

## **The importance of cooperation and solidarity in fighting hunger and poverty<sup>1</sup>**

by  
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The past two years have vividly demonstrated how the world's most serious problems are truly global in nature while, at the same time, raising profound questions about our capacity to address the scale of the problems and injustices facing humanity.

The extraordinary speed of globalization and communications has greatly amplified the movement of people, goods and knowledge around the world. They have created a burst of new interdependencies between people, nations and regions, which has moved faster than our abilities to understand their full implications on our lives and societies or to mitigate their negative impacts.



Along with the backdrop of global climate change impact, the most striking example is, of course, the COVID 19 pandemic which engulfed the whole world in a matter of months. Within less than two years, it has already caused between 10 and 20 million

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<sup>1</sup> This article has been derived from a speech delivered by the author at a meeting of the [Centisimus Annus Pro Pontifice \(CAPP\)](http://www.centisimusannuspropontifice.org) in October 2021 at the Vatican.

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extra deaths, turned economies upside down, accentuated inequalities and remains perilous with no end in sight. It has highlighted the unpreparedness and inability of global and national institutions to manage serious worldwide disease outbreaks and, by extension, so many of the other challenges facing humanity.

It has also generated an immense wave of research that will lead to the better treatment of other illnesses, changed the way we work – including global supply chains – and upended former certitudes on multiple fronts. It has stimulated the search for new solutions to shared problems.

The recent [UN Food Systems Summit](#) exposed myriad problems in the world's food systems and stimulated discussion of a host of helpful solutions but was [noticeably weak on financial commitments](#) to support the investments necessary for food system transformation. Similarly, the even more recent COP26 made important progress towards slowing climate change but without securing policy and financial commitments of anything like the magnitude required.

This has been a sobering period and now is the ideal time to re-examine why cooperation and solidarity, driven by a sense of responsibility to take action for the common good, are absolutely vital in addressing global issues and translating commitments into action. As Pope Francis writes in his recent encyclical [Fratelli Tutti](#), COVID 19 has “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”.

At a conference at the Vatican in October 2021, I had the privilege of speaking about the importance of cooperation and solidarity in fighting hunger and poverty from the perspective of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, created in 1945. FAO's 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 also thinking of some type 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.

It did not take long, however, for reality to set in regarding the difficulty of managing an intergovernmental body and reconciling the competing interests of members. Confronted with rejection by some member states of proposals that would have allowed FAO to intervene in food markets, the Organization's first Director-General, John Boyd-Orr, resigned after three years, going on to win the Nobel Peace Prize a few years later.

There has been enormous progress globally since then with the global number of hungry falling from around 800 million in 2005 before remaining at 600-650 million between 2014 and 2019 - but in 2020 [the pandemic pushed 80-130 million more people into chronic hunger](#).

In my speech, I highlighted three lessons that we have learned about cooperation and solidarity in addressing hunger and poverty.

**The first lesson 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, the Conference's keynote speaker, spoke about it [in his book on this topic](#), and 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 making an 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 the almost opposite end of the wealth spectrum. That is, the marginalization of the working class in the United States as economic growth has left them behind.

[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 the 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.

**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 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. Successful innovations in policy and programmes almost always involve a coalition of people who are directly involved, who generally supply the innovations and who ultimately invest in the solutions. In my FAO experience, almost all the really good innovations started out locally from a group who sought 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. This directly relates to what Pope Francis terms the “culture of encounter”. The need for this has never been greater.

**The third lesson is that great progress can be made when divisions and conflicts between groups are overcome as part of the development process.** Experience is particularly good in this regard when working with divided communities who face common agricultural problems, and with women’s groups on agricultural or pastoral livelihoods within the context of conflicts over natural resources. We have only begun to explore the power of the working through the [“humanitarian-development-peace nexus”](#) where these three elements are all combined.

The reverse, unfortunately, is also true, that divisions among people create enormous barriers to progress. There are huge negative repercussions when people see things through as a zero-sum lens, where they believe that, if others benefit, they will lose. Divisions and animosities hold us back from finding solutions where everyone could benefit. I have run into this sense that ‘progress’ is seen as a zero-sum competition in every country in which I worked, holding back not just a larger sense of solidarity and shared well-being, but very practical and mundane means of progress.

Very clearly, the bigger the circle and the larger the sense that we are all in this together prevails, the better. Sadly, at the global level, the effectiveness of the multilateral institutions set up to serve the common good is too often eroded by rivalrous behaviour and the general failure of their member countries to provide the financial resources that they need to fulfil their mandates and to ensure that the goals that they have been set by the same countries can be attained!

The message of Pope Francis in [Fratelli Tutti](#) on cooperation and solidarity has a much deeper meaning, but it is also eminently practical. The solutions to our most pressing problems, on climate change. COVID-19 and hunger to name only three, can only be found this way. Everyone really is connected, and as the Pope put it, “No one is saved alone”. We miss out on so much progress, including on hunger and poverty, by not taking this to heart and putting it into action.

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Further readings:

- Pope Francis, [Fratelli Tutti](#) (On Fraternity and social Friendship), Encyclical Letter, 2020.
- Anne Case and Angus Deaton, [Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism](#), Princeton University Press, 2020.
- Oxfam, [The humanitarian-development-peace nexus - What does it mean for multi-mandated organizations?](#) Oxfam Discussion Papers, 2019.
- Joachim von Braun and Franz W. Gatzweiler (Editors), [Marginality - Addressing the Nexus of Poverty, Exclusion and Ecology](#), Springer Open, 2014.

Selection of earlier articles on [hungerexplained.org](#) related to the topic:

- Opinions: [Will Glasgow Fix Broken Climate Finance Promises?](#) by Jomo Kwame Sundaram and Anis Chowdhury, 2021.

- Opinions: [The possible relevance of Kenya's experience to shaping aid to Africa](#) by Andrew MacMillan, 2021.
- Opinions: [UN Analytical Leadership in Addressing Global Economic Challenges](#) by José Antonio Ocampo and Jomo Kwame Sundaram, 2017.
- [Exclusion](#), 2013.