



World Health Organization

Topic B: Alleviating the Problems Associated
with World Hunger

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Alleviating the Problems Associated with World Hunger

Introduction

At present, it is estimated that 1.02 billion people do not have enough to eat¹. Lack of adequate food intake leads to malnutrition, which by itself can cause severe problems including scurvy (lack of vitamin C), osteoporosis (lack of calcium in the bones), and other problems directly linked to the body being starved of needed nutrients and minerals for normal functionality. In addition, lack of nutrition indirectly leads to weakened immune response and decreased capability of the body to heal from injuries, infections, and trauma. This not only increases the susceptibility of humans to becoming sick, it also reduces the person's natural ability to fight off the disease, increasing the likelihood of death. For the year 2007, it is estimated that 684,000 child deaths might have been prevented through increased provision and access to vitamin A and zinc².

Malnutrition and starvation are clearly significant problems, but the vulnerability that accompanies nutrient deficiency is also extremely problematic, especially for developing countries, where roughly 90% of the world's starving people reside.³ As mentioned above, malnutrition is an important cause in undermining the effectiveness of the body's natural defense mechanisms, such as cell regeneration and immune response. This leaves the person both more susceptible to disease, including tuberculosis and malaria (the developing world's two most lethal diseases), and less able to respond to disease; it is not a coincidence that 90% of worldwide malaria deaths occur in tropical African countries.⁴ Furthermore, in many countries suffering from starvation and food shortage, the

¹ World Food Programme, 2010

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Okie, 2008



safety of the food supply constitutes a genuine concern. Food-borne illnesses, defined as “diseases, usually either infectious or toxic in nature, caused by agents that enter the body through the ingestion of food,”⁵ are a factor for concern even within developed nations, and certainly within developing nations. In the developed world, for instance, the 2009 salmonella outbreak in the US linked to certain peanut products evinces the fact that development is not necessarily an indicator of immunity⁶. In developing nations, however, there are even greater risks. In addition to the standard worries of underprepared foods carrying germs (such as *E. coli* or parasites), there are also hazards related to industrialization and development. One prominent example is the outbreak of mercury poisoning in Japan, known as Minamata disease, during the 1950s.

During Japan’s reintegration and recovery following the Second World War, heavy industrialization took place across the country. In one location, Minamata, a local factory disposed of waste into the local harbor, leading to toxic heavy metal contamination of the harbor and its wildlife. A nearby village, whose population survived primarily on a diet of locally caught fish, thus became heavily exposed to these toxins. Mercury acts as a neurotoxin, causing damage to crucial structures within the brain and leading to loss of function. Symptoms can include loss of vision and hearing as well as inhibition or even reduction of neurological development.⁷ To date, more than two thousand are attributed to Minamata disease, and compensation is still being paid to victims of the disease.⁸ Solving world hunger, therefore, is not simply about sending food to the needy, but also ensuring that the food received, as well as all other sources of nutrition among those starving, is beneficial and safe for consumption.

⁵ World Health Organization, 2007

⁶ Fox, 2009

⁷ Bolger and Schwetz, 2002

⁸ Japanese Ministry of the Environment, 2009



Finally, the primary method employed today in the effort to solve world hunger is in the distribution of food aid. However, “as much as 90 percent of all food aid resources may be ‘tied’ to some specific conditions. These often make it difficult for implementing agencies to use the aid in the most efficient way.”⁹ Moreover, the provision of food aid, while granting immediate relief for those suffering from lack of food, also leads to economic problems on a local scale, such as disruption of local markets and the stifling of local agricultural growth and production.

Therefore, in trying to contemplate the issue of world hunger, it is not enough to simply send more money or more food. Rather, what is necessary is to sculpt a response which is appropriate to the problem and helps reach a sustainable solution for all parties involved.

⁹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2007



Background

Hunger as a Health Hazard

As detailed earlier, food shortage afflicts roughly one-sixth of the global population. Moreover, many who are able to access food may not have access to a diet sufficient in all the necessary dietary nutrients, leading to deficiencies in such vital nutrients as iron, calcium or vitamin C. Iron deficiency, “the most prevalent form of malnutrition worldwide, [affects] an estimated 2 billion people...[and] is impairing the mental development of 40-60 percent of children in developing countries.”¹⁰ Lack of vitamin A “kills a million infants a year. Iodine deficiency is the single greatest cause of mental retardation and brain damage worldwide.”¹¹ And despite all efforts to end or reverse world hunger, between 2007 and 2008, the number of undernourished people grew by more than 100 million.

As we have noted, malnourishment creates numerous health problems and vulnerabilities. Indeed, shortages of food have frequently been noted in human history. During China’s “Great Leap Forward,” for instance, famine is said to have caused the deaths of approximately 30 million people. Famine continues to ravage many people today, especially in war-torn states and among refugee populations. However, there is evidence from history that famines can be averted or corrected with proper and sufficient external assistance.

