

WHO BENEFITS FROM PERSISTENT HUNGER?

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ABSTRACT: I am writing this because an article of mine on *The Benefits of World Hunger* was unclear. Some readers have taken it to mean I advocate having more hunger in the world. That was not my intention. I have been pushing for reduction of hunger for decades. I am writing this to explain my views relating to who benefits from hunger.

KEYWORDS: hunger, malnutrition, poverty, exploitation.

2008

Many years ago I participated in a meeting in India about assistance programs for poor people. A farm owner objected to a proposed program because he felt it would reduce the supply of laborers willing to work on his farm. Since then, I have been troubled by the thought that some people might benefit from persistent hunger in the world. This could lead to resistance of attempts to end it. Since then, I have documented some of the resistance (Kent 2005; Kent 2008; Kent 2016). Clearly, there are people who support the fight against hunger and some who don't care about it. But perhaps we have not paid enough attention to another category: people who benefit from persistent hunger and therefore might resist efforts to reduce it.

To bring attention to the thought that some people benefit from persistent hunger, I wrote a short article titled *The Benefits of World Hunger*. It was published in the *UN Chronicle* in 2008 and again in 2009 when the *Chronicle* changed its format (Kent 2008). Here is its entire text:

We sometimes talk about hunger in the world as if it were a scourge that all of us want to see abolished, viewing it as comparable with the plague or aids. But that naïve view prevents us from coming to grips with what causes and sustains hunger. Hunger has great positive value to many people. Indeed, it is fundamental to the working of the world's economy. Hungry people are the most productive people, especially where there is a need for manual labour.

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We in developed countries sometimes see poor people by the roadside holding up signs saying "Will Work for Food." Actually, most people work for food. It is mainly because people need food to survive that they work so hard either in producing food for themselves in subsistence-level production, or by selling their services to others in exchange for money. How many of us would sell our services if it were not for the threat of hunger?

More importantly, how many of us would sell our services so cheaply if it were not for the threat of hunger? When we sell our services cheaply, we enrich others, those who own the factories, the machines, and the lands, and ultimately own the people who work for them. For those who depend on the availability of cheap labour, hunger is the foundation of their wealth. The conventional thinking is that hunger is caused by low-paying jobs. For example, an article reports on "Brazil's ethanol slaves: 200,000 migrant sugar cutters who prop up renewable energy boom".¹ While it is true that hunger is caused by low-paying jobs, we need to understand that hunger at the same time causes low-paying jobs to be created. Who would have established massive biofuel production operations in Brazil if they did not know there were thousands of hungry people desperate enough to take the awful jobs they would offer? Who would build any sort of factory if they did not know that many people would be available to take the jobs at low-pay rates?

Much of the hunger literature talks about how it is important to assure that people are well fed so that they can be more productive. That is nonsense. No one works harder than hungry people. Yes, people who are well nourished have greater capacity for productive physical activity, but well-nourished people are far less willing to do that work.

The non-governmental organization, Free the Slaves, defines slaves as people who are not allowed to walk away from their jobs. It estimates that there are about 27 million slaves in the world,² including those who are literally locked into workrooms and held as bonded labourers in South Asia. However, they do not include people who might be described as slaves to hunger, that is, those who are free to walk away from their jobs but have nothing better to go to. Maybe most people who work are slaves to hunger?

For those of us at the high end of the social ladder, ending hunger globally would be a disaster. If there were no hunger in the world, who would plow the fields? Who would harvest our vegetables? Who would work in the rendering plants? Who would clean our toilets? We would have to produce our own food and clean our own toilets. No wonder people at the high end are not rushing to solve the hunger problem. For many of us, hunger is not a problem, but an asset.

