



FACTS & ISSUES

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League of Women Voters of the Houston Area

GLOBAL HUNGER

INTRODUCTION

Global hunger has long been accepted by well-nourished citizens as a global shame. They have recognized the problem can be eradicated only by concerted efforts of those who care, and that the burden should fall heaviest on those least affected by hunger: the people of the developed countries. Until now, however, the eradication efforts have largely been considered charity.

Recently, global hunger has been accepted by world leaders as a bar to world peace, and therefore as a necessarily shared responsibility. In the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, of the eight general objectives therein, the first pledges to eradicate hunger. The importance given to it recognizes that worldwide hunger has a substantial present potential to carry us to the abyss. Starving people are desperate and will do whatever it takes to stay alive. Food insecurity thus leads to failed states, which destabilize their regions and provide fertile ground for violence and recruitment of terrorists. With the current fiscal crisis possibly aggravating the situation, global hunger is seen as a growing threat to world peace and security.

The following discussion first defines what is meant by hunger, then looks at the current state of global hunger, the causes, and some possible solutions. Finally, it evaluates the significance to the world of ignoring the problem.

CONDITIONS TODAY

For a sixth of the world's population "hunger means a dietary intake that does not provide the kind and quantity of food that is needed for growth and activity and the maintenance of good health."¹ The overall statistics on global hunger are appalling. Hunger statistics from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) note that over one billion people do not have enough to eat and live in conditions that condemn them to continuing hunger. The number of those hungry exceeds the total populations of Canada, the United States, and the European Union. Almost all of these people who suffer hunger live in developing countries. Asia and the Pacific Region are of particular concern because they are home to over half of the world's population and contain nearly two thirds of the world's hungry people. However, other underdeveloped areas are also of concern, notably in Africa. Just seven key countries in Asia, the Pacific Region, and Africa contain a total of 65% of the world's hungry: India, China, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Pakistan plus the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Ethiopia. Of these chronically hungry, more than 60% are women. (Detailed statistics are in the annual FAO reports, "The State of Food Insecurity in the World".)

¹ Robert W. Kates for the U.S. Global Change Research Information Office, <http://www.gcrio.org/CONSEQUENCES/vol2no2/article1.html>. For additional perspectives on hunger, see the Addendum to this paper.

The effects of hunger on children have been particularly serious. It is estimated that one out of four children in developing countries, a total of roughly 146 million, are underweight, with malnutrition and hunger-related diseases causing 60% of the deaths of the 10.9 million children under five who die in these countries each year. In addition to simple hunger, malnutrition caused by a lack of required dietary elements takes a terrible toll on both children and adults. Iron deficiency is the most prevalent form of malnutrition, affecting the health and reducing the productivity of an estimated two billion people. Vitamin A deficiency is associated with blindness and susceptibility to disease as well as high mortality rates. It is particularly damaging to children, killing an estimated million infants every year and affecting about one-quarter of the developing world's preschoolers. Iodine deficiency remains the greatest single cause of mental retardation and brain damage, with an estimated 1.9 billion people at risk world wide.

In short, global hunger is a widespread problem which is far from solution and may become substantially worse.

ALLEGED CAUSES

Why is there hunger, in a world that produces enough food to feed its more than 6 billion people? Generally, surplus food is produced in more industrialized nations, and most hunger is in poorer, less developed nations. This mismatch between supply and demand results from unwise agricultural policies, misguided aid attempts, and greed.

A. UNWISE AGRICULTURAL POLICIES

1. Countries misusing food: Making bio-fuels from consumable food not only reduces the supply of food that could feed the hungry, but delays weaning countries from their energy-hogging behavior. This keeps the cost of energy high, further deteriorating the ability of poor countries to develop their own industry and agribusinesses.
2. Wealthy countries discouraging farming in poor countries: Subsidizing agribusinesses encourages production at below-market prices of excess food, which is exported and sold to consumers in the hungry nations at cheaper prices than local farmers can meet. Tariffs further handicap their selling crops abroad. And the EU, because of unproven fears, refuses to import genetically modified (GM) food from sellers who use GM crops.
3. Conflict and mismanagement destroying farms and farmers: Regional conflicts result in not only destruction of productive land and the population to manage it, but also massive migrations to neighboring countries that might have already been struggling to feed their own people. Hunger and its attendant ills follow. Failure to rein in population growth results in urbanization, so more land is removed from farming purposes. Zimbabwe is notorious for having wrested its lush, productive farmland from the owners that developed them, and given it to ignorant and unskilled locals, who have destroyed the area's productiveness. China flooded a significant portion of its arable land building a controversial dam considered by many to be unnecessary. The desertification of much of Africa is blamed in large measure on poor land use policies. And failure of many countries to provide for the inevitable floods and droughts, significantly aggravated by global warming, can have disastrous consequences

