

The Need for Humanist Action on Global Poverty and Injustice

Richard Norman

If 'humanism' means anything at all, it must surely embrace respect and concern for all human beings, whether they are members of our own family or group or society or are people on the other side of the world whom we do not know and will never meet. It means a responsiveness to the needs of all with whom we share a common humanity. As humanists we often invoke the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which reflects and translates into political imperatives those shared human needs, and which includes these items:

Article 25: Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

Article 26: Everyone has the right to education...

Article 28: Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

But the sad truth is that we have a long way to go before we have an international order in which these rights are fully realized for everyone. Here are some facts about the world in which we live.

- Around 1.4 billion people still subsist on less than \$1.25 a day, the international poverty line defined by the World Bank.
- Around one billion people suffer from hunger.
- Almost nine million children die each year before they reach their fifth birthday.
- Hundreds of thousands of women die due to complications of pregnancy or child birth every year.
- About 69 million school-age children are not in school. Almost half of them (31 million) are in sub-Saharan Africa, and more than a quarter (18 million) are in Southern Asia.¹

Humanists have always been actively involved in organisations dedicated to tackling the challenges of global poverty and injustice.² The BHA encourages its members to continue that tradition of involvement, but has rightly avoided duplicating the organisations which are already active in the field. For this reason there is no specifically humanist movement dedicated to combating poverty and promoting international development. There are also good reasons, parallel to the ones which Marilyn mentions in the case of climate change, why humanists have not organised *as humanists*: we may legitimately disagree about the best way to deal with poverty and global injustice, and we are resistant to being told what causes to support.

But without creating unnecessary new organisations, it's important that humanists are *visible* in their support for global justice. 'Actions speak louder than words', and if we're serious in what we say about shared human values and about living a good life

without religion, then we need to be seen to be putting those values into action. The role of the new humanist interest group 'Humanists for a Better World' should be to add a distinctive humanist presence and voice to existing organisations and campaigns. It should act as a forum for humanists to pool news and information, and to alert one another to important events and campaigns.

Here are some of the issues which I think are currently important.

In the last few years, concern for international development and concern about climate change have become increasingly linked. The problem of climate change caused by CO2 emissions has been created by the industrialised countries, but it is above all the countries of the global south which are already feeling the effects, with more extreme and unpredictable weather patterns, increased flooding in some areas, and changes in rainfall leading to crop failures and the drying up of pastureland in others. Action on climate change has to take the form of 'climate justice' – enabling the poorer countries of the world to follow a low-carbon route to development and not being forced to pay the price for our failures. Oxfam and the World Development Movement among others are campaigning for a global Climate Fund which is fair and effective. See:

http://www.oxfam.org.uk/get_involved/campaign/climate_change/

<http://www.wdm.org.uk/climatedebt>

World poverty is being fuelled by the spike in food commodity prices, which have been artificially inflated by the irresponsible behaviour of commodity speculators. We need international regulations to curb food speculation – see:

<http://www.wdm.org.uk/food-speculation>

Development organisations have increasingly come to recognise that trade is the route out of poverty. But this requires more than the free-marketers' mantra of 'free trade'. It needs *trade justice*. At the level of our daily lives and our own purchases, this is something which we can promote by buying Fairtrade products and raising awareness of the value of Fairtrade. I'd like to see more Humanist groups committing themselves to using Fairtrade refreshments at their meetings and events. But it also requires political action, because the scope for trade to benefit developing countries is severely limited by the unfair tariffs and subsidies maintained by the US and Europe. The Fairtrade Foundation is currently running a campaign against American and European subsidies for their own cotton farmers, which lower world prices and hit cotton-producing countries such as Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali. See:

<http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/products/cotton/default.aspx>

If you share these or related concerns, do please make use of the 'Humanists for a Better World' web site:

www.h4bw.org.uk

to communicate news, ideas and actions, and to work with other humanists for global justice and a better world.

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¹ Data from <http://un.org/millenniumgoals/news.shtml>

² See <http://www.humanism.org.uk/humanism/humanist-tradition/working-for-a-better-world>