Notes 1 Tom Phillipps, "Brazil's ethanol slaves: 200,000 migrant sugar cutters who prop up renewable energy boom". *The Guardian*. Online, 9 March

2007.^[L]_[SEP] <http://environment.guardian.co.uk/energy/story/0,,2030144,00.html>
2 Free the Slaves. Online, 2007. <http://www.freetheslaves.net/>

2022

Now, in 2022, I wrote the present article with a clearer title (*Who Benefits from Persistent Hunger?*) because of the complaints about the original that suddenly stormed in. After fourteen years of total quiet, on July 5, 2022, I got an email saying:

“Hello Mr. Kent. Just read your latest article in the United Nations webpage, and as a Venezuelan historian that makes less than 50\$ a month I just want to ask you: Please clean your toilet you piglet”

Soon after that I learned that there were attacks against the 2008 article and me on the Internet. I didn't see them because I don't use social media. A journalist alerted me to an article dated July 6, 2022 (OpIndia 2022). The title is:

Article describing “The Benefits of World Hunger” published by the UN goes viral, netizens confused whether it is real or satire

The subtitle said:

George Kent has written extensively on the issue of global hunger; therefore it is unlikely that he will write something positive about the issue, and hence it can be said that the article is satirical.

OpIndia spoke about my article as if it was recent, but only their response was new. It said:

An [article](#) published by the United Nations hailing the benefits of hunger has gone viral on social media today, with netizens expressing shock over the claims made in the article titled “The Benefits of World Hunger”. Written by retired Hawaiian professor George Kent, the article explains how hunger is needed to get workers for low-level manual jobs. It was published on UN Chronicle, the flagship magazine of the UN.

The article argues that people work to fight hunger, and if there is no hunger, there will be nobody to do the manual jobs. Kenk [sic] shockingly says, “For those of us at the high end of the social ladder, ending hunger globally would be a disaster. If there were no hunger in the world, who would plow the fields? Who would harvest our vegetables? Who would work in the rendering plants? Who would clean our toilets? We would have to produce our own food and clean our own toilets.”

George Kent also claims that only hungry people work hard, while well-nourished people are far less willing to do such work. He termed the notion that people

should be fed well to make them more productive ‘nosense’ [sic], saying that “No one works harder than hungry people.”

The article caused great outrage on social media across the world, with common netizens and well-known people slamming it for glorifying hunger for the benefits of the rich

I have not changed the spelling or anything else in that text. The description of me as Hawaiian is incorrect. I live in Hawaii, but I am American. The term “Hawaiian” is reserved for people of Hawaiian descent.

Various interpretations of my 2008 article showed up on the Internet: Baxter 2022; Bazeer 2022; Clark 2022, Dickson 2022; Editorials 360 2022; Krylenko 2022; Miltimor 2022; OpIndia 2022; Powe 2022; Treon 2022. They were just part of the messaging that reached me. I got many emails and phone calls about my article. Some were aggressive attacks from people who were fully convinced that I want to have more hunger in the world so that wealthy people could get more services from poor people. Some just wanted to convey their anger to me and showed no interest in discussing anything. Some messages were nothing more than vulgar name-calling. Some calls were from people who heard about the Internet commotion and wanted to know what was going on. I had nice discussions with people who wanted to hear and understand my views (Bazeer 200; Clark 2022; Miltimor 2022.)

UN CHRONICLE DELETES THE ARTICLE

Early in June 2022 my article was taken down from the UN Chronicle website. A friend sent me a copy of a tweet apparently from a UN Chronicle editor:

This article appeared in the UN Chronicle 14 years ago as an attempt at satire and was never meant to be taken literally. We have been made aware of its failures, even as satire, and have removed it from our site.

I don’t know the basis for their claim that this was “an attempt at satire”. I wasn’t trying to be funny. I don’t recall any mention of satire from UN Chronicle people when I submitted the article or at any time since then. The editors could have asked me to clarify my intentions at any time. They did not communicate with me before or after they took my article down.

MY INTENTIONS

In 2008 I imagined that my article might prompt discussion of a neglected issue in the fight against persistent hunger, the thought that some people might resist efforts to end hunger. That didn’t work. Perhaps that discussion could begin now.

