

Review-- Within our Grasp: Childhood Malnutrition Worldwide and the Revolution Taking Place to End it

by George Kent, University of Hawaii

Sharman Apt Russell's book "Childhood Malnutrition Worldwide and the Revolution taking place to end it" (New York: Pantheon Books, 2021) takes us on a tour of severe malnutrition worldwide and the responses to it. Her tour includes many side trips, helping readers to see the multifaceted nature the problem.

Russell says we know how to prevent childhood malnutrition, but then adds. "We have the knowledge, and we have the motivation (p. 5). The motivation issue should be examined. Many people really do want hunger to end. Some don't care much about it. And some benefit from it. In many settings the persistence of hunger ensures a steady supply of cheap labor (Kent 2009)

Yes, ending child malnutrition is "within our grasp" (p. 11) in the sense that we already have a lot of scientific knowledge about how to do the job. However, this has little meaning if those who are powerful are not sufficiently motivated to help make it happen. Russell says, "Feeding all our children begins with the understanding that they are all our children" (p. 6). We should not confuse that hope with current reality. Judging by press coverage there is far more interest in soccer, the stock market, and sending people to the moon. I don't see the motivation for ending hunger at the level it is needed. There is much talk about ending hunger in the world, but there are no serious strategies for getting there. I have not found any plans that could be expected to end hunger (Kent 2019).

A clear distinction should be made between remedies (therapies) for severe malnutrition when it occurs and approaches for preventing it. Prevention is less costly in terms of money and in terms of misery. Remedies tend to get more attention partly because they can be monetized, especially if some product is to be manufactured and sold. Some people will make money. That can be a good thing, but it can be messy. Russell illustrates this in her history of Plumpy'Nut and other similar products. The commodity-focused approach often raises major issues such as the excesses in the infant formula industry's marketing practices (pp. 54-56; 79-81) and the development of genetically modified golden rice (pp. 159-167)

Preventing malnutrition is easier than remedying it after it occurs. Generally, prevention requires simple changes such as diversifying the diet or eating more of some familiar food category (p. 119). However, the cost of diversification should be taken seriously (p. 195). Many people have monotonous diets because they cannot afford anything but the cheapest foods. While there have been efforts to monetize prevention (pp. 68-70), that challenge usually does not require new products. In some cases, serious child malnutrition can be reduced simply by supporting better breastfeeding practices. For children going to school, free lunches produce huge benefits (pp. 205-209)

Focusing on remedies for severe malnutrition suggests that, in a way, we accept the endless reproduction of malnutrition in our prevailing social order. Transforming that social order is going to be difficult, but at the same time it may be the most promising approach to preventing severe malnutrition.

Poverty and hunger are endlessly recreated by exploitative trade-based economic systems. If they are motivated, those who are powerful could facilitate or at least allow the creation of local communities that are so strong that no one goes hungry (Kent 2019b). Communities of that sort can coexist with more conventional ones. The conversion of social systems into more humane forms could be done in small steps. The building of more humane communities could get a good start by fully recognizing and implementing the human right to adequate food at the village or district levels and building up from there.

Sharman Apt Russell tells the story of widespread malnutrition. She looks at it directly and shares that experience for those of us who live outside that world. We need that education. The columns of numbers we see annually in global reports on malnutrition miss the heart of the story.

Widespread malnutrition is a tragic drama, a challenge to the world's humanity. It is not about a shortage of food or land or knowledge, but a shortage of something deeper: caring (Kent 2016). Yes, many children suffer severe malnutrition because of poverty, but no child is born into a poor world. Given decent opportunities, most people would provide for themselves and their children. If they have decent opportunities, they will not need charity.

Surely, Sharman Apt Russell would agree: We need to take malnutrition seriously and end the tragedy. Actually end it, not just nudge it.

REFERENCES

- Kent, George. 2009. "The Benefits of World Hunger." *UN Chronicle*. December.
<https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/benefits-world-hunger>
- . 2016. *Caring About Hunger*. Sparsnäs, Sweden: Irene Publishing.
- . 2019a. "Are We Serious About Ending Hunger?" *World Nutrition*. 10(3):3-22.
<https://worldnutritionjournal.org/index.php/wn/article/view/657/571>
- . 2019b. "Communities as Food Environments." *UNSCN Nutrition*. United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition. 2019. 44: 185-187.
http://www.academia.edu/attachments/63531199/download_file?s=portfolio