



Give up a cappuccino and change the world

So you'd like to give something back? Just 50 pence a day can help a family put poverty behind them, ActionAid International's chief executive, Ramesh Singh, tells MIKE DICKSON

Iwant you to imagine that you run a large international aid agency. You are responsible for around 2,600 staff located in 50 different countries, and you work with 2,500 'partner' organisations and their key people. Your mission is to organise, inspire and lead them and to provide them with the necessary funds to do their work.

If you were running ActionAid International, at least 15 million of the poorest people on the planet would depend on your ability and determination to succeed.

Nepalese-born Ramesh Singh is chief executive of ActionAid International. He grew up in a part of southern Nepal where, as he says, 'If ActionAid had existed at the time, I could easily have been one of their recipients.' Meeting Ramesh for just 45 minutes during one of his heavily scheduled trips through London is enlightening. A charming man with a gentle smile, he has seen and experienced most of the world disasters we only see through the lens of the ten o'clock news.

AFTER THE TSUNAMI
Ramesh Singh with victims of the Boxing Day disaster in Thailand, 2004

He worked for ActionAid for 25 years – mostly in India and Africa – before becoming chief executive five years ago. His first task was to implement the charity's transformation from a British-based aid agency to a truly international organisation.

The first move was to transfer the charity's headquarters to Africa, where over half of the charity's work takes place and where much of the debate about poverty centres. The aim was to embed ActionAid's work firmly in the countries in which it works. Local NGOs with country boards were established, able to capitalise on local contacts and resources and bring diversity to their governance. The charity now works much more effectively at the grassroots, getting things done that agencies still based abroad find difficult and sometimes impossible. It also gives ActionAid a powerful and credible voice in international discussions and debates about world-wide issues.

When ActionAid was founded in 1972 by British businessman Cecil Jackson-Cole, it was based in Britain and had a very simple proposition: supporters were encouraged to 'adopt a child' in India and Kenya and so fund their education. The simplicity of the sponsorship scheme and its direct focus had immediate appeal. So much so that today there are over 450,000 regular donors in Europe.

Jackson-Cole was a man ahead of his time, and the scheme is still current, although it is now more broadly focused – to support the child, their family and the community on which the child's development is dependent. The minimum sponsorship required is £15 a month – just 50 pence a day, or the price of one large cappuccino a week. The few pence saved is enough to help poor families grow more food and supply them with the tools, seeds and livestock they need to put a lifetime of hunger behind them.

ActionAid's calculation is that this small amount can teach a child to read and write, pay for schooling, or build a water system that will give a community clean, safe water for a generation or more.

ActionAid is one of the 13 members of the Disasters Emergency Committee and a quick scan of the major natural disasters that have taken place over the last year will pull you up short.

Remember May, when Cyclone Nargis swept through Myanmar? According to the UN, there are more than 134,000 people dead or missing and 2.4 million more have been 'severely affected' – NGO-speak for losing their homes and possessions.

In Africa, millions of people are starving. The failure of successive rainy seasons has left 1.2 million people severely short of food in Kenya – where the recent political upheaval hasn't helped – and 4.6 million facing acute food shortages in Ethiopia. The people have no food to eat, no food stocks and on top of that, food prices are increasing rapidly, as are fertiliser prices. The situation has been described by one ActionAid worker as 'desperate'.

In Bihar, north-eastern India, 2.5 million people have been displaced from their homes and villages after the Kosi river changed course and flooded areas that normally would not have been affected by the monsoon rains. Survivors have been cut off from the rest of the world and are in desperate need of food, water and emergency supplies. The situation is expected to worsen as water levels rise after fresh rains.

'We anticipate that things will get worse since the broken embankment is widening. It is likely that more villages will be marooned,' said Vinay Ohdar, who manages ActionAid's work in Bihar. Roads are flooded, hampering rescue and relief efforts. Water levels on the national highway connecting the capital New Delhi with Bihar's state capital Patna are so high in some places that cars and jeeps cannot get through. ActionAid and its partners are working in camps in the worst affected Supaul district, providing much-needed rescue boats, food, medicine and tarpaulin sheets.

'Our immediate focus is on providing food and medical aid to women and young mothers and setting up shelters for the stranded,' said Ohdar. 'Families have left their villages for any high ground. They will not be able to go back home for a long time as long as their villages remain waterlogged.'

Is there any hope? Yes, there is. We have the knowledge and the resources and the funds to put a stop to all this. We just need the international will. Jeffrey Sachs



DISPOSSESSED
Bindeshwar Sahni outside his house in Bihar, after floods killed 515 people

argues in his book *The End of Poverty* that extreme poverty (defined by the World Bank as income of less than \$1 per day) currently affecting 1.1 billion people worldwide, can be eliminated globally by 2025 through carefully planned development aid. He presents the problem as an inability of very poor countries to reach the 'bottom rung' of the ladder of economic development. Once the bottom rung is reached, a country can pull itself up into the global market economy, and the need for outside aid will be greatly diminished or eliminated.

Ramesh agrees that Sachs' book is well researched and has lifted the debate. But he thinks more is needed. 'We need more money. It isn't coming, promises are not being fulfilled, but on top of that we need even more than has been promised at the moment, from governments and from the public. Governments need to be held to account, and their citizenships. We need to rethink our role as global citizens and realise that our personal behaviour and how we spend our money can have a major impact. We are very connected – what I buy, where I buy it and how much I eat has an international impact, and our future and certainly our children's future is very much linked.'

Ramesh sees women's rights and education as a vital and central part of their work. Yes, children need education, but women do too: they grow 70 per cent of the world's food. Their role in helping to lift their children and their communities out of poverty is critical. It's no coincidence that the vast majority of microfinance loans are made to women – and that they are paid back!

Climate change is another issue that requires attention; the international community has to become better able to deal with a greater number of natural disasters.

Our conversation ends, and Ramesh leaves me for New York, where he's meeting with the heads of all the other major international aid agencies. Now that many of the bankers and other financial heroes who filled our business pages for the last few years have finally imploded, perhaps he and the others present are about to become today's real heroes. ●

For further information contact ActionAid on 020 7561 7561 or visit www.actionaid.org.uk



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