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How to end hunger



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Access June 2013 Colin Tudge on Living well off the land (1) here
Access July 2013 Colin Tudge on Living well off the land (2) here
Access this issue Update, testimony of Shannon Hayes here

Editor's note

The centre of George Kent's visionary work for over 30 years, as a scholar, advocate, and advisor to relevant UN agencies, has been and remains the human right to adequate and nourishing food. As professor of political science at the University of Hawai'i, he has taken an increasingly broad 'big picture' view of the value of food and nutrition, the meaning of world hunger, and how all countries and communities could be well nourished.

In this the first of two *WN* commentaries, in the *WN Balance* series on how to live wisely and well, George Kent sees nutrition in its biological sense as just one part of physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social and cultural nourishment. His thesis is that the persistence of hunger in the world can be resolved only by full understanding of its context and moral significance, and of its cause being not so much lack of food, as of indifference to and exploitation of others. This has been well understood until recently in history. His second commentary is in *WN* next month.

Summary



There is more to nutrition security than overall food supplies or money supplies. Worldwide, both are abundant. The key in all societies, however impoverished they may be, is always the quality of care

Many studies of hunger in the world have treated it as a technical problem arising from limits in the capacity to produce more food. Little attention has been given to the importance of human relationships. The likelihood of hunger occurring in any community depends on whether people care about one another, or whether they are indifferent to one another, or else whether they exploit one another. In any stable community, if people care about one another's well-being, they are not likely to go hungry. This is true even where people have little money.

Caring communities protect people from exploitation, and enable local food systems that are adequate, nutritious and in the broader sense nourishing. Protecting and strengthening caring communities should effectively reduce hunger in the world.

Quantity of food is not the issue

According to the United Nations Committee on World Food Security (1):

> Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs for an active and healthy life

Nutrition security, which relates to health status, depends on good food security. Ensuring that everyone is well nourished under all conditions requires attention to ensuring a good food supply. It also requires attention to other inter-related issues

such as health care, eating habits, infant feeding, and food safety. Food security is also about long-term food supply, disaster planning, and many other issues.

In this commentary I am mainly concerned with the unmet nutritional needs of people subsisting on very low incomes, commonly referred to as 'the hunger problem'. It is evidently a very big problem. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, more than 800 million people are currently estimated to be chronically undernourished (2). This proportion of the global population has not greatly changed for decades;

How can this be explained? In 2013, global wealth reached an all-time high of US$ 241 trillion, up 4.9 per cent from the preceding year (3). No child is born into a poor world.

If the reasons for hunger were properly understood, and if ending hunger really became a high priority for governments and all other actors including citizens, that goal could be achieved. There are no serious technological obstacles. The challenge is not about charitable assistance. The issue of quantity is largely about how and for whom the earth's resources are used. Much more nutritious food could be produced if fewer agricultural and other resources were used to produce foods of little nutritional value such as coffee, or non-foods such as tobacco, fuel, and flowers.

Huge amounts of food are produced, as we can see in any supermarket. Viewed globally, there is no shortage of potential for producing food that is needed for many decades to come. There are local shortages of land and water and other resources essential for producing food, but globally there is no shortage of such things. Much depends on what these precious resources are used for.

In strong communities no one goes hungry

There is a close correlation between poverty and hunger. But why is there so much poverty in the world when there is also so much wealth? And how is it that there are so many people who are poor but not hungry?

Caring may be defined as actions taken primarily because of concern for the well-being of others. This is distinguished from instrumental caring of the sort that might be undertaken by a caretaker in exchange for a salary (4).

The premise here is that in strong communities, where people care about one another's well-being, no one goes hungry (5). This is true even in poor and in so-called primitive societies. Karl Polanyi, lauded by Nobel prize-winner Joseph Stiglitz for his presience as a social economist and philosopher, recognised this in 1944 (6):

> As a rule, the individual in primitive society is not threatened by starvation unless the community as a whole is in a like predicament. . . . destitution is impossible: whosoever needs assistance receives it unquestioningly. . . .There is no starvation in societies living on the subsistence margin.

In 1986 George Kanahele said much the same thing about Hawai'i, before and after the original contact with Europeans (7):

> The starkest forms of famine occur in much more harsh natural environments than Hawai'i's and, ironically, in part as a result of the industrialism which makes marginal economies dependent upon international political and economic events over which people in such economies have no control. We cannot honestly imagine absolute hunger occurring among the families dwelling in a self-sufficient 'iliahupua'a in the days of old.

