

World Hunger: A Persistent Dilemma

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More people are hungry today than ever before. Over one-half of them are children under five years of age.

The World Bank estimates that 800 million people live in absolute poverty. At least one-eighth of the world's people suffer debilitating malnutrition.

Hunger usually kills indirectly, and will be a major cause of death for ten million people this year. An adequate diet would have prevented deaths from measles, pneumonia or diarrhea.

According to the Presidential Commission on World Hunger, "There are no physical or natural reasons why all the men, women and children in the world cannot have enough food to eat." Starvation of humans is clearly a moral and ethical issue because its solution lies well within the capability of nations working alone and together.

To say, "The cause is sin," recognizes that this problem is rooted deeply in human nature. To say, "The reason for world hunger is poor distribution," is also correct. Even this simple answer sees beyond scarcity as the reason for hunger and lays blame to structures and systems. Yet, analysis alone is useless. Identifying causes of hunger has merit only in allowing us to attack them.

Some of the causes of hunger are related immediately to those who suffer. Others are more worldwide, systematic and more difficult to tackle. Still others must be laid directly at our doorstep. We—the wealthy, educated, politically free and self-determining, the practitioners of the Christian faith—live with the highest calling to help (Luke 12:48).

First, examine causes of hunger directly related to the suffering ones.

Poverty

The hungry cannot buy food. Of the world's people a fourth are rich, three-fourths are poor. Along with food shortages poverty means illiteracy, unemployment, lack of health

services, bad drinking water, a drift toward the crowded cities, open sewage and inadequate housing.

Even doubling food production next year would not solve the hunger crisis since it is poverty that plagues the starving. In India, with 30 percent of 640 million people too poor to buy food, the nation has been exporting rice and wheat.

The difficulty of cracking the poverty problem reminds us of a biblical insight: "For the poor shall never cease out of the land." The rest of the verse should be read as well: "Therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy in thy land" (Deut. 15:11).

We must not try to account for a complex evil with an oversimple answer. Yet, the poor do not have enough to eat. We cannot deal with hunger without attacking poverty.

Tradition

Many traditions tend to maintain the present level of living in different parts of the world. Some tradition is so intertwined with religion or superstition that it defies change. At times political history has reinforced class and ethnic advantages.

The basic and most stubborn tradition is the fatalism which says, "This is the way things have been and the way they are meant to be."

In the universal war between tradition and modernity, new technologies do not always help. Tradition is not an un-mixed evil. Some of the strengths of the rural poor lie tangled with tradition.

Among the poorest of the poor the role of women illustrates dramatically the iron grip of tradition. Women in developing countries provide over half of the agricultural labor, planting, cultivating, food processing and cooking. They are most often the sole providers of food for families. Yet, in many cultures women and girls eat only what men leave despite extra caloric needs during pregnancy.

There is generally less opportunity for the education of women. In the developing world 28 percent of the men and 40 percent of the women are illiterate.

There is a terrible tension between the necessity to allow genuine self-determination and the need to challenge traditions that enslave. No easy answers resolve this ongoing struggle between tradition and change.

The Colonial Legacy

One view of world hunger today sees it as the heritage of colonialism, economic as well as political. Developing nations have been robbed and exploited by colonizing countries. The people have been conditioned as former subjects to accept political and financial patterns that keep them under.

There is truth in this interpretation. It takes time to overcome centuries of neglect, abuse and dependency. Technological expertise, agricultural leadership, governing and managerial experience are not instant achievements. Even the systems of transportation and communication were developed in many countries to serve the trade systems benefiting the political or economic big brother.

The colonial legacy is perpetuated by patterns of dependency, real and binding. Some causes of world hunger are inseparable from that dependency.

The Challenge of Agricultural Development

From the Garden of Eden until now, man has had the divine assignment of subduing the earth, tending it, caring for it. That is not easy.

First, agricultural development has not been valued as highly as industrial development. Then, progress in agricultural development is a complex process involving biology, chemistry, economics, agronomy, engineering, politics, trade policy and marketing. Next, there are expected barriers: an absence of incentives, low investment in the education and health of the agricultural work force, inequitable land tenure, to name a few. Finally, the important ingredients are missing in most developing countries: fertilizer, irrigation, modern equipment and "know-how."