Following the Second World War, Japan was completely devastated, with extreme food shortages and virtually no industrial output. When the American forces began to administer the ravaged nation, some estimated that up to two million people could starve to death in the first year if significant aid was not administered.¹² However, with proper management, as well as a gift of eight

¹⁰ World Food Programme, 2010

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Kawai, 1979



hundred thousand tons of food (some estimates reckon the amount at two million tons), mass starvation was averted.¹³ Today, Japan has completely reversed its economic situation and become one of the leading donors of international aid. This is proof that hunger as a singular problem can be averted. It is true that it will require significant assistance from relatively wealthy and prosperous countries, but that investment will certainly be compensated for in the future if it is implemented constructively and sustainably.

Unfortunately, international aid as a policy is woefully underfunded, particularly in light of the recent growth in food prices. In 2006, “the world’s major donors provided USD 103.9 billion in aid...down 5.1 percent from 2005.”¹⁴ Moreover, the US provided \$24 billion, Japan \$18 billion and the UK \$13 billion (all in USD). These are the three largest donors. To put this in perspective, the US Department of Defense base budget for 2010 was \$533.7 billion, the US Department of Agriculture provides over \$20 billion in loans and grants to support “rural development activities,” and the US’ National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) has a budget of \$18.7 billion.¹⁵ This is not to say that expenditures on foreign aid are unimportant or unnecessary, but rather to show that there is significant room for improvement in terms of supporting those around the world who suffer from shortages of survival necessities.

Hunger as an Economic Problem

According to some estimates, malnutrition leads to \$20-30 billion USD in lost national economic development per annum.¹⁶ This is because “a malnourished person finds that their body

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ World Food Programme, 2010

¹⁵ Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal Year 2010. U.S. Government Printing Office
<http://www.gpoaccess.gov/usbudget/fy10/browse.html>

¹⁶ World Food Programme, 2010



struggles to do normal things...physical work becomes very difficult and even learning abilities can be diminished.”¹⁷ For children, this means that the effectiveness of education is severely restricted. As a result, the potential to develop an educated or skilled workforce is greatly impaired, dimming the future developmental prospects of the country and reducing its attractiveness to foreign investment. Moreover, as economic agents, malnourished children’s future potential to contribute is further reduced, as they are more likely to not develop as well, particularly during puberty. This decreased development means that, particularly in labor-intensive agricultural economies, their ability to function as workers is drastically compromised. In addition, their general low level of health leaves them vulnerable to viruses, bacteria, fungi, parasites, and other invasive organisms detrimental to their health and growth.

For adults, particularly economically active adults, malnutrition affects not only their individual capability, but also their economic dependents. The loss of productivity due to lack of proper nutrients means that, over time, the effectiveness of the worker is reduced, and so will be the economic returns on his or her labor. Reduced returns lead to a lowered ability to secure needed food and nutrients, instigating a negative feedback loop. Moreover, when the principal economic agent of a family fails to provide, those dependent on him lose the resources his economic activity provided. Without the income from labor, the family unit’s ability to procure resources declines, and the family as a whole is collectively doomed to hunger and malnourishment.

In addition, the malnourished are more likely to become sick—the larger the population of sick people, the greater the needs for medical care and treatment. Many countries faced with hunger crises also lack the financial resources to secure on the open market the medical supplies necessary to nurse their sick population back to health. Thus, a large part of the onus of care falls onto the

¹⁷ World Food Programme, 2010



NGO community, such as organizations like Doctors without Borders, or international humanitarian organizations, including the UN and USAID, among others. Nevertheless, the amount of treatment available is dwarfed by the sheer number of those in need of treatment. Whether from treatable diseases such as tuberculosis or malaria, or diseases requiring sustained management, such as HIV/AIDS, the volume of treatment needed greatly outpaces the resources available. As a result, humanitarian aid resources are not only dispersed to procure food, but also diverted in an effort to secure medication and treatment, thinning an already limited resource pool.

Finally, the economic viability of these countries is also a great cause for concern. Particularly for states such as Somalia, where immediate economic prospects are uncertain in the most optimistic of circumstances, developmental investment is limited and slow to come. Moreover, as mentioned above, as much as 90% of aid is tied up as conditional aid, hamstringing the flexibility of relief workers on the ground. Most aid is directed towards humanitarian relief. Especially in states where government effectiveness is extremely limited, dispersion and utilization of aid is handled by whichever relief organizations are on the spot, often without long-term planning for development and sustainable growth. Specifically, aid is often focused on relieving the immediate humanitarian crisis, but follow-up reconstruction, or, in the case of many underdeveloped nations, construction, is a lengthy process that is often overlooked. As a result, in many instances the immediate humanitarian crisis is averted, but long-term structural problems persist that are often underappreciated and therefore underfunded. A sustainable solution is thus missed.