In a study of Hungary, others put it this way (8):

> When a community functions well, it is because of the active solidarity among its members. People look out for each other, help each other . . . When individuals slip into poverty it is not simply because they have run out of money - it is also because their community has failed.

There can of course be serious food supply issues when geophysical hazards such as earthquakes and floods occur, or when armed attacks disrupt local food systems and entire communities. But in stable communities, hunger usually results from exploitation, under which some people profit excessively from the fruits of the labour of other people who suffer. Usually, when people have decent opportunities and can enjoy the full benefits of their own labour and of the environmental resources around them, they live adequately, irrespective of their material circumstances. They do that even in harsh environments. When social or physical situations are too bleak or harsh to sustain life people move elsewhere, if they can.

Hunger is a social problem

In many high-income countries there are low-income groups that go hungry. Their problems may be due as much to the absence of caring communities as to the lack of money. In Japan for example, increasing numbers of senior citizens are arrested for shoplifting (9):

> Senior citizens shoplift lunch boxes and bread out of poverty, and they steal also because they are lonely and isolated . . . . Some steal even when they aren't really hungry because the traditional support system is breaking down and they have become isolated from society.

Society's indifference takes a heavy toll on the isolated elderly. The fact that hunger depends in part on the quality of relationships among people is clear where some

groups suffer from discrimination by dominant groups. Those who are discriminated against are more poorly nourished than the dominant groups. This is very clearly the case in India. The country has become a leading exporter of beef and rice, while many millions of its own people go hungry, especially its minorities (10, 11).

Studies of hunger rarely recognise that it has a lot to do with how people treat each other. Lists of relevant factors relating to hunger (12, 13) rarely refer to, let alone cover, social relationships. They do not look into how people actually live. They may include a lot of information about deficits in land availability, water, seeds, knowledge, and trade opportunities, but they do not see that the fundamental problem might be a deficit in caring.

Hunger is at root a social problem, its extent and degree heavily influenced by human relationships of compassion, indifference, or exploitation.

Food for health, products for wealth

Various global agencies are now working to strengthen links between agriculture and nutrition (14-16). In 2012 the Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition hosted an extensive discussion on *Making Agriculture Work for Nutrition* (17). Such initiatives may counteract a major deficiency of the global industrialised food system, which is the fact that it responds mainly to money and not to needs.

International agencies ask how agriculture might make a stronger contribution to nutrition. But this is an odd question. Nutrition-sensitive agriculture has been well developed in many places throughout history (18-20). Agro-ecology evolved to meet the needs of people and the eco-systems in which they were embedded, in sustainable – almost timeless – systems. Ancient Mayan cities and ancient Constantinople have much to teach us regarding urban food systems (21).



Before the arrival of Europeans, a central achievement both of Mayan (left) and of Hawaiian (right) civilisations was assurance of plenty of nourishing food from land and sea produced for all the people

In today's industrialised agriculture, good basic nutrition is no longer the primary motivation that drives food production. The driving force is money and profit. In pre-modern times, before the dominance of markets and before wealth accumulation became so important to so many, agriculture was undertaken to produce food for health, not products for wealth.

In pre-contact Hawai'i, for example, food was abundant, and people were healthy. Taro and other foods were produced to meet people's needs. One can eat just so much taro. However, with the advent of European industry and technology, agriculture and nutrition were separated. Settlers decided to produce rice for profit. There was a large-scale shift from taro to rice production in Hawai'i in the 1860s. Rice exports, mainly to California, reached more than 13 million tons in 1887. Long before that level was reached, the rapid displacement of taro by rice led the local newspaper to ask, where is our taro to come from? (22). The disconnect between farming for food and farming for money became clear. The people whose taro supply was threatened were not the people who benefited from rice exports.

Since modern food producers are motivated mainly by money and not quality, so the industrialised system, now dominant all over the world, favours highly profitable ultra-processed food and drink products. Many farms and food plants operate in ways that exploit their workers, their environment, and their customers. The impact of the global shift of agriculture from producing food for health to producing products for wealth, often for outsiders, is thoroughly documented (23-25).

Industrial agriculture ignores hunger



The exploitation of peasants as quasi-slave rural workers in central America (sugar plantation, left) has led to demonstrations against this injustice in favour of food sovereignty (right) in many countries

The mal-development of modern agriculture is well illustrated in Guatemala (26):

> Guatemala has one of the world's highest rates of land concentration, where 3% of private landowners – a white elite – occupy 65% of the arable land. Small farms (those with fewer than four hectares) occupy only 11% of agricultural land.

