

A New Kind Of Poverty

Introduction to the Middle East & Eastern Europe Region

By Philip J Hunt, Regional Vice President.

Our ministry focus at the forthcoming Board meeting will be on the Middle East & Eastern Europe Region. Although we have been involved in this region since 1962, World Vision's ministry has grown mostly in the last decade.

Today we have full-time staff in 12 countries. Last year, we had USD 56 million under management (cash, gifts-in-kind, and loan capital). This year we forecast total resources under management of USD 83 million.

The Old Kind of Poverty

Why do we work in this region? Is it poor?

According to the UNDP report, the least developed country we are working in here is Azerbaijan at number 110. All countries in Africa except for Namibia are rated lower. China is 106. India is 139. None of the countries of our region is classified in the "low human development" category. For some, such as Israel's Occupied Territories, Bosnia and Kosovo, there is simply no data.

According to the numbers, these are not the poorest countries in the world. Yet, as usual, statistics tell only one kind of truth. Because in every country in the Middle East & Eastern Europe Region severe poverty is a dreadful reality. The collapse of the Communist system has mostly been replaced by governments of former Communists, criminals and military. These few are increasingly, and often fabulously, wealthy. The remainder are poorer and poorer. Communism replaced by Kleptocracy.

Furthermore, almost all the countries of Eastern Europe are in economic decline. Can we catch them on the way down, or do we wait for the bottom?

In Lebanon most ordinary people are much poorer now than during the war. The middle class has become poor. The poor have become destitute. Yet, Beirut is one of the world's great construction sites. In this case, the appearance of wealth is simply that – appearance. A very few are very rich. A great many are increasingly poor.

In Romania, where about half the population live outside the cities, sixty percent of the rural population have no cash income. None.

Throughout the region, unemployment is the norm. In Azerbaijan, for example, the unemployment rate is over 80%.

Even by the normal standards of poverty, this is a place in which World Vision International must be working.

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But the real reason for World Vision International to be ministering in this region is that there is a new kind of poverty that accompanies increasing economic poverty. This is a poverty of the spirit, a poverty of meaning, a poverty of the heart.¹

In Eastern Europe, this new kind of poverty is the creation of 70 years of Communism. In the Middle East, there are differences, but many similarities caused by war and occupation.

This “new” kind of poverty has the following features:

- The sudden loss of the economic base. Most people do not have a self-image as *poor*. As a result they do not see themselves in need of aid. If anything, they want investment.
- An educated, urban middle class that is poor, owns little or no property, and has shallow traditions and culture.
- Education which has not led to development. Technical skills in abundance, but little understanding of how to apply these skills.
- A loss of spirituality, leading to religious revival without a revival in belief.
- No traditions or models of organised activity. New models we bring are not trusted.
- People who have been taught, and who have learned, that risk-taking is the same as speculation.
- Trust has been destroyed. Everyone was a spy on their neighbour.
- No tradition of personal initiative. Private commercial activity was banned and considered a pathology, as dangerous as rabies.
- The old rules have gone, but the new ones seem worse. New politicians are worse on promise fulfilment than the old ones. Corruption and official thievery are now institutionalised.
- Dependency was the goal of Communism. NGOs can easily replace the old State in this role.

What is World Vision’s response?

- Economic empowerment of the individual and of the community;
- Transition of social institutions dealing with the vulnerable in society to ones where the value of life and of the individual are respected.
- Transition and empowerment of communities to take control of their own destiny.
- Empowering and emboldening the church to break out of social and religious irrelevance and into the fullness of its mission.

¹ I freely and thankfully acknowledge my debt to former Transcaucasus director for World Vision, Roger Schrage, for much of the following analysis.

Appendix 1: A Short History of the Middle East & Eastern Europe Region

Year	Events
1962	Relief supplies to Poland
1968/9	Relief supplies to Portugal
1975	Assistance to schools, orphanages in West Bank Assistance to schools in Lebanon
1976	Assistance to Cyprus, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Jordan
1977	Pastor's Conference in Yugoslavia Earthquake relief in Romania
1980	Middle East Coordinating Office opens in Cyprus
1981	Relief to Poland
1985	Office opens in Lebanon
1986	Office opens in Jerusalem for West Bank and Gaza Office opens in Egypt (closes in 1989)
1989	Earthquake relief to Armenia
1990	Office opens in Romania. Program expands rapidly. Food and Bibles to Russia. Earthquake relief in Iran. Assistance to Gulf War refugees in Jordan.
1991	Assistance to Kurds in Turkey/Iraq. Office opens in Moscow, Russia (closes in 1998)
1992	Food aid to Russia, Belarus, Armenia. War victims helped in Yugoslavia.
1994	War victims helped in Azerbaijan.
1995	Micro grants program begins in Georgia.
1996	Office opens in Bosnia.
1998	Assistance begins in Kosovo and Montenegro.
1999	War victims assisted in Albania.
2000	Presentation to the WVI Board