

Statement by the Rev. David Beckmann,
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on behalf of the INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE AGAINST HUNGER

High-Level Conference on World Food Security, June 5, 2008

I am honored by this opportunity to speak to representatives of the world's governments and other leaders with responsibility for the world's food security. I want to urge that the response to the world hunger crisis should include steps to build political will to overcome hunger and, specifically, increased support for the International Alliance Against Hunger.

As food prices rose, many governments in developing countries took action, partly because political leaders realized that rising food prices could spark political unrest. Food riots and other disruptions in many countries grabbed the attention of the industrialized countries and the world press. International institutions helped publicize the problem and took steps to address it. The organizers of this conference moved quickly to make it into a bigger event than was originally planned. The size of the conference and the participation of many heads of state are impressive.

But the commitments made at this meeting will not by themselves be sufficient to reverse the huge set-back against hunger and poverty that has occurred, and we know from decades of experience with similar conferences that most governments will do less than they have promised here.

Conferences and reports over many years have concluded that it is feasible to end world hunger. They have appealed, again and again, for the necessary political will. This experience has taught us that conferences and reports are not enough to build the necessary political will.

Thus, when the world's governments last met on this scale to discuss world hunger in 2002, they highlighted the need to build advocacy institutions to defend the political interests of hungry and poor people. Several years ago, I was given the opportunity to make this point in the inaugural lecture at the biannual meeting of the FAO.

Farmer associations, neighborhood organizations and religious institutions are often advocates for hungry people. Local governments and hunger-focused institutions within national governments can be advocates for hungry and poor people, too. The press and political parties have important roles to play. But institutions such as these that represent the interests of hungry and poor people need to be made much stronger than they are.

Political will does not just happen.

The organization I lead, Bread for the World, has helped to convince the U.S. government to more than double its funding for poverty-focused development assistance during this decade. Bread for the World's activist members and churches mobilize hundreds

of thousands of constituent contacts with the U.S. Congress each year. We work with coalitions, urge the media to cover this issue, and directly lobby political leaders. I am grateful to the political leaders who have helped to increase U.S. development assistance, but it wouldn't have happened without strong advocacy organizations.

The experience of leading a growing advocacy organization makes me acutely aware that political will needs to be *built*.

Right now, we need more analysis of the politics of the current crisis. In particular countries, what groups are suffering? What groups are well-positioned to defend themselves politically? To which groups is the government responding? Are there ways to create institutions or alliances that will encourage the government to do more for hungry families that are being neglected?

We also need more effort to engage diverse institutions in responding to the world hunger crisis. Nongovernmental organizations have been able to participate only marginally in this conference, so we will need to find other opportunities to engage civil society groups, religious networks, organizations of poor people, unions, universities and corporations. Their efforts are needed – to complement what governments can do, and also to urge governments to do what they should.

We especially need media advocacy. There will be more food riots. There will certainly be tremendous suffering – including dramatic suffering in some countries. Some countries will address the crisis in exemplary ways that the rest of the world should know about. We will need organizations that are active in telling this story through the media.

Very specifically, the International Alliance Against Hunger should be strengthened. In response to a decision of the 2002 conference, the FAO, the World Food Program and IFAD joined together to launch the International Alliance. Their cooperation in reaching out to civil society is one of the strengths of the Alliance. The International Alliance has initiated or strengthened national alliances against hunger in more than 20 countries. The International Alliance is the best mechanism we have to share information among countries about efforts to build the political will to end hunger.

The U.S. Alliance to End Hunger now includes 60 institutions. We have strengthened the advocacy efforts of universities, corporations, and diverse religious bodies. We have worked together to convince candidates for president and other politicians that U.S. voters favor effective action to reduce hunger. The International Alliance has helped us learn about and forge partnerships with like-minded groups in developing countries.

But funding for the International Alliance has always been meager and is now less than minimal. We are looking for private funding to complement official funding. But if the Rome agencies would provide additional funding for the International Alliance, they would leverage much larger changes in the politics of hunger.

And to overcome today's hunger tragedy, we desperately need to build institutions that will change the politics of hunger.