The World Health Organization released a document that shows *The World is Moving Backwards in Efforts to Eliminate Hunger and Malnutrition* (WHO2022a; WHO 2022b). Why is it moving backward? Why are we not giving that problem more attention? I think the short answer is that *the people who have the power to end the problem are not the ones who have the problem.*

There are many countries, rich and poor, with persistent malnutrition in the population as a whole or in distinct subgroups. Some observers might take this persistence to mean the government *cannot* solve the problem. In some cases, it might be more accurate to say it *will not*. It might be a choice.

I take *persistent hunger* to refer to serious malnutrition or food insecurity that remains at a high level over time. It is not due to transitory events such as climate emergencies, armed conflict, food chain disruptions, or epidemics. Persistent hunger is closely associated with persistent poverty.

Here are the roots of my concern. Social and economic arrangements generally have two major components. One is community based, where people know each other and, to some extent, care about one another's well-being (Kent 2019a). Another component is mainly transactional. People buy goods and services, often from far away and from people they don't know. The transactions are based on explicit or implicit bargaining. According to Wikipedia:

bargaining or **haggling** is a type of negotiation in which the buyer and seller of a good or service debate the price or nature of a transaction. If the bargaining produces agreement on terms, the transaction takes place.

If you can get the product you want from several different stores, choosing one of them is like coming to an agreement through what could be described as implicit bargaining. You consider several offers and then agree to one or none. In some ways, choosing among job offers also works like face-to-face bargaining. Making your choice means coming to an agreement. Generally, you do better when you have several alternative stores or job opportunities available to you. On the other side of the transaction, sellers do better when they have many customers or many job applicants (and few competitors). Skilled job applicants who have many different potential employers have good bargaining power and are offered good wages. Unskilled workers who are desperate for money are likely to be offered low wages.

Who benefits? A company's owners and stockholders benefit from the fact that employees who suffer from persistent hunger or poverty are likely to accept low wages. Customers of the goods and services also may benefit because the producer's use of low-wage workers will mean consumers get the products at a lower price than they would if there was a shortage of cheap labor (assuming there is adequate competition).

Many studies show that poor workers are treated badly (Kamal 2020). The issues are well illustrated in studies of the chocolate industry (Food Empowerment Project 2022). These issues get little attention. Those who have the power to improve the situation give much more attention to economic impacts for the rich than health impacts for the poor.

Economics textbooks are likely to focus on the way bargaining increases total wealth and say little about how it increases inequality. We know bargained agreements benefit both sides because, by definition, either party could withdraw without agreeing. What is not so obvious is that the bargaining process is likely to deliver greater benefits to the party with greater bargaining power, the party with better alternatives. Bargaining increases inequality, sometimes

just a little, but it consistently moves in the same direction, usually benefiting the larger, more powerful party. In some cases, governments launch welfare programs to counter the economic system's pressure toward increasing inequality.

Often, the poor are exploited by the rich. One indicator of exploitation is that the wealth of the richer parties is likely to grow much faster than the wealth of the poorer parties. Another compelling indicator is that in food trade within countries and between countries, on balance, the poor feed the rich (Kent 1982; Kent 2019b; Shiva 2022).

Transactional relationships build inequality in many sectors of the economy, not just the food industry. Persistent hunger and poverty are not due simply to the presence of bad actors. Business owners, stockholders, and customers *systematically* benefit from the presence of hunger and poverty in the world. This can be expected in a world that is more about transactions than it is about caring for other people's well-being.

What are the forces that sustain hunger? If no one benefited, why would it persist? It is important to see how hunger and poverty benefit people who are not hungry or poor. My 2008 article was meant to draw attention to this issue. It was not written as some sort of joke or as praise for persistent hunger. Its purpose was to call for recognition of the fact that some people might resist efforts to end persistent hunger because they benefit from it. I discussed the importance of cheap labor not because I like it, but because we need to see exploitation if we want to resist it. We must also care about it.

I apologize for what I now see as the ambiguity of my 2008 article. Hopefully the next generation of actors motivated to help end hunger in the world will explore the question of why hunger persists. I hope they will take this discussion forward in constructive ways.

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