

Live Below the Line 2011

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Recently I, along with 6,000 other people in Australia (including our own Matt Morris), participated in the 'Live Below the Line' challenge. The campaign was first established in Melbourne in 2010 by members of the Oaktree Foundation and the Global Poverty Project (GPP). The aim of the campaign was to challenge Australians to feed themselves with \$2 a day for five days, to help raise funds for a variety of anti-poverty projects and raise awareness for the extreme challenges faced by the 1.4 billion people trapped in the cycle of extreme poverty around the world. Participants can take part in either a team, where they can pool their resources, or individually. In its first year alone over 2,000 people from around Australia participated, raising over \$520,000 for Oaktree and GPP initiatives.

In 2011, only its second year, the campaign attracted over 6,000 participants across Australia to participate between the 16th and 20th of May. As of Friday the 27th of May the campaign has so far raised \$1,306,741 through individual participants seeking donations, going towards Oaktree and GPP initiative'. The campaign has also spread internationally, being adopted in both the United States (through CARE and GPP) and the United Kingdom (through the Salvation Army, RESULTS UK, Restless Development, Christian Aids and Think Global). Celebrities have also come onboard to support the campaign, most notably with Hugh Jackman blitzing the international airwaves (CNN, BBC and Entertainment Tonight to name a few) for the sole purpose of raising awareness for the campaign.

The organisers of the campaign also took it a step further this week, organising a 'Live Below the Line' week for MPs in the middle of a sitting week of parliament. A total of 7 MPs (Sharon Bird, Andrew Laming, Michael McCormack, Laura Smyth, Andrew Wilkie, Wayne Swan and Ken Wyatt) and 2 Senators (Bob Brown and Kate Lundy) took part in the challenge. This was supported by the organisation of an MPs morning tea, where Oaktree and GPP volunteers were hosted at parliament, by Laura Smyth and Andrew Laming, to talk to the politicians about their experiences, the continuing importance of the campaign and the Australian Governments commitment to foreign aid and international development.

Where the money goes

Participants in the challenge have the choice of directing their donations towards either Oaktree or GPP initiatives. The Oaktree Foundation supports projects in education in Cambodia, PNG and East Timor. This includes building schools, training teachers, and providing scholarships for the most disadvantaged students in the Asia-Pacific region. Funds to the GPP will support education and advocacy work in Australia, in order to provide thousands of Australians with the knowledge and resources they need to 'become agents for change within their communities. Major GPP campaigns include the eradication of polio, ensuring a fair price for workers everywhere and exposing and tackling corruption.

My experience

I first put the proposition of participating in Live Below the line to my housemates in early April. It was not until a few weeks later that I finally got around to signing us up to the challenge and begin campaigning (you can see our team page [here](#)). We originally set a goal of reaching \$1,000 by the end of the campaign and left it to facebook and e-mailing our friends and family to do the rest. In the week leading up to the campaign, overwhelmed by the generosity of those around us, we had already passed that mark and raised the bar to \$2,000. Working as a team we put together a [shopping list](#) and [meal plan](#) and went on search for the cheapest produce possible (Aldi and the local farmers markets were a great choice). This in itself was a challenge, trying to figure what nutrients, energy and vitamins would be essential to keep us going throughout the week and splitting that evenly between meals. I don't think I, or anyone in my household, had committed nearly enough time to deciding what we would eat and when, and we hadn't even started the challenge.

Looking at all the food we had available at the beginning of the week I thought that this would be easy, and a great way to save some money. As the week dragged on, however, my team and I began to realise how much of a challenge it really was. Our productivity and energy levels dropped. Our level of focus and concentration were also heavily affected. Those who relied on a daily caffeine dose suffered mild headaches and got quickly tired. In the words of my housemate 'it was a novel experience for my stomach to only ever be either empty or half-empty, and it was eye-opening to have to give so much thought to what to eat, and when. Standing in the kitchen with our housemates, talking in circles about whether we could cook this packet of lentils on Tuesday or Thursday, or when we could eat our allotted half a pear, my thoughts of "this is stupid" gave way to a realisation: "this is a daily problem for many people"

It was a gruelling week and thankfully we were able to reward ourselves with a bountiful meal on Saturday. Most people living on \$2 a day don't have such luxury. I think we were all humbled by our experience. We also raised a total of \$1,935.40 for the Oaktree foundation, more than any of us had imagined possible. I will definitely be doing it again next year.

Why has this campaign been so successful?

I believe that the Live Below the Line Campaign has been successful for a variety of reasons. First, through the already established networks within GPP and Oaktree, it had access to a broad base of youth already interested and engaged in eradicating global poverty. It is also a simple concept, \$2 a day on food for five days, that on the surface would appear simple and is easy to promote to a wide audience. It also brings into perspective a very subjective area for many Australians, that of food scarcity and absolute poverty. By objectively challenging individuals to change their behaviour the campaign has a much larger impact than most others. It is also a novel experience, one that participants can't help but talk about. I know I haven't shut up about it in the past week. The organisers also included a variety of incentives to appeal to the competitive nature within all of us, including the setting of individual targets, individual and team donation leaderboards and the opportunity for the best fundraisers to travel to Cambodia to see first hand the impact of Oaktree funds.

Finally, another major reason that the campaign is so successful is that it does not just impact the 6,000 Australians that participated in it this year, but also their friends, family, co-workers, people reached through social media and anyone else they could reach to raise funds for their individual challenge. Surely that degree of extra awareness and support can't be a bad thing for the international development community.

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