Bloc Positions

Developed nations

As mentioned earlier, most developed nations—the US, UK, Germany, France, Japan, Canada, Australia, and others—are net donors of aid. Without the aid programs distributed by these countries, it is doubtless that world hunger would be of even greater magnitude than it is now. However, the aid granted by many of these countries is often only able to placate immediate concerns of starvation and malnutrition, and rarely sufficient to contribute to long term growth. Most developing nations, particularly deeply impoverished nations and those who have recently emerged from or continue to be devastated by civil war, including Somalia, Sierra Leone and Bangladesh, lack the developmental infrastructure or technical know-how to establish any form of economy other than subsistence agricultural economies. Without significant investments in education, industrial development and infrastructure, these countries will continue to face virtually non-existent future prospects, and can only look forward to an aid-dependent future.

Moreover, external debt further complicates the situation. As mentioned above, US aid amounts to \$24 billion USD annually. Bangladesh's external debt alone in 2007 was over \$21 billion USD. Somalia's national debt was \$3 billion USD. Sierra Leone, a country with approximately six and a half million people carried a debt of over \$1.5 billion USD. Most of the obligations from this debt go to Western nations and creditors. Certainly, heavy debt is not necessarily a crippling problem; however, where a country has virtually no ability to manufacture and export, heavy debt obligations becomes a strong impediment to development. However, debt is accrued through investment, and uniformly excusing debt, especially so much debt, would dissuade all but the most impetuous investors from future investments.



Asia

Asia is a region that is uniquely positioned to both receive help and provide assistance. Most of the Asian economies show surprising economic promise and continue to grow at impressive rates. However, Asia is also home to nearly two-thirds of the world's hungry population, and such countries as China, India, Bangladesh and Indonesia house a sizeable portion of this population.¹⁸ Moreover, many Asian countries are located in tropical environments and are at the whim of capricious climates, exposing them to significant disease risk as well as vulnerability to natural calamities. Moreover, despite strong regional economic development, distribution of this growth has been extremely uneven. For example, coastal regions of China such as Shanghai and Beijing have experienced rapid growth and urbanization, while far inland locations including Tibet and Xinjiang continue to suffer from low investment and development. Even among countries, growth is uneven. China, India and South Korea continue to be focal points of foreign investment, while Sri Lanka, for instance, struggles to expand its economy beyond simple agricultural production.

Asia, therefore, represents an important frontline in combating world hunger given its high concentration of hungry people. It also, however, presents as a strong potential ally in helping to rectify the global hunger situation, and could conceivably become a major donor in global affairs.

Africa

As the least economically developed continent, Africa suffers not only from economic hardship but also from natural calamity. Because many of the poorest and hungriest countries in Africa exist in tropical climates, their peoples are subject to infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria, as well as other pathogens. Solving Africa's problems will require significant planning

¹⁸ (World Food Programme 2010)



and effort. Given the widespread pervasion of illness and disease, simply providing foodstuffs to Africa is not enough. The weakened condition of many of the people in this region means that their body may not be able to effectively metabolize the nutrients of the food they do receive. Therefore, relief needs to center on providing nutrients as well as medical care, particularly in treating bacterial and parasitic diseases. The raising of general health levels among many of these nations will allow them to reenter the labor force and generate greater economic activity. This, coupled with effective revitalization of the local agricultural sectors, can potentially signal a long-term, sustainable solution to the region's food supply problems.



Question to Consider:

This is not meant to be either comprehensive or limiting in directing you research and positions. Rather, it is meant to be a rough guide of what kinds of questions you might want to consider when examining the issue.

- 1) What kinds of diseases and other bodily ailments can arise from malnutrition? How will they complicate efforts to address world hunger?
- 2) What kinds of measures need to be put in place in order to ensure that the food consumed will be safe and prepared correctly?
- 3) What actions need to be taken in order to ensure that countries suffering from food shortages will be able to secure food in the short term? What actions will guarantee that the food will be present in the long term?
- 4) How can aid be reformed to both ensure effective usage of the aid and keep the distribution system accountable and efficient?
- 5) How can we ensure that the food aid distributed to people will satisfy all their needs, including such concerns as caloric intake and nutritional balance?
- 6) What measures can be taken to ensure that, even as global food prices increase, disadvantaged nations or peoples will not be left unprotected?
- 7) What efforts need to be implemented alongside distribution of food to ensure that local populations will develop in healthy and wholesome ways? Take into account problems such as sanitation, natural calamities, and infectious disease.



Recommended Sources

This is not intended to be a comprehensive list of resources. Rather, it is meant to serve as a general starting point for your research in order to allow you to establish certain groundwork facts and a basis to build your position.

- World Food Programme
<http://www.wfp.org/>
- Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations
<http://www.fao.org/>
- The Secretary-General's High Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis
<http://www.un.org/issues/food/taskforce/index.shtml>
- WHO Health Topics: Food-borne diseases
http://www.who.int/topics/foodborne_diseases/en/
- Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
<http://www.gatesfoundation.org/about/Pages/overview.aspx>
- U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)
<http://www.usaid.gov/>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Official Development Assistance (MOFA: ODA)
<http://www.mofa.go.jp/POLICY/oda/index.html>



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