Resource Abuse

Intertwined with the above causes of hunger are the misuse, underuse and abuse of nature's resources. Abuse has many roots: religions that place traditional practices ahead of human need, defense of land use less efficient than family

farms, trade policies like those which insure that one-half the grain grown in Brazil will be fed to livestock.

Resource abuse comes to some degree from historic development strategies which have assumed that a larger gross national product would "trickle down" to benefit everyone. Such policies have insisted upon speeding up the development train without checking to see if everyone is aboard.

There is a Christian theology of resource use rooted in Psalm 24, "The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof."

Orville Freeman, a former Secretary of Agriculture for the United States, has said, "Despite world hunger pessimism, the planet Earth has the potential to feed not only six billion people but perhaps as many as 48 billion. . . . Only one-half of the world's productive, arable land is currently under the plow" (**Christian Science Monitor**, March 25, 1980, page 22). The question is: Is the world ready for the solid commitment it will take to use our resources humanely?

Population Growth

Some see the hunger problem as a race between food availability and population growth. While population growth does apply pressure to the world's food supply, it is not the basic cause of world hunger; nor is it any excuse for inaction or despair.

Hungry people usually have large families. Those large families reflect a desire for extra hands, help in old age and some survival insurance against a high infant death rate. Lower birth rates come with improved food availability. As Barry Commoner puts it, "Poverty breeds overpopulation and not the other way around."

Excessive population growth is a symptom and a result of poverty and powerlessness. Population growth is a factor in world hunger, but we should remember one population that eats more (and better) than the 10 to 15 million persons who will die of hunger this year. That is the 65 million cats and dogs in the United States.

Trade Policies

Right now reliable estimates indicate that enough grain alone is produced to provide a diet of 3,000 calories per person per day for everyone in the world. Yet, trade policies leave vast pockets of starvation.

Food produced almost anywhere heads for the cities where people pay more. No single cause of world hunger is more clearly entangled with the entire economic order, the way we do business.

The basic problem comes from a trade pattern which persists from colonial days: Developing countries **export** raw materials and agricultural commodities (grain, coffee, sugar) and **import** manufactured goods. Since each level of manufacturing generally means better paying jobs and higher profits than those connected with the sale of raw materials, the developing countries come out on the short end. The developed countries perpetuate this trend by erecting tariffs to protect their own manufactured products.

The Power of Multinational Corporations

Giant global corporations display their superior bargaining power in weak, disorganized societies by

- manipulation of transfer prices,
- technology transfer inappropriate to the needs of poor countries,
- offering a development model that has built-in inequities,
- exerting political influence, and finally by
- failing to make products designed for the poorest 60 percent of the population.

The infant formula scandal offers a disturbing case study. Multinational food company advertising persuades poor women to use expensive prepared formula (usually mixed with unclean water) instead of breast-feeding, which is free and safe. This is a classic illustration of the power of the marketplace to talk people into doing things against their own interest.

Distribution Disparities

Hunger is rooted to some degree in privileges for some that perpetuate the poverty of others. The fact that those privileges are sanctioned by law and custom may simply reflect the sinfulness of human nature. Therefore, the vast differences in distribution may simply suggest the most obstinate of the causes of hunger—greed and selfishness.

Elizabeth Seton said it well, "We should live more simply that others may simply live." That notion does have some relevance when the United States earns more than twice the income of the entire poor world.

Arms Spending

Another global cause of world hunger is the enormous amount spent on munitions and military forces. A dollar spent for guns is a dollar that cannot be spent for butter.

Dwight D. Eisenhower knew the military well. It was his life. He said, "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed." Today defense spending of the United States alone exceeds the total annual income of the poorest billion people on earth.

Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense in the Vietnam era, is another man aware of defense needs. He warns, "Unless there is a different allocation of resources in the industrialized nations from military development to human development in the poorer nations we shall not have a peaceful world. We cannot build a secure world upon a foundation of human misery."

It may be that plowshares and pruning hooks can only be made from swords and spears.

