

# Schoolink Vol 6:3 August 2000

## Social justice in a global context

I met Reth Khou, 42, when I was in Cambodia last August. She, her husband and six children were landless – the consequences of which cannot be underestimated. If you do not own land you cannot grow your own food. In rural Cambodia that leaves one very vulnerable. They eked out an existence by producing sugar palm juice for sale and working for daily wages – a brutal lifestyle. Khou awoke at 3am every morning to ensure she secured work for the day on the properties of larger landowners. Anyone familiar with the task of traditional rice production understands its backbreaking nature. Her husband, Reun, also worked for daily wages and earned a small income selling fish.

The outward signs of their poverty were clear. Their home was nothing more than a raised bamboo floor partially covered by palm leaves. They had few possessions. It was a day-to-day struggle for survival.

### **Justice and Human Rights**

Khou's story illustrates that we live in a broken world where respect for people's dignity and intrinsic worth is being denied. The statistics are sobering. Over 1.3 billion people live on less than two dollars a day; 14 million are refugees, 900 million are illiterate; and in many countries the average life expectancy is under 50 years. Over the past half century Australian Lutheran World Service (ALWS) has been the LCA's expression of Christian service to the poor in developing countries. Our commitment to this ministry is based on a vision of social justice that seeks to address this unnecessary waste of life and God-given potential. Importantly, our work is also motivated by the example and command of Jesus to show compassion to our neighbour in need, just as he has shown compassion for us. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a particularly strong illustration of the call to share Jesus' love with all people subject to injustice and suffering.

A central underpinning of our 'witness through service' is a commitment to the protection and fulfillment of people's human rights. The first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states: '*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights*'. This statement resonates strongly with our understanding of all people being one in Christ and made in the image of God. The relevance of human rights is that it provides our concept of social justice with a practical framework for achievement. In an international context, human rights law attempts to articulate those 'needs' that are fundamental to what it is to be human, and required for a life with dignity and worth. Crucially, human rights law gives the force of legal obligation to these values: a very important defence for those seeking justice against oppressive regimes.

### **Social Justice in the Classroom**

Discussing social justice in a human rights framework, complemented by our theological understanding, can be a useful educational tool. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an accessible document that could open discussion not only about rights but also our responsibilities to ensure the fulfillment of these rights.

### **Signs of Hope**

And so we return to Reth Khou and family. Despite the apparent hopelessness of their situation when I met them a significant transformation in their lives was underway. In 1998, Khou joined the village bank established with the support of ALWS. This bank lends to the poor, because it is the poor who own it. Khou has taken two loans from the bank and the rest, as they say, is history.

Move forward nine months to May of this year and I am again talking with Khou and husband Reun. This time it is outside their new home and we are discussing the recent harvest of **their** rice crop grown on **their** land. In the space of nine months the profits from the increased sugar palm production and other activities financed by the two loans enabled them to purchase 0.35 hectares of land and start another small business producing and selling

baskets. Although still below an average land-holding it has given them some security and the basis to further improve their well-being. Another positive sign is the two school-age children who are attending school, a third is attending a literacy class. At last they are able to plan for the future rather than live day-to-day.

The achievement of basic rights, such as that to an education, has enabled this family to look forward to a brighter future. But despite the progress I am still left with an image of a tired woman who has had to struggle too hard against injustice and oppression to make a life for herself and her family. It is our hope that her children, in whom we see the face of Christ, will not have to struggle in the same way. We have a shared responsibility as stewards of God's creation to work towards a world that recognises their worth and allows them to develop their God-given potential. And the cross of Jesus gives us hope that all we do as people of faith will not be in vain.

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