

## Good Questions 9. Is Ignoring Hunger Comparable with Ignoring Genocide? Review of Eyal Mayroz's *Reluctant Interveners*\*

### ABSTRACT

Eyal Mayroz's book, *Reluctant Interveners*, focuses on how public opinion shapes and is shaped by the US government's response to genocide, a type of mass atrocity. Mass atrocity is defined here as *widespread avoidable harm*. Hunger can be viewed as another type of mass atrocity, even if the harm is not imposed intentionally. The book and this review show that responses to hunger and genocide have been similar.

**KEY WORDS:** genocide, atrocity, hunger, food security, child mortality.

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Eyal Mayroz's book, *Reluctant Interveners*, explores why the United States has not intervened decisively to stop genocides (Mayroz 2019). It is framed by his broader question: "Why has the international community been sitting on its hands while countless children, women and men were being massacred, often by their own governments?" [p. ix] The book focuses on how public opinion shapes and is shaped by the US government's response to genocide. It covers several examples from the late twentieth century onward.

The book focuses on genocides but recognizes that there are other forms of mass atrocities. As used in this review, the term *mass atrocity* refers to *widespread avoidable harm*. It can result from direct violence of the sort that arrives via fists or bullets, or it can arrive through structural violence, harms that are mediated through the social order (Kent 2010a). Widespread hunger and poverty are symptoms of structural violence.

### CHILDREN

One indicator of the impact of structural violence is child mortality, measured as the number of deaths from all causes of children under five years of age. Globally, child mortality *numbers* have been declining steadily, from about 14 million in 1980 to just over 5 million in 2018. That is good progress. The impacts of structural violence are clearer when we compare child mortality *rates*, the number of child deaths for each thousand live births. Globally that figure averaged 39 in 2018. There are great variations across regions. In 2018 the safest place for children was Western Europe, where only 4 out of every 1,000 children born died before their fifth birthday.

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The worst region was West and Central Africa, where 97 children of every thousand born died before their fifth birthday (UNICEF 2019a, 181; also see WHO 2019). There are reasons for these differences, but no good reasons.

Many children's deaths are linked to malnutrition. The context is described in UNICEF's Key Points on child mortality:

- In 2018 an estimated 6.2 million children and adolescents under the age of 15 years died, mostly from preventable causes. Of these deaths, 5.3 million occurred in the first 5 years, with almost half of these in the first month of life.
- Leading causes of death in children under-5 years are preterm birth complications, pneumonia, birth asphyxia, congenital anomalies, diarrhoea and malaria. Nearly half of these deaths are in newborns.
- More than half of these early child deaths are preventable or can be treated with simple, affordable interventions including immunization, adequate nutrition, safe water and food and appropriate care by a trained health provider when needed.
- Children in sub-Saharan Africa are more than 15 times more likely to die before the age of 5 than children in high income countries (UNICEF 2019b).

The impact of poor child feeding practices is severe. It has been estimated that “The scaling up of breastfeeding to a near universal level could prevent 823,000 annual deaths in children younger than 5 years” (Victora et al. 2016). Better support for optimal breastfeeding practices could sharply reduce the infant mortality rate. Many lives could be saved at little cost.

According to one study:

Intensive and controversial marketing of infant formula is believed to be responsible for millions of infant deaths in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) . . . Our key finding is that the availability of formula increased infant mortality by 9.4 per 1000 births . . . among mothers without access to clean water, suggesting that unclean water acted as a vector for the transmission of water-borne pathogens to infants. We estimate that the availability of formula in LIMCs resulted in approximately 66,000 infant deaths in 1981 at the peak of the infant formula controversy (Anttila-Hughes et al. 2018).

Child mortality cannot be reduced to zero, but it could be much closer to zero. Under the right conditions, all countries have the potential for reducing their child mortality rates to those in the countries with the lowest levels. These harms could be sharply reduced if people and countries were sufficiently motivated. The obstacles are in the choices made by powerful agencies about how the world's resources are to be used (Kent 1991).

The key point here is not only that the number of child deaths has been high, but also that they demonstrate *widespread avoidable harm*. The high level of child mortality is a mass atrocity, continuing year after year.