Government Corruption and Inefficiency

It comes as no surprise to Christians to see governments everywhere fail. Increased food supply does not necessarily reach the poor. Aid designated for the poorest of the poor is often diverted.

Unequal access to land, water and credit, which inequality is frequently related to government policy, often causes hunger.

The fight against hunger, then, cannot be totally set apart from political concerns. With some long-suffering patience and a deep commitment to justice, there is a need for government reform in the war on hunger.

Food Insecurity

Natural disasters, war and political upheaval contribute to world hunger. In fact, until there is a flood, an earthquake or a drouth, we may not be aware of desperate food needs.

The lives of many people are on the thin edge of survival. Without an available emergency food supply, disaster is a day away. A world food reserve has long been seen as a major weapon in the war against hunger. The failure of well-fed people in the world to demand that grain reserves be set up, that regional emergency food plans be established, must be seen as one cause of world hunger.

This cursory look at the causes of world hunger brings us, then, to our own doorstep. Because we are the "haves," six percent of the world's people consuming 30 percent to 40 percent of the world's goods, we cannot avoid a disproportionate responsibility.

Some of the causes of world hunger lie within us.

Theological Immaturity

A careful examination of our operating theology (not what we say, but what we do) is frightening. It is revealing to test what we think we believe about God by the way we spend our time, money and energy.

The right to food is grounded in the value that God places on human beings. The sacredness of life is basic. God's love for all mankind is the starting place.

"We say man was created in the image of God. I refuse to imagine a God who is miserable, poor, ignorant, superstitious, fearful, oppressed and wretched—which is the lot of the majority of those He created in His own image" (Julius K. Nyerere, President of Tanzania, *Maryknoll*, June 1971, page 37).

Ethical Insensitivity

"The earth has enough for every man's need but not enough for every man's greed." Gandhi's famous words draw sharply the ethical challenge.

Because human society could, if it would, see that no child goes to bed hungry, our failure to do so is morally out-

rageous. Our dedication to see that innocent children eat is a basic test of our Christian ethic.

We pray for our daily bread in the same breath we pray for the coming of His Kingdom. This sets the moral tone for our lives.

Yet, Americans basically give negative responses to the idea of foreign aid. There is little evidence that churchgoing Christian Americans have different attitudes.

Political Ignorance and Apathy

What is seen as insensitivity may be ignorance. Of those questioned about foreign aid and responding negatively to the very idea, 98 percent do not have the slightest idea what is now being spent or how it is being spent. Yet, ironically, the American people, the same ones opposing "foreign aid," want to "help the hungry" (Presidential Commission on World Hunger study).

The majority of Americans (70 percent) prefer development assistance to military aid, and 80 percent of Americans favor maintaining our food aid level or increasing it (Presidential Commission . . .). Many public opinion polls have demonstrated conclusively the confusion and misinformation held by the average American in regard to the United States' role in fighting hunger.

For a nation that depends upon an informed electorate, we are in deep trouble. Citizens who call themselves Christians had better care enough to do their homework and know enough to care. Our democracy cannot long survive massive ignorance and apathy of the citizenry.

Economic Overconsumption

No catalog of the causes of world hunger would be complete without facing our own consumption patterns. To admit that our overconsumption is a part of the problem is no sign of a sentimental unrealism or a morbid "guilt trip."

The facts speak for themselves. On the average, people in the United States consume 4.5 times more grain per capita than people in the developing nations. Americans spend over \$40 billion every year on advertising, trying to convince one another that Jesus was wrong when he said that life does not

consist in the abundance of things. Even our pets outbid the hungry people of the world in the global supermarket.

Our buying, spending, using habits have to be seen in the light of growing scarcity. Our materialism cannot persist without being judged by the New Testament. Leonard Bernstein in **1600 Pennsylvania Avenue** Jabs us: "If God says lovin' money is the root of all sin, then God is un-amerikin." Our basic wants and desires for things have to be examined alongside the biblical concepts of justice, stewardship and love for one's fellowman.

According to the Presidential Commission on World Hunger, "Each major cause of world hunger could be averted or overcome if the human community were to act cooperatively and decisively." It boils down to a question of will. Our Christian faith majors on changing minds and hearts and wills.