

RESTRICTED VISION = (some comments on the 40 hour famine).

There is a familiar argument against charity and welfare: it is said that they undermine people's self respect, that they create dependence on the giver, and that they ignore the root causes of the problem. In this way, it is argued, charity re-inforces the system that creates the problem, and makes it less likely that the victims will organise towards change.

This argument itself can be criticised. It is a very cynical person indeed who says that starving people must wait until "after the revolution" before they can be properly fed. But it remains true that the effects of any charity programme need to be carefully assessed. For such programmes can be misleading about the root causes of hunger and poverty, and can draw attention away from what needs to be done to change things.

World Vision's "40 hour famine" is a case in point. For the last two years World Vision (an Evangelical Christian body) has organised such "famines". The idea is that people fast and get sponsored for each hour that they don't eat. World Vision uses the money that is raised in this way to sponsor feeding schemes around the country.

According to a publicity pamphlet the fast is "aimed at mobilising public compassion and resources to wipe out malnutrition in Southern Africa." This is where the first question arises. There can be no serious argument about the causes of malnutrition in South Africa. It is unemployment, landlessness, economic exploitation backed by political repression, the bantustan policy and migrant labour that are the major strands in the web of poverty and social disruption that are finally responsible for hunger and starvation. World Vision is doing nothing about these problems, and yet claims, through its 40 hour famine to be trying to wipe out malnutrition. In this way the organisation turns attention away from these problems.

The second flaw in the World Vision campaign is the kind of attitude that it helps to create. Those who have taken part in the fast are offered a sticker to put on their car or school bag. The sticker reads: "I have starved ... so that others won't". There are a number of problems which result from slogans like this.

Firstly, it is particularly self righteous. It says: "I have done my bit for the starving masses. I am a good person". Secondly, the sticker is misleading. Starving oneself deliberately has absolutely no effect on whether other people starve or not. The money could be collected just as well without self inflicted "starving." This starving of oneself is little more than a way of escaping one's guilt at the fact that others are really starving, and feeling good about "doing one's bit". It also enables many people who directly or indirectly uphold the very system that leads to starvation in South Africa to feel complacent about their role.



Indeed, a major criticism of the World Vision campaign, and many similar welfare actions, is that they present the solution to the problem as being non-political acts of individual charity. This ignores two things. Firstly, the wealth of South Africa rightly belongs to all the people of the country anyway. Secondly, a just redistribution of this wealth will only take place when the poor and the starving have sufficient political strength to claim what is rightfully theirs.

Individual acts of charity may be valuable if they help to feed the victims of Apartheid. But to suggest to school children, to churches and to the public that such charity is the solution to the problem is misleading in the extreme because it draws attention away from the political tasks that are necessary to change society.

To achieve these political tasks requires joint and united action. To substitute acts of self-starvation for such united action is to encourage political passivity.

By all means let us try to feed the hungry. But let us also, realistically dedicate most of our energy to understanding and to changing the society that causes hunger in the first place.