> Poor indigenous farmers scrape out a living through subsistence agriculture, often on the poorest soils, while wealthy plantation owners, or *latifundistas*, benefit from an agricultural system based on international exports such as coffee, sugar cane and African palm oil – and cheap, mostly indigenous labour.

In 2012 a report in *Nature* on global agriculture showed that levels of rice, wheat, corn and soya production have stagnated or declined. Author John Foley, director of the Institute of the Environment at the University of Minnesota, said (27):

> This finding is particularly troubling because it suggests that we have preferentially focused our crop improvement efforts on feeding animals and cars, as we have largely ignored investments in wheat and rice, crops that feed people and are the basis of food security in much of the world.

It is the preferences of the people with money that shape prices and motivate producers. People with money usually outbid the poor for the services of farmers and food processors. The system, in its normal mode of operation, benefits the wealthy few far more than the impoverished many, steadily widening the gap between them (28). The dominant economic system does not care much for people without money (29). It also does not care much for people who are hungry.

Pre-modern food systems work well



Traditional dishes and meals of Kerala, South India (left), part of an age-old culture, are prepared always to be enjoyed in company. Rice on land cultivated for centuries (right) provides the staple food

With local pre-modern, non-industrial food systems, the product of agriculture is nourishing food. As stated in *The New York Times* and elsewhere (30, 31), such systems still function in much of the world, where farming is not tied to profit-driven 'markets':

> Only 30% of the world's food supply is produced on industrial farms, while half of the world's cultivated food is produced by peasants. More than 12% comes from hunting and gathering while more than 7% is produced in city gardens.

> The notion that there is a tremendous exchange happening between countries for food crops is incorrect, as 85% of the people in this world live on a domestic diet. Food crops are sold outside the... industrial marketplace. Much is grown for self reliance and the remainder is bartered or sold at local marketplaces. . . . .
>
> There are about 1.5 billion peasant farmers on 380 million farms; 800 million more urban gardens; and 410 million gathering the hidden harvest of our forests and savannas; 190 million in animal husbandry and well over 100 million peasant fishers. Many of our world's farmers are women. Better than anyone else, peasant farmers feed the hungry; if we are to eat in 2050 we will need all of them and all of their diversity.

The Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration confirms this, and states (31):

> The Industrial Food Chain uses 70% of the world's agricultural resources to produce just 30% of our global food supply. Conversely, the Peasant Food Web provides 70% of the global food supply while using only 30% of agricultural resources.

The pre-modern is not just ancient history. It is alive and doing well in much of the world, but it gets little attention.

Food sovereignty begins with us all

Many critics confront the dominant food system, and call for it to be replaced (32-36). However, to address the issues on a large scale is to run into obstacles and often to become preoccupied with them. Large scale, direct challenges are sometimes necessary, but here I am suggesting what can be done under the radar. Living in harmony with one's environment and one's neighbours has to be done locally.

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development is now calling on global agriculture to wake up before it is too late (36). However, radical transformation originating from the top is not likely. The challenge is to imagine, design, and implement a post-modern world that draws on the best of both the pre-modern and modern worlds, avoids their worst features, and preserves and develops their best features. This work can begin locally, at many different points and nodes, and grow upwards from these.

People with little money can live together with no one going hungry, as shown in countless places over thousands of years. Instead of focusing on ways to remedy hunger when it occurs, we can recognise, valorise and develop ways of living in which the hunger issue never comes up. Many reports describe nutrition projects undertaken within communities, sometimes through initiatives by outside organisations, and sometime on the basis of local initiatives (37). The work usually addresses specific issues such as micronutrient deficiencies or obesity. But

communities can function in such a way that basic food supply rarely becomes a problem, and interventions to remedy nutrition issues are less likely to be needed.

Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and now chair of the Council of Women World Leaders, has said that the most valuable lesson she has learned in her career is 'If you want change, it has to happen from within communities, not from the outside. Those from the outside can only support change by being patient and being respectful' (38).

The concept of food sovereignty is based on the same idea. It refers to the localisation of control of food in communities, based on increasing local self-reliance. In this perspective, the centre of decision-making must be local, not national or global. The higher levels should facilitate and support local decision makers in doing what they want to do. Under the principle of subsidiarity, the higher levels should serve the lower levels, not the reverse (39).

United Nations and other international and well-resourced agencies could support research on how to strengthen local communities. There have been excellent studies of positive deviance that explain why some children, families, communities, states and countries are better nourished than would be expected on the basis of their socio-economic circumstances(40). These positively deviant examples should be studied and understood. There are places like the state of Kerala in India in which malnutrition levels are consistently lower than would be expected on the basis of their income levels. Undoubtedly this is due in some measure to the extent to which people look after one another's well-being.