B. MISGUIDED AID POLICIES

1. Wealthy countries wasting aid resources: To alleviate world hunger, over a trillion dollars has been spent by wealthier nations, by non-government organizations (NGOs), and by individuals, without adequate coordination and oversight. More aid than is needed – or misguided aid - may be sent to one place, and no or little aid sent to another. The aid that reaches a hungry nation can be reduced to a pittance by brokers' fees, tariffs, and the siphoning of portions of it by greedy officials. The costs of transporting food over long distances drains aid dollars, and this may be compounded by countries requiring use of ships carrying their flag, which enables the transporters to charge higher rates. The food also may suffer in quality and quantity during the trip.
2. Aid dollars encouraging dependence: Damage to local economies can result from free or cheap food and goods being sent to an area, thus further discouraging local farming and industry.
3. Emergency aid perpetuating the problem: The encouragement of dependence is magnified in emergency situations, thus creating a vicious circle. Emergency aid is rarely transformational – it usually consists of cheap or free food flooding local markets in poorer countries, and delays the ability of local farmers to recover from the crisis.

C. GREED

1. Local officials stealing from their countries: Often national leaders confiscate large shares of the aid offered to their populations and large shares of their population's productivity.
2. Upwardly mobile populations eating more meat: Increasing demand by individuals for meat in their diet has aggravated hunger in lesser developed nations because (a) it uses land that could grow grain; (b) more food value goes to feed the animals than is produced by consuming the animals' meat. In America, 70% of grain produced (especially corn) is used to feed animals; (c) farm animals produce a great deal of methane which increases global warming; and (d) raising farm animals uses more energy than producing crops, thus raising the cost of energy.

There are many other thoughts on what causes global hunger including remoteness of primitive peoples, bans on formally exported foods, demands by the IMF and World Bank, and the tripling of water needs in the last 50 years. Providing solutions is the challenge the whole world faces.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO GLOBAL HUNGER

Because global hunger results from actions of governments, organizations, and individuals, the solutions will require action from all. As Ban Ki Moon, secretary general of the United Nations, and Rodriguez Zapatero, prime minister of Spain, noted in the New York Times of February 5, 2009: "Additional allocations to agriculture, rural development and social protection should be made in accord with aid effectiveness principles, and we should strengthen coordination and make greater use of institutional and financial systems to ensure transparency, predictability and results."

A. GOVERNMENTS

1. Aid should encourage development in recipient nations: To the extent possible, aid givers should buy within the recipient nation. This (a) encourages local agriculture and industry; (b) reduces import of foreign food on high-cost subsidized carriers; and (c) prevents transport-related loss of both funds and food. Money should go directly to agricultural infrastructure and institutions to prevent its being siphoned off by corrupt governments. Farmers in developing countries should be helped with training, credit, seeds, equipment, fertilizers and land tenure. Emergency aid to avoid starvation must still be sent as needed, but should become temporary and rare. Direct food aid tends to skew markets in the recipient country and should be used only in an emergency.
2. Industrial nations' policies should benefit long-term global goals: Developed countries' agricultural policies that cause disruption to the world's food supply, such as farmer subsidies and use of food for bio-fuels, should be revised. Energy policies should recognize the individual nation's impact on the rest of the world. Nations wanting to subsidize businesses should focus on research that benefits the long-term interests of the world and avoid activity that aggravates global hunger. Commercial farming should be used as appropriate to increase the supply of food.
3. All nations should cooperate to reduce conflict: Lesser-developed nations whose destructive policies and regional conflicts are damaging local populations should be encouraged to redirect their efforts in their peoples' behalves. This will require greater cooperation among both developed and lesser developed nations.

B. ORGANIZATIONS

1. Aid should encourage development in recipient nations: As with governments, aid should be granted in the form of investment in the agricultural subsistence of poor countries. This applies to financial, educational, or personnel aid. Organizations should be encouraged to foster the growth of a populace that will be strong, healthy, productive, and able to develop their country's economy. That would involve targeting the very young (offering high-nutrition supplements to children under 5, and fostering breastfeeding in infants under 2) and the working ages, especially women (offering education and an opportunity to become economically independent.) Studies show that aid targeted to women benefits families and whole villages, while aid targeted to men largely benefits the individual man receiving the aid.
2. Cooperation should ensure best aid practices: Organizations should research in advance what aid other groups are delivering to their target region, and then cooperate with them to ensure the best outcome.

