

CHARITY and JUSTICE

(The following was written by Deborah O'Connor, a Community Legal Worker at the Northumberland Community Legal Centre. Deb has been active in the anti-poverty movement for many years. The Legal Centre specializes in poverty law)

First, it must be acknowledged that without charity, many people would be forced to do without, and a genuine thank you must be said to all the generous people who give their time or money, or both, to help those who need it. As a society, we couldn't function without charity.

But charity isn't enough and it never will be. It's just a band-aid, not a real solution. In some cases, charity lets governments off the hook for services and supports they used to provide but no longer do - thanks to free trade, globalization and the neo-conservative political agenda that inspired those movements.

Charity lets its donors off the hook too, by allowing them to think they've done their share when they donate to the food bank, or throw a few coins in the Christmas Kettle. It takes more effort than that to end poverty, and a very different approach.

There's nothing wrong with making charitable donations – they are very much needed – but if we really want to end poverty and we really care about the poor, we need to do a lot more, and we need to get the focus off charity and onto justice, which is the only real route out of poverty. There's a huge difference between the two, and we need to understand that.

We need to understand that charity is just a band-aid; it only stops the pain for the moment, and the need will never end until the poor have the same opportunities as the rest of us.

What does justice mean? It means finding systemic solutions to the poverty trap instead of individual handouts. It means raising the minimum wage so that people get a living wage. It means raising welfare and disability rates to a level that actually meets people's needs. It means creating affordable housing, providing educational supports at all levels. It means high quality, accessible and affordable day care.

Finally, justice needs our voices to take root and thrive. We must speak out, loudly and clearly and insistently and put unrelenting pressure on governments to do the right thing.

Free trade proponents used to talk about creating a level playing field, and that's what the poor need today - a level playing field where they have the same chance of success as anyone else. Given the tools they need, the poor are quite capable of escaping from the poverty trap all by themselves. Then we can be rid of the food banks, rid of the constant pleas for support from charities and, finally, rid of the poverty industry whose very existence depends on keeping people in poverty.

Remember, it is Justice that the poor need, not Charity. Add your voice to the chorus and we will all be stronger at the end of the day.