperation in the sense of solidarity and sharing experience is what drives things forward. I would relate this directly to what Pope Francis terms the “culture of encounter.” The need for this has never been greater.

The third theme is that great progress can be made when divisions and conflicts between groups are overcome as part of the process. Experience working with women’s groups on agriculture and conflicts over natural resources is particularly good in this regard. We have only begun to explore the power of the working through the “peace-development-humanitarian nexus” where these three elements are all combined.

The reverse, unfortunately, is also true, that divisions among people create enormous barriers to progress. Where people see things through as a zero-sum lens, where if others benefit, they will lose, there are huge negative repercussions. Divisions and animosities hold us back from finding solutions where everyone could benefit.

A major cause of the increase in hunger since 2014 has been violent conflict. Less dramatic forms of separateness and resentment hold us all back. In the US, there is a well-known illustration of how racism led many communities to pave over their public swimming pools in the 1960s rather than allow racial integration.

Case and Deaton see racism behind the lack of political support for social programmes and changes in the US health care system that could clearly benefit those who oppose them, along with most everyone else. We see similar social counterforces elsewhere, working against what could be positive outcomes for all.

A sense of progress being zero-sum equation feeds on tribalism in Kenya, clans in Somalia, caste in India, as elsewhere. It holds back not just a universal sense of solidarity and shared well-being, but very practical and mundane elements of progress that could deliver a positive sum of benefits.

Very clearly, the bigger the circle and the larger the sense that we are all in this together the better. This is true in communities, nationally and globally. The message of Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti* of cooperation and solidarity has a much deeper meaning, but it is also it is eminently practical. The solutions to our most pressing problems can only be solved this way. Everyone really is connected, and no one is saved alone. We miss out on so much progress, including on hunger and poverty, by not taking it to heart and putting it into action.