C. **INDIVIDUALS**: Each individual can make a contribution that, multiplied by imitation, will snowball into global benefits. It may take a long time, but it should start in each person reading this:

1. Every global citizen has a role to play: On a personal level, all should (a) balance the proportion of meat in the diet in favor of food served as it comes from nature: grains, fruits and vegetables; (b) not buy unneeded food, as it reduces supply and increases prices; and (c) look for

Fair Trade food (which ensures the producers are fairly compensated for it) and international trade markets run by non-profits, which funnel all profits back to the producing nations.

2. Contributions should be targeted to effective organizations: On a community level, all who contribute to or volunteer with organizations should choose one that direct their aid toward growth in the recipient nations, such as: (a) Heifer International which gives livestock and training so that, as its founder Dan West said, the poor "could be spared the indignity of depending on others to feed their children"; and (b) Oxfam and Opportunity International which provide micro loans in developing countries.

SIGNIFICANCE

It is often said there are only a few meals between civilization and anarchy. Historically, the anarchy would affect only the immediate locale of the hunger, but global transportation and communication, our interdependent economies, and well-established networks of anarchists, now promise widespread trouble. As noted by Josette Sheeran, the Executive Director of the United Nations World Food Program, "[Hunger is a] silent tsunami that respects no borders".

To see the impact of hunger, Africa is a model. World Food Program Executive Director James T. Morris warns that, with one African in three malnourished, the prevalence of hunger is an accurate barometer for the level of social instability in the continent. "The greatest humanitarian crisis we face today ... is the gradual disintegration of the social structures in southern Africa and hunger is playing a critical part." Hunger is always a factor in social instability, and chronic hunger in the African countryside has undermined peace and security.

Moreover, hungry people are not productive people. They make unstable markets for the industrial nations, whose economies suffer proportionate to the decline in suffering nations. Their health problems can lead to worldwide epidemics. And they offer a breeding ground for terrorists, as experiences in Pakistan, Somalia, et al. have shown.

That over one-sixth of the world is missing many meals is testified to by both extensive anecdotal evidence and experts in the field. This compels the conclusion that the world will see neither economic stability nor peace until all its people are well nourished.

RESOURCES

1. Food aid organizations like Care, Oxfam, Bread Organization.
2. Brookings Institute
3. Center for Strategic & International Studies
4. The Economist and other magazines and newspapers.
5. U.N. 2008 Report on Poverty and Hunger.
6. Monaghan, Elaine, "Global Food Crisis", Great Decisions 2009.

Prepared by the International Affairs Committee, Millie Whittington and Marge O'Connor, Co-chairs

ADDENDUM

Hunger can mean “*Starvation*, the near absence of dietary intake suffered in the course of famines, ... *undernutrition*, which is the chronic or seasonal absence of needed food proteins and caloric energy[,] ... micronutrient deficiencies [or *dietary shortages*, and] ... *nutrient-depleting diseases*, in which dietary intake may not be absorbed, or is wasted by fever or parasites that are carried in the body.”²

Viewed from the perspective of those definitions, even highly developed countries have hunger problems. For example, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that, in 2007, some 36 million people lived in U.S. households that were “food insecure,” meaning they “find themselves skipping meals or cutting back on the quality or quantity of food they purchase.”³ That represents more than 10% of U.S. households. While starvation is rare in the U.S., chronic undernutrition and dietary shortages are widespread.

The organization Bread for the World reports: “Research shows that preschool and school-aged children who experience severe hunger have higher levels of chronic illness, anxiety and depression, and behavior problems than children with no hunger.”⁴ As with hunger worldwide, the problems generated by even non-starvation hunger can impact those who are well-nourished. Healthcare costs, support for social services, crime and civil unrest all rise when populations feel hunger. It is as important for the U.S. government to resolve this problem as it is for it to cooperate in eradicating global hunger.

² Robert W. Kates for the U.S. Global Change Research Information Office, at <http://www.gcric.org/CONSEQUENCES/vol2no2/article1.html>

³ *Hunger and Food Insecurity in the United States*, at http://www.frac.org/html/hunger_in_the_us/hunger_index.html.

⁴ At <http://www.bread.org/learn/hunger-basics/hunger-facts-domestic.html>, referencing *Pediatrics*, Vol. 100 No. 4, October 2003.