

HUNGERING FOR PEACE PART II: THE ONGOING WAR AGAINST HUNGER

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Summary

"This is the first generation in all of recorded history that can do something about the scourge of poverty. We have the means to do it. We can banish hunger from the face of the Earth."

Hubert Humphrey, 1965

Yet forty years later hunger is still with us.

In Part I of *Hungering for Peace* we looked at how the development of agriculture, the growth of towns and villages, the concept of "land ownership," and a wide degree of social disparity brought about widespread hunger, violence and war.

We also looked at how the massive distribution of unhealthy food and the destruction of the soil threatens the well-being of all humankind and concluded that there can be no lasting peace in the world until a sufficient supply of healthy food is available to all of Earth's people.

This paper will examine the questions: Why do we still have hunger? What is being done to eliminate it? and What programs are proving effective?

1. What is Hunger?

Hunger is the uncomfortable or painful sensation that results from a lack of food. We've all experienced the sensation from time to time. But what is the difference between the normal signal that our bodies send us when it's time for a re-fueling and the kind of hunger that results in serious long-term and even life-threatening consequences? For almost 15% of the world's population hunger is a constant presence resulting in fatigue, disease, disability and death.

2. Hunger and Malnutrition

Hunger has many faces. A drastic shortage of sustenance that results from a natural or manmade disaster, such as a drought or a war, is called a famine and can result in mass starvation. In some parts of the world a chronic or seasonal lack of sufficient food causes widespread malnutrition and related diseases. Both of these types of hunger fall under the category of protein-energy malnutrition which means that there is a lack of enough protein and food that provides energy (calories) to sustain life or health. There are, on the other hand, situations in which the diet has sufficient calories but is lacking in certain essential nutrients. And there is malnutrition and starvation resulting from diseases, such as dysentery, that make the body unable to absorb or utilize the food that is taken in.

The World Food Program estimates that one in seven people throughout the world is afflicted by one or the other of these forms of hunger. The World Hunger Education Service puts the number of people who are suffering from protein-energy malnutrition at approximately 850 million. About 10.9 million people die each year as a result of protein-energy malnutrition and approximately half of those are children. Many more, however, fully one-fourth of the world's children, are affected by PEM which is manifested in impaired physical and mental development and frequent and severe illness. PEM leaves children more vulnerable to other illnesses and exacerbates their effects. Children who suffer from PEM are, on the average, acutely ill close to 50% of the time.

3. Hunger Demographics

Hunger is more prevalent in politically unstable regions of the world, where the population rate is high, where people have low incomes and limited assets, where agricultural productivity is poor and where there is a high risk of natural disaster. Southern Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa have the highest rates of hunger and malnutrition, followed by South-eastern Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and Western Asia. However, no part of the globe is immune. Due to political upheaval Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have suffered severe hunger problems in recent years. And even in the United States, 11 percent of households are classified as "food insecure" with 3.8 million households described as "hungry."

Hunger is not confined to the inner city or to remote mountain villages. Urban and rural areas are equally affected with somewhat higher incidence in rural regions of developing countries.

Hunger is most likely to have permanent effects when it is prevalent during critical times in the life cycle, such as child-bearing years and infancy. All over the world, hungry households are most likely to be those headed by single mothers.

4. Causes of Hunger

Why are so many of the world's citizens hungry? Poverty and conflict are the two most obvious causes of hunger. While instances of mass hunger brought on by political conflict are more visible, poverty is by far the more prevalent cause. According to Global Poverty Monitoring, there are approximately 1.08 billion poor people worldwide who live on \$1 a day or less. This figure is actually down from the estimated "dollar a day" figure of the 1990's which stood at approximately 1.23 billion. Most of the reduction has taken place in Asia, particularly East Asia while the number of desperately poor has increased in all other parts of the world.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the HIV/AIDS epidemic has contributed to the 33% rate of hunger and malnourishment in that region. The extraordinarily high death rate among young and middle-aged adults, typically the primary breadwinners in the family, has left countless orphans, and children taking care of children.

Still, there is enough food in this world today for every man, woman and child to be healthy and well-fed. Food First, the Institute for Food and Development Policy states that, "Enough Food is available to provide at least 4.3 pounds of food per person, per day, worldwide...enough to make most people fat!"

People are hungry and starving because of how food is distributed, because of unfair trade laws, because of poor agriculture and lack of support for small farmers. Income distribution and food distribution go hand in hand. In Latin America and the Caribbean, where income distribution is particularly unequal, although the GDP (gross domestic product) in these countries has grown substantially over the last decade, the percentage of extremely poor has not changed.

