

The Birmingham Jewish Community unite to Make Poverty History

Judging by the cross-communal attendance and positive will shown by the workshop delegates on Sunday October 9th, the eradication of extreme poverty is an issue that concerns and motivates Jews to act, within and beyond their communities. Extreme poverty is defined as living on less than a dollar a day: 1.3 billion people live on less than a dollar a day. 1200 children die every hour from malnutrition and poverty-related diseases. These figures, repeated in different contexts throughout the day were shocking and the current rate of progress depressing, but if the concern tangibly felt by the 50 strong community listening within the beautiful setting of Singer's Hill Synagogue is replicated the rich World over, then politicians will surely have no choice but to listen and to act.

The Make Poverty History Jewish Coalition was formed in January, this year. It started when 4 individual Jews, representing 4 different Jewish movements met amidst a much larger group of non-Jewish activists. So the coalition was born and within weeks had grown to include 20 Jewish groups across the religious and political spectrum. All united, however in their aims: To bring the campaign into the heart of the Jewish community and to show the wider community that Jews care. This was explained in the introductory speech made by Daniel Casson, former director of World Jewish Aid.

We learned how the white kippot embroidered with "Make Poverty History" have become a widely-recognised symbol, first worn at the Edinburgh march. The idea originated as a practical response to not carrying a banner on Shabbat but grew in significance as the impoverished Argentinean Jewish community were commissioned to make the kippot. Thousands have been sold with all profit going directly to the manufacturers, putting in to practice one of the main principles of MPH: Trade Justice. Gideon Rabinowitz, a development worker, talked more about Trade, explaining how the poor need to achieve sustainable livelihoods; they need to be able to trade themselves out of poverty. Jewish ethics teaches that of the 8 levels of charity the top is to provide someone with the means and the dignity to support themselves. In fact Tzedek means Justice, not charity. Global economic policies, however, with agricultural subsidies for European, Japanese and US farmers threaten the livelihood of small farmers in developing countries who cannot compete with the low, subsidised prices.

So what can we do?

The International Trade Organisation is meeting in Hong Kong in December. Britain will be defending "our interests" so it is incumbent upon us to tell our politicians that it is not in our interests to rob the poor of their livelihoods. There will be a mass lobby of Parliament on November 2nd. Visit the MPH website for more details and to sign up for the campaign if you haven't already done so. In a study session led by Rabbis Jacobi and Tann we learned that it is a Jewish moral imperative to "let the poor be members of your household" In other words, treat the world as your family.

Steve Miller of "Tzedek", talked about the gap between the aid needed and that pledged. The millennium goals are to halve extreme poverty by 2015. Although there is a will within

British leadership too little has been pledged, too late. In order to achieve the goals wealthier countries need to set aside 0.7% of their GNP. Almost no country has got near to this figure. Again the study session re-enforced the moral obligation to give, between 10 and 20% of one's income to others. So, as Jews we should be encouraging our political leaders to give more than 0.7%, not less.

Jinmi Macaulay from the "Centre for African Policy and Peace Strategy" talked about Debt. He explained how African countries were encouraged to borrow money in the 1970's during the energy crisis. The interest rates were set beyond the means of the countries to repay it; moreover the interest rates cripple the economies of developing countries so they are unable to make progress. In Guyana for example they spend 16% of their GNP on debt servicing and only 4.9% on their entire health care.

So how far have we gone towards debt relief?

Only 27 countries in extreme poverty are eligible for debt relief yet there are many more countries suffering acute levels of poverty. Education is a key factor in progress but millions of children receive no education at all. In towns and villages that are fortunate enough to have schools the teachers are not there. Many teachers have died and many more will die from AIDS.

In the subsequent workshop Jinmi moved us profoundly, speaking eloquently and passionately about the strength and resilience of African people, the resourcefulness of African women: Africans want to be self-sufficient but AIDS has destroyed a significant proportion of the workforce, reducing the ability of countries to lift themselves out of poverty. Add the devastating effects of war, the legacies of corrupt and brutal dictatorships; the fact that the world's wealthy nations will still not cancel the debt wholesale seems morally and ethically unsustainable.

So what can we do?

We can put pressure on our politicians to Make Poverty History. On a local and communal level we should promote Trade Justice through buying Fairtrade products, writing to local MPs and introducing the issues in synagogue services. Members from Birmingham and London, from United and Liberal synagogues were interested to hear what we have been doing here in Leicester to promote the MPH campaign. The Birmingham Jewish Representative council is a cross-communal body. It is now, as a direct result of the workshop also forming a Social Action Sub-committee. They are already planning a speaker for Fairtrade fortnight.

So what can we do?

Michele Benn