## HUNGER IS COMPARABLE WITH GENOCIDE

Hunger often exists along with genocide, sometimes as a deliberate instrument of genocide (de Waal 2018, 94-112). Here, however, the two are viewed as separate in order to compare them.

Hunger is different from genocide, but both are mass atrocities. Mayroz's approach to analyzing responses to genocide could be adapted for studying reluctant interveners for all sorts of mass atrocities.

Mayroz pays close attention to the importance of labels, as in the debates about whether an obvious mass atrocity should be described as genocide, based on the technical definition in the United Nations treaty called the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (UNOHCHR 2019a). If the US had not ratified that convention it probably would not have gone to such lengths in insisting that some mass atrocities did not fit the convention's technical definition of the term. When something is officially described as genocide, that means the obligations accepted with ratification of the convention must be carried out. It was 40 years after the convention came into effect that the US ratified it, a sign of its reluctance to commit to fulfilling the obligations specified in it.

There are similar terminology issues in relation to nutrition. Even specialists are not always clear about the distinctions between malnutrition, hunger, food security, and starvation. Starvation is an unambiguous term, one that is likely to grab headlines because it suggests imminent death. However, no international agency uses a formal definition or collects data on starvation. The global focus is on hunger understood as food insecurity, assessed primarily in terms of energy (calorie) deficiency. Based on this standard, currently there are more than 800 million people in the world who go hungry (FAO 2019, 3). In my view, this is a chronic mass atrocity.

Those who prefer to reserve the mass atrocity label for more extreme cases of hunger can receive regular reports about such cases, based on the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, by subscribing at <http://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-website/contacts/subscription/en> The categories they use are listed at <http://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/A> A typical report from them is available at

[http://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC\\_Kenya\\_AcuteFoodSec\\_Malnutrition\\_2019JulyOctober.pdf](http://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Kenya_AcuteFoodSec_Malnutrition_2019JulyOctober.pdf)

Another option would be to review the current emergencies listed under *Where We Work* on the website of the World Food Programme, at [www.wfp.org](http://www.wfp.org) Strategies for responding to such situations have been developed by the Committee on World Food Security (CFS 2915) United Nations agencies provide good estimates of the number of child deaths each year (UNICEF 2019a). Some data on genocide have been collected (Roser and Nagdy 2019; Rummel 1994), but none are as systematic as the data on child mortality. There is no monitoring of the

number of deaths related to malnutrition in its various forms. The harms resulting from various types of mass atrocities could be compared in greater detail if we had more systematic data on them.

## INTENTIONALITY

Article II of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide says:

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (UNOHCHR 2019a).

This language suggests that action that leads to widespread harm should be defined as genocidal only if it is intentional. This is a reasonable position, but it is troubling if it leads to the thought that if it is not imposed intentionally, it somehow doesn't matter and can be ignored.

In many countries national law distinguishes various forms of killing depending on the killer's intentions, such as criminally negligent homicide, manslaughter, second-degree murder, and first-degree murder. Similar distinctions could be made in relation to mass atrocities of various kinds. Widespread child mortality does not result from murder, but arguably it results from a form of negligent homicide. Many of those deaths are avoidable (Kent 1994, 277-279).

It is important to distinguish between one-off incidents and repetitive patterns. If people are consistently harmed from using tobacco, opioids, or pesticides the manufacturers should be held accountable. If a factory operates in a way that repeatedly leads to specific types of injuries to workers or the environment, the owners should be held accountable. If a social order regularly and predictably reproduces widespread poverty and hunger, it should be held accountable. Doing things that are predictably harmful in a persistent way should be treated as intentional in some sense. Occasional unintended or "collateral" damage" might be forgivable, but persistent, widespread, and intense unintended damage should not be ignored. Persisting in harmful behaviors can rise to the level of committing an atrocity, even if the behavior is not undertaken for the purpose of inflicting that harm.

Some people might feel that widespread hunger and poverty should not be viewed as a form of mass atrocity because it is not imposed with the intention of causing harm. However, I have written a book and several papers that view the large-scale hunger and mortality of children as a type of genocide (Kent 1984, 1994, 1999, 2010b; also see Charny 1994). Using Mayroz's terminology I would now describe these as mass atrocities.