On the other side of the coin, China has drastically decreased the percentage of poor and hungry in their population over the past two decades. The World Bank estimates that the number of Chinese citizens who can be classified as extremely poor fell from 56 percent to 17 percent between 1981 and 2001. China has learned that in order to maintain a steady decrease in poverty and hunger the government must direct its resources where they are most needed towards rural economic reforms that stimulate agriculture. When that country's development strategy turned towards the industrial sector in the late 1980's poverty reduction, which had been making great strides, came to a standstill. Now China is in the process of once again re-directing its resources to directly reach poor households and to support micro-finance operations.

5. Consequences of Hunger

Poverty and hunger hold their victims in a vicious cycle. Poverty breeds hunger and hunger breeds more poverty because hungry people become sick and cannot work to free themselves from the grip of these twin vices .

The consequences of hunger range from the obvious (hundreds of thousands starving in southern Africa) to the subtle (reduced productivity on the part of undernourished workers).

Children are the most vulnerable to malnourishment and suffer the greatest consequences. About 60% of childhood deaths are related to malnourishment and even children who are only mildly or moderately malnourished may succumb to diseases that would not be fatal to the well-nourished. Those who survive severe malnourishment in early childhood often suffer from frequent infections and chronic respiratory and gastrointestinal ailments. Their developing bodies can become permanently stunted. In Africa and southern Asia, 40–50% of children under five years old suffer from stunting.

Cognitive development is also affected. Studies have shown that, even controlling for other factors, there is an important relationship between nutrition and mental development. Nutritional status indicators have proven to significantly influence school indicators such as grade level, age of enrollment, absenteeism, classroom concentration, achievement test scores, I.Q. and performance on certain cognitive tasks.

Among infants and young children Protein Energy Malnutrition has been shown to decrease the level of playfulness and inquisitiveness while increasing irritability and lethargy. Yet recent research has shown that children who suffer diminished mental development due to malnutrition in the early years of life can be brought up to near normal development when provided with a healthy diet. Improvement is greatly enhanced when the children are offered the opportunity to experience activities that stimulate cognitive development and achievement motivation such as the visual arts, music, drama and dance.

The most common micronutrient deficiencies are shortages in iron, iodine and Vitamin A. Iron deficiency can lead to lowered mental performance, impaired immunity, increased susceptibility to infection and illness and lowered job performance.

Iodine comes from seafood, seaweed, or plants grown on land that was once beneath the sea. Iodine deficiency is most common in areas where the soil is deficient in this essential nutrient, such as high mountain areas that are far removed from the sea. Iodine deficiency in pregnancy, which affects more than 12% of the world's population, can result in a wide range of disorders ranging from feeble-mindedness, dwarfism, deaf-mutism, neurological disorders and goiter. Vitamin A is obtained from animal foods and fresh vegetables and fruits. In areas where these foods are not available children are the most profoundly affected. Vitamin A deficiency can lead to eye disease, blindness and death. In some countries this problem, by itself, doubles the death rate for young children.

It is a common fallacy that poverty and hunger only affect the poor. The desperation brought on by hunger breeds, crime, revolution and terror, affecting everyone in its wake. Says Jacques Diouf, Director General of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, "Given that poverty and malnourishment often breeds crime and extremism through resentment, it is in the interests of rich and poor countries to combat hunger."

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Biographical Sketch

Rose Lord is a nurse, wife, mother, grandmother, and entrepreneur. While raising her family she operated a homebased medical transcription business and founded the Home Business Association in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her involvement in micro-enterprise included several years on the board of directors of Pittsburgh's Micro-Enterprise Assistance Program.

A profound interest in diet and nutrition inspired Rose to go back to school to study vegetarian nutrition. She has been practicing organic and intensive gardening techniques for the past five years and has developed an all-natural baking mix which she currently produces and sells along with a line of all-natural cookies.

Rose is a co-founder of Global Coalition for Peace, a non-profit organization incorporated in the state of Maryland. In her work with Global Coalition for Peace she initiated and directs the Mother-to-Mother for Peace and Nonviolence program. This project creates partnerships between mothers in different parts of the world for the purpose of supporting each other in their decision to raise their children in the ways of nonviolence.

Rose is also the director of Global Applications for Self Reliance, a GCFP program whose purpose is to bring to women in economically depressed areas information and courses of action which, when used in conjunction with their own skills and knowledge, can help them to provide a healthier and more comfortable life for themselves and their families. Information in the areas of nutrition, intensive gardening and micro-enterprise are offered. The first implementation of this program was initiated in the Peten region of Guatemala in January, 2005.

Rose has been studying the relationship between food and peace since 1991 and is the author of *What I've Learned About Food and Peace*. She also edits the newsletter, *Food for Peace and (R)evolution*.