One can propose reconfigurations of the global food system that would make it more responsive to the needs of the poor. But if those in control do not understand the nature of the changes that are needed, and act accordingly, not much good will happen. The best beginning is when people share with one other face to face.

The meaning of nourishment

The flow from agriculture to nutrition needs to be recognised, valorised, restored and strengthened beginning at ground level, in the communities. High-level agencies can offer important support services, but the main action has to be local. Restoration will not come from 'market forces' but from supporting the natural human desire to care about one another's well-being. If the food systems and supplies of all communities were designed to ensure that their people were well nourished, hunger would vanish.

We all tend to talk about global hunger and to ask how the world will be fed despite the challenges of growing populations, climate change, and other concerns. This

thinking has led to many top-down proposals, most of them ineffective. Instead, we should acknowledge that all hunger is local. The primary role of agencies at national and global levels should be to help strengthen local communities. The up-state New York farmer Shannon Hayes has got it right (41) when she says as quoted in this issue of *World Nutrition* 'Instead of trying to feed the world, let's help it feed itself'. More attention should be given to localised food systems that are responsive to local needs. We need to understand the meaning and the value of the pre-modern as well as of modern to get beyond our flawed present to better post-modern times.

The conventional wisdom of policy-makers and decision-takers now, is that malnutrition is a technical problem, to be solved by interventions that address specific deficiencies. The current global policy of addressing vitamin A deficiency with vitamin A capsules is an example. The interventions may be effective for a time, but their impact dissipates soon after the interveners leave and vanishes when the funding runs out. Many interventions are not very useful. A package of ten nutrition-specific interventions covering 90 percent of the countries with high levels of child stunting might avert only one-fifth of the stunting in those countries. The annual cost of doing this was estimated at US$ 9.6 billion per year (42).

Interventions, even when they are effective, are not likely to change deeply entrenched undernutrition that continues from generation to generation. The basic cause of such hunger is social forces, not specific nutrient deficiencies. Just as health does not depend only on medicine, good nutritional status does not depend only on issue-specific interventions. It also depends on the quality of the relationships among the people affected.

Hunger in the world is not explained by a lack of knowledge about nutrition or by a global shortage of resources (43). In a world with very great wealth, hunger persists because many people don't care about others and often exploit others. This results in local shortages of various kinds, rooted in conflicts of interest about how the earth's abundant resources should be used. Often local resources are used to provide goods and services for people with high incomes, locally or at a distance, rather than providing basic nutrition for local people who have serious needs but little money. The problem has to do with priorities, not absolute resource levels.

The earth's resources could be used to feed billions more people, but that will happen only if ensuring adequate food for all became a high priority. In efforts to explain and respond to the hunger problem, there has been little appreciation of the importance of exploitation, indifference, and caring. This is especially clear at the global level, where there is caring about hunger, but not enough to motivate serious planning. A serious plan can be defined as one for which adequate resources have been allocated and an effective management system has been set up in a way that gives observers confidence that the goal will be achieved. The problem is not that the

global plans have failed, but rather that there has never been a serious plan for ending hunger in the world (5).

At the top level of policy-makers and decision-takers, the geographical and social distances are too great to stimulate caring that is deep enough to motivate serious efforts to end hunger. Instead of always looking upward for solutions for solution to the problem of hunger, we all can instead focus on how hunger can be ended locally, with communities as the fundamental unit of analysis and activity.

The need for care

The argument here can be summarised in three propositions:

- Hunger is less likely where people care about one another's well being.
- Caring is strengthened when people work and play together.
- Therefore, hunger in any community is likely to be reduced by encouraging its people to work and play together, especially in food-related activities.

In *The Conquest of Bread*, Peter Kropotkin argued (44):

> Well-being for all is not a dream. It is possible, realisable, owing to all that our ancestors have done to increase our powers of production.

To make good use of that potential, everyone should have the opportunity to live in a strong caring community. Caring communities can protect people from exploitation. They can establish local food systems that are sensitive to local nutritional needs. Caring communities could remedy hunger when it occurs, but their main contribution is to prevent it from ever occurring.

It is not easy to increase the caring, but if hunger is to be ended, that is what must be done. We, all of us, have to find better ways to live together with some people, and apart from some others. The solution is personal too, it begins with ourselves. Instead of just looking for ways to fix communities that are broken, we should work to help build environments within which they themselves can become self-reliant and resilient, and strong.

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