

FROM THE UN

Hunger: what is happening

You might think hunger is about too many people and too little food. This is not the case. Hunger is about Power, Poverty and Inequality.

The facts are stark and a moral challenge.

The persistence of hunger in a “world of plenty” is a major silent disaster. There is something very wrong when there is more food available than ever before, when agricultural yields have increased enormously, when *1.5 billion* people worldwide are obese and yet, when **almost a billion adults and children do not have enough to eat**. People are chronically hungry because they are too poor to purchase sufficient food and, increasingly, they are losing the lands on which they used to grow their food to big agro-companies. Farming is a business!

The effect of hunger is particularly devastating on children. More than 100 million children under five are underweight resulting in serious health problems. Childhood malnutrition is estimated to be the cause of death of more than 2.5 million children every year. It has been demonstrated that there are specific nutrients that children must have at specific stages of development in their early years. Vitamins E, C and D are essential early on. For example children must have sufficient Vitamin C within the first 1000 days of life to enable normal development and begin developing immunity to a number of diseases. Improper nourishment leads to a reduction of immunity and susceptibility to diseases that could be fatal. Another example is the necessity for iodine for normal thyroid development.

It should be noted that rich countries are also victims of hunger. In 2010 the US Department of Agriculture spent about \$70 billion on food for more than 40 million people.

Food is a commodity like any other product in the market economy and agro-farming is big business. Accordingly, large tracts of agricultural land are often dedicated to the cultivation of coffee, tobacco and cotton in response to market demand rather than feeding the indigenous poor. Speculators are now engaged in a major scramble for land in Africa and other underdeveloped areas.

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Accompanying the need for food is the volatility of food prices, a major problem for poor people and small farms. The result of this cascade of problems is the basically unregulated, commodity futures trading and speculation. All of these factors create havoc in food prices. It is increasingly clear that more regulation is needed to dampen the volatility in food prices. It is essential to strengthen food reserves. This idea goes as far back as a biblical era when Joseph stored extra food for times when there was a famine (Genesis). The US has an oil reserve. When food prices spike up, food can be sold to the poor at affordable prices but high enough not to undermine local small farmers.

A recent article in the NY Times (1/6/13) describes how Biofuel demand squeezes Guatemalans. For Guatemalan large land owners long term leases with large biofuel companies are more profitable to manage than cattle ranching or renting to subsistence farmers. So subsistence farmers struggle to find a place to sow their seeds. The result of this outrage is that about 50 percent of Guatemalan children are chronically malnourished.

What can be done? Can social policies help?

What has been done in Brazil is a good example. Brazil was, until recently, one of the most unequal countries in the world. According to the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) the number of Brazilians suffering from hunger and malnutrition fell by more than 40 percent in the past two decades due to Brazil's social programs. The main one is Bolza Familia, (Family Grant) which gives cash to poor families under certain conditions (CCT) The requirements include that the family must keep their children in school, go for regular medical checkups and the mothers must attend workshops on nutrition and disease prevention. The payments almost always goes to women as they are most likely to spend the money on their families. In Mexico there is an equally successful program, called Oportunidades, reducing poverty. Conditional Cash Transfer programs have been adopted in many other countries. These programs are administered amazingly with almost no corruption. The basic idea is to give children more education and better health.

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Social programs can also work in rich countries. For example, in 1964 President Johnson declared a "War on Poverty". Years later President Reagan liked to say that poverty won. He was wrong. The US poverty rate was cut in half between 1959 and 1974.

Economics should exist for people , not visa versa. The point was made by President Franklin Roosevelt, " The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little"

To get more information and to help look up OXFAM.

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