

# Taking Action for the World's Poor and Hungry People

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## SPEAKER SUMMARY NOTE

**Session:** Putting Social Entrepreneurs to Work for the Poor  
**Speaker:** *Norah Owaraga, Adviser to Executive Director, Uganda Change Agent Association, Uganda*  
**Title:** Mobilizing Support and Change Commitment to End Extreme Poverty and Hunger

In the past, there was a tradition practised in the south-western part of Uganda which demanded that if a young woman or girl lost her virginity before she got married she would be taken to and pushed off a cliff into a river for disgracing her family. The pushing of the girls was done by the men. At that time many 'good hearted' people tried their level best to save the girls by pulling them out of the river. The more girls were pushed off the cliff by the man the more the 'good hearted' people strived to improve their strategies and techniques of pulling the girls out of the river. Indeed, the good hearted people saved the lives of many girls and this was appreciated. However, many other lives were lost. Would it not have been more effective for the 'good hearted' people to stop the man from pushing the girls into the river? In what circumstances did the girls lose their virginity? Did they lose their virginity on their own free will or were they defiled and/or raped? Who defiled and/or raped them? Why didn't the girls and/or their mothers fight back?

Mercifully, this tradition was practised before my time and it is no longer in practise. I am convinced that this tradition is no longer practised because there has been a change of attitude towards it. It is our conviction in Uganda Change Agent Association (UCAA)<sup>1</sup> that the most effective and sustainable way of ending these kinds of negative traditional beliefs and practises is through facilitating processes of conscious awakening for those who practise them to begin to question these traditions. To look for and address the real root causes of such negative traditional beliefs and practices.

We can draw similarities from this story with our current challenge of how to end extreme poverty and hunger. Who are the poor and hungry? How did they end up poor and hungry? Did they end up poor and hungry unknowingly because of their own actions? Did the actions of others make them poor and hungry? Are our initiatives intended to help the poor and hungry addressing the real root causes of their poverty and hunger or are we, like the 'good hearted' people, addressing the symptoms and not the root causes. These and many more questions need to be answered in order to end extreme hunger and poverty.

At the grassroots level, whereat the majority are the poor and hungry, we need to facilitate processes that enable the poor and hungry to question how they ended up poor and hungry. What are the personal (human) causes of their poverty? For example, in Uganda and I am convinced in sub-Saharan Africa in general, some of the root causes of poverty at the grassroots level are that the people of Uganda have misdirected priorities, dependency thinking, insufficient awareness, insufficient skills, insufficient cooperation and negative traditional beliefs. For example, some of the misdirected priorities include the fact that people spend too much money and time on drink, and drunkenness affects their work and families. Too much money and time is spent on weddings and funerals. Cattle are kept only for prestige purposes. So, why is a man with 100 heads of cattle poor and hungry requiring food aid from the World Food Programme?

At the national level, let us examine the policies of our governments and the environment in which they are being implemented. What are the priorities reflected in our governments' policies? In his book, *The Fate of Africa*, Martin Meredith writes that a study of fourteen francophone (African) states in 1964 showed that the amount spent on importing alcoholic drinks was six times higher than that spent on importing fertiliser. Half as much was spent on perfume and cosmetic imports as on machine tools. Almost as much went on importing petrol for privately owned cars as on the purchase of tractors; and five times as much on importing cars as on agricultural

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the work of UCAA check our website, [www.ucaa.or.ug](http://www.ucaa.or.ug).

equipment. Are things different now? For most of sub-Saharan Africa some of the root political causes of poverty include the fact that there is insufficient democratic participation. There is insufficient accountability at all levels, corruption is endemic at all levels, there is political instability, civil war and banditry, dictatorships, sectarianism and tribalism. All of these are the real reasons why millions are experiencing extreme hunger and poverty.

At the international level, let us examine the way in which we relate and do business with each other. Let us examine the real causes behind fluctuating agricultural commodity prices, the tariffs and quotas, unfair trade practices and external debt. Do these have a hand in pushing more people into the category of those experiencing extreme hunger and poverty? For example, how much of the donations of the United States of America (USA) to World Food Programme are in the form of surplus and subsidised USA agricultural products?

UCAA has evidence that once poor men and women have the opportunity to analyse their own attitudes and behaviour and the environment in which they live, they will be in position to identify the real causes of their problems. Once they identify the real causes of their problems, quite often they positively change their attitudes and behaviour towards development and they will formulate their own concrete and practical solutions to their problems. In UCAA we use a house to demonstrate our conviction that the foundation for all development is human (personal) development. Human development is a process in which individuals develop self-respect, self-confidence, tolerance and determination. They become innovative and enterprising. They develop the skills of cooperation. This can be achieved through helping individuals to become aware of the costs of their misdirected priorities and of their opportunities for self-improvement; to develop skills and acquire knowledge; to eliminate their dependency thinking; and learn the skills of cooperation. UCAA has evidence to show that once men and women attain human development they inevitably take interest and become engaged in economic and political development processes. It is UCAA's conviction that without the pillars of economic and political development social development can not be sustained.

Development assistance, therefore, should be directed at assisting those experiencing extreme hunger and poverty to become conscientised. Simultaneously, also the givers of aid should be assisted to become conscientised and to analyse the impact of their actions. Are we pulling the girls out of the river, while sustaining and legitimising the man who is raping and pushing them into the river? Are we the man that is pushing the girls into the river?