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High price of poverty

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FOR Maree Nutt it's all about money. Lots of money. Right now she has \$37 million in her sights but what's \$37 million when you're fighting a scourge such as world poverty.

The Mona Vale woman who, for the past two years, has been managing director of anti-poverty advocacy group Results Australia, knows exactly what that sort of money can achieve and how many lives it can save.

It's her business to know and to make sure politicians hear about it. Unlike front-line aid organisations that run their own aid projects, Results Australia functions purely as a lobby group to influence government decisions about Australia's \$3 billion overseas aid program.

The concept started in the US and there are now counterpart groups around the world.

Maree Nutt is a passionate believer in its philosophy and its method of mobilising networks of grass-roots members who each work individually to lobby and inform their local politicians.

"We feel as individuals we can make a bigger difference by influencing the government than going off and doing our own aid projects," she said.

"It's sometimes difficult for individuals to see how they can make a difference but what Results is very good at showing is what they can do and it all starts with making a connection with their local politician. We build respectful relationships with members of parliament, where we want them to respect us for the quality and credibility of the information we bring to them."

She said the work was underpinned by a conviction that poverty could be eliminated.

"In 2000 all the leaders from every country agreed on a set of eight goals for halving poverty by 2015 and eventually ending poverty by 2025 and they committed to achieving those goals," she said. "We are just past the halfway mark and there are some countries that are behind, but others ahead of schedule."

Nutt, a former physiotherapist, said she was introduced to Results Australia when a friend invited her to a meeting 19 years ago.

She was single and just back from travelling the world, but left the meeting determined to join the cause after watching a video that graphically depicted the 40,000 children aged under five who, at that time, were dying every day from preventable, poverty-related causes.

"They had a jumbo jet in cartoon form carrying 400 children and 100 of them crashing to the ground every day," she said. "Now it's 30,000 children dying every day so things have got better, but that is still horrific, one child every three seconds."



Maree Nutt of Results Australia ...
'one child dies every three seconds due to poverty'.
Picture: MARTIN LANGE

She said Results Australia was now focusing on solutions to poverty such as micro-credit schemes, which provide small loans to help people start income-generating activities and work their way out of poverty. She said almost 100 million of the world's poorest families had had access to microcredit and been able to profoundly improve their families' lives and futures.

"We are trying to encourage the government to allocate more of our aid program to micro finance," she said. "I can tell you it's a very small percentage at the moment."
She said another big focus was on trying to eradicate the "diseases of poverty": AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. "You can prevent all three and you can cure TB and malaria yet six million people die of those diseases every year and they're mostly poor people."

And that's where she hopes the \$37 million will come in. Results has been lobbying the Australian Government to help combat these diseases in Indonesia, which now has the world's third-highest incidence of TB. She said the Labor Party committed before the last election to cancel \$75 million of Indonesia's debt to Australia if, in return, Indonesia agreed to direct \$37 million of it to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB. The fund would then send it back to Indonesia in AIDS, TB and malaria programs.

"The government is getting very close now to making a decision on that and we are very hopeful it will be a favourable decision," she said. Although Nutt receives only a small stipend for her work, she said she was committed to continuing in her present role and pursuing Results' vision for a world without poverty.

"It's been very fulfilling learning about these issues and some of the great things that are being done, but it's also fulfilling to help bring people in the organisation move from a sense of powerlessness to a sense that individuals can actually make a big difference."
She said since she had her own children it had been harder to find the time to do the work but her commitment had become stronger.

"You hear about children dying before the age of five from things that are so easily preventable and you put yourself in those mothers' shoes and you think, that could have been your child if you had been born in a different country," she said.
"A lot of our members up here are mothers and it really hits them that it could be them watching a child die of diarrhoea when they could be cured with a 10c sachet of rehydration therapy."

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