

Budget cuts hurt poor, say religious groups

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) in the [March 22, 2011](#) issue

Get ready for more undernourished infants, dangerously cold homes and disease-stricken communities in developing countries if proposed federal budget cuts become law.

That's the message coming from left-to-center religious advocacy groups, who've been rallying supporters and blanketing Capitol Hill since budget debates kicked into high gear in mid-February.

Declaring budgets to be "moral documents," they're prodding lawmakers to honor their respective faith traditions by sparing poverty-related programs from the cost-cutting axe.

But efforts to save funding are meeting resistance—not only from number crunchers but also from others with different views of what constitutes moral budgeting.

The conscience-tweaking initiatives are popping up just as lawmakers work to shrink trillion-dollar annual deficits. In mid-February, 300 leaders from Catholic social ministry organizations left a Washington-area conference to lobby their representatives and senators. Sojourners, an evangelical ministry with a social justice focus, is raising money for bracelets and ads asking, "What would Jesus cut?"

"Our job is to provide the moral voice that says, 'You don't cut the poor first,'" said Kathy Saile, director of domestic social development for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. "But thus far in this recession and economic crisis, the only

people who've been asked to sacrifice have been the poor."

Advocates

like Saile are denouncing House-passed plans to cut about \$5 billion from poverty-focused international aid, \$2.3 billion from affordable housing, \$1.75 billion from job training, \$1 billion from community health centers, \$900 million from refugee programs and \$390 million from low-income heating assistance.

Under current proposals, programs that target poor people would face cuts of much deeper proportion than other areas of the budget, according to Stephen Colecchi, director of the USCCB's Office of International Justice and Peace.

Moral

arguments aren't just niceties for lawmakers to consider once the hard-nosed economic analyses are done, according to Wayne Fields, executive director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion & Politics at Washington University in St. Louis. On the contrary, he said, budget pressures and religious lobbying efforts can help reveal a public figure's depth of commitment.

"It's a test of how serious our politicians are when they declare their commitments to religious values and to faith communities," Fields said. "It's a test of how much they actually listen when those communities witness to the deepest moral and ethical concerns of the faith."

Others, however, see a different moral imperative: fighting wasteful spending. The 1-million-member TeaParty.org group encourages "traditional family values" and calls for an end to federal deficits. Its president, Dale Robertson, says government-funded antipoverty programs are vulnerable to fraud and abuse in the absence of sufficient accountability.

For

example, he cites the scandal-plagued Global Fund, which receives taxpayer dollars for overseas projects and recently reported \$34 million missing. "It's wrong, it's uncharitable and it's unchristian to give

good money after bad," Robertson said. "It's almost like you're destroying this nation because you're not solving the problems. . . . Until we begin to hold [programs] accountable, cut everything."

[Church

World Service has joined several other humanitarian agencies in appealing to House leaders in a February 22 letter saying the nation's proposed spending plan for 2011 would severely curtail U.S. relief efforts. The letter posed a scenario in which "in the next major global humanitarian crisis—the next Haiti, tsunami or Darfur—the United States might simply fail to show up."]

Religious advocates bristle at the suggestion that government funding implies wastefulness.

World

Vision, a Christian relief organization, gets about 10 percent of its budget from the government, according to Robert Zachritz, its director of advocacy and government relations. He says poverty-focused international programs achieve strong returns on investment. Cutting poverty-focused international aid by 26 percent as proposed, he said, would hamper disaster response efforts and would remove 13 million people from feeding programs overseas.

Calls to preserve funding

for poverty assistance programs are coming from a diverse swath of religious communities, including the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism and Hindu American Seva Charities. Yet while lobbyists hear a divine mandate, Americans on the whole don't seem convinced.

In a

February survey by the Pew Research Center, global poverty assistance was the only area out of 13 categories in which more respondents called for spending cuts (45 percent) than called for a spending increase (21 percent). What's more, cuts to global poverty assistance were equally favored by Catholics, evangelicals, mainline Protestants and people with no religious affiliation.

Socially conservative lobbyists are largely staying out of debates about antipoverty programs. Groups such as the Family Research Council, Focus on the Family and the Traditional Values Coalition have focused efforts on defunding Planned Parenthood, an abortion provider.

People on both sides agree that if antipoverty programs suffer substantial cuts, religious organizations will bear more responsibility for feeding the hungry and meeting other basic needs. But some advocates for sustaining public funding say such a backup plan is more ideological than realistic.

"Churches simply have not put in their budgets the kind of funding that would be required to feed 9 to 10 million people," said Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tennessee. "So it's dishonest for politicians to shift the responsibility away from the government to the church." —RNS