Some practices are atrocious even if they were not intended to cause widespread harm. Atrocious behavior can result from causing widespread harm and also from failing to prevent it (Mohamed 2013). The atrocity of widespread hunger and poverty can and should be compared with other types of mass atrocities such as genocide.

## PEOPLE AND GOVERNMENTS CARE, BUT NOT ENOUGH

Polls in the US show that the people don't like genocide and feel that something should be done about it. But as Mayroz summarizes, "the findings of the opinion polls suggest that Americans did want their leaders to help stop genocides; but when presented with the purported risks, costs, and other hindrances to strong action, many considered them a high price to pay to save non-Americans." [p. 7] There is a clear parallel with views on hunger. No one is going to speak in favor of widespread hunger in the world, but that is different from a willingness to pay for action to end it. Many people, in and out of government, see hunger as someone else's problem, just like genocide. People care about hunger, but not enough (Kent 2016).

Like Samantha Power's earlier study (Power 2002), Mayroz's book is about the US and its reluctance to address genocide. The importance of their research can be grasped when we see that the weak US performance generally conforms with that of the world as a whole. This is true not only with regard to genocide but to all kinds of mass atrocities.

The UN convention on genocide is the only major human rights treaty that does not have a committee to oversee its implementation. This demonstrates the world's disinterest in undertaking the effort and bearing the risks needed to address genocide in a decisive way. The lack of interest in human rights generally is shown by the tiny budget for the operations of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, especially when considered in relation to the enormous number of ongoing violations of human rights around the world (UNOHCHR 2019b). The Joint office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide and on the Responsibility to Protect is a small operation within UNOHCHR (Joint Office 2019). Budgets can tell us better than words what people and nations really care about.

Mayroz's concluding chapter points out that "international bystanding to genocide has existed expediently with moralizing rhetoric about the need to do just that: 'something.'" [p.121] This brings to mind the commonplace calls for ending hunger in the world, accompanied by projects to alleviate the problem a little bit here and there. As Mayroz put it in relation to genocide, "one of the ways to deflect criticism was to carry out a range of limited measures aimed at generating the impression of a determined resolve to act. In such situations, states were technically complying with the imperative to do something, as they were 'taking action', but in reality, their compliance was a sham." [p. 125]

## CALL TO ACTION

Photographs documenting extreme brutality in Syria have been posted at the UN and the US Congress for all to see (Simon and Bolduan 2019). World leaders act as if they had never seen pictures like those and fall silent. Going beyond simple indifference, the world sometimes

becomes complicit in protecting ongoing mass atrocities. As Mayroz put it, “never again” has become “ever again”. [p. 10] Mass atrocities such as genocide and hunger are now normal and rarely newsworthy. Where is the outrage? Where are the plans for stopping mass atrocities when they occur and prevent them from ever starting?

Just as there are no serious global plans for ending hunger (Kent 2019), there are no serious plans for preventing genocide and stopping it if it starts. Mayroz shows the *ad hoc* interaction between public opinion and government policymaking that occurs with each new genocide that comes up. That is far short of a plan for *preventing* genocide and other mass atrocities. A few nongovernmental organizations have been exploring possible pathways (CGNK 2019), but none have gotten the attention and the resources needed to do the job. Imagining a world without mass atrocities such as genocide and hunger is not easy, but that work must be done. Turning away is not acceptable. Mayroz’s book helps all of us, governmental or not, American or not, to look inward to see whether we are doing the right thing, and enough of it.

I see no better way to close this essay than by repeating the opening paragraphs of a 1981 *Manifesto Against Hunger* presented by a group of Nobel Prize Laureates:

We . . . address an appeal to all men and women of good will . . . so that dozens of millions of those who are suffering from starvation and underdevelopment, victims of the international political and economic disorder so widespread today, may be restored to life.

An unprecedented holocaust, whose horror includes in a single year all the horror of the exterminations which our generations saw in the first half of the century, is still happening today and continuing to widen, every moment that passes... (Kent 1995, 41-43; UNDP 1981, 5-7).

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