

World Bank photo by Jaime Martin-Escobal

World Hunger: Asking the Right Questions

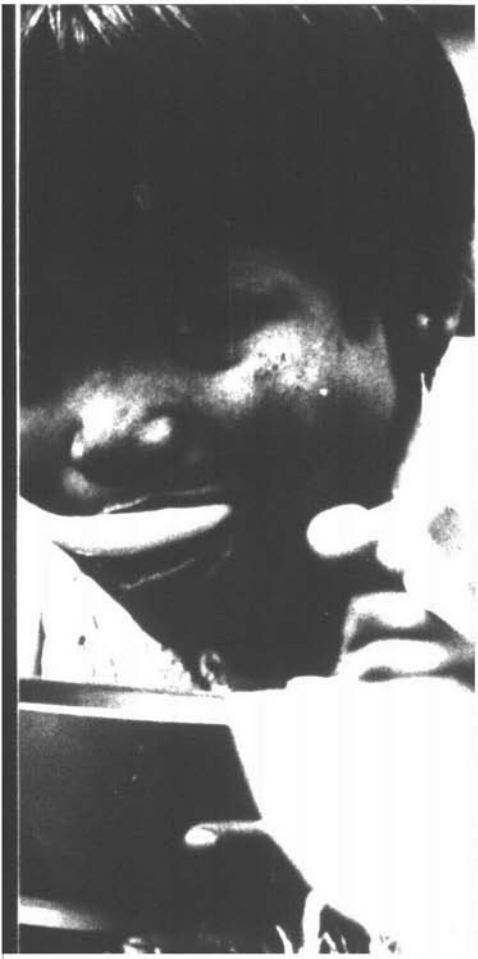
SUSAN GEORGE

To do our share in overcoming hunger, we Americans must first understand that it *can* be eliminated.

Every year it seems there is a new poll proving that 99.7 percent of Americans cannot name the ruling dictator of Paraguay nor accurately estimate the amount of millet produced in Upper Volta. Commentators on such surveys deplore this bottomless ignorance of the Third World[1] and typically blame the schools for not doing their job. This is a chorus I do not intend to join. Educators have plenty of excuses for side-stepping issues like hunger, as do students who show little interest in learning about them.

For one thing, the subject of hunger can only be profoundly depressing. Furthermore, people are naturally more enthusiastic about topics that are historically and geographically close to them.

Susan George is Senior Fellow, Institute for Policy Studies/Transnational Institute, Washington, D.C. and Amsterdam.



In the land of the overflowing refrigerator, hunger seems far away indeed. This is not just an American trait. From Australia to Zimbabwe, curricula understandably treat their own country as the hub of the universe.[2] But curricular ethnocentrism is perhaps more pronounced in the United States because of its enormous size and relative isolation from other nations; its huge economy; and its real preeminence, for better or worse, in world affairs.

America's prominence may itself give rise to another motive for leaving some Third World issues, including hunger, in comparative limbo. If truth be told, the U.S. (and Europe) has not always played a shining role in the affairs of Asia, Africa, and Latin America and indeed have frequently worsened their lot. Any serious examination of hunger and poverty implies an equally serious examination of abundance and wealth. Not everyone takes kindly to analyses in which the good guys and the bad guys are not always those one might have hoped!

Yet I doubt that these psychological factors can durably dampen the interest professional educators necessarily take in the world around them. We are, after all, talking about three quarters of humanity, and about a "small planet" on which other people's problems, sooner or later, become our own. The best an outsider can do for educators is to try to help them ask the right questions about hunger and underdevelopment.

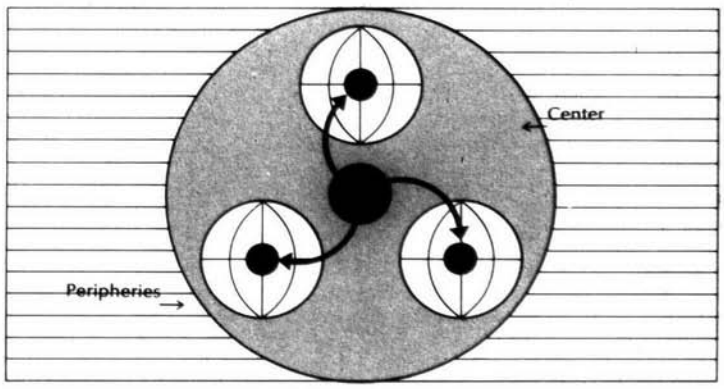
Can Hunger Be Eliminated?

The most important question is: Can hunger be fought and eliminated? Must we really be "depressed" by Third World reality? In one sense, the answer is obvious, and the statistics never allow us to forget it. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) reports that there are 450 million malnourished people in Africa, India, and Latin America. The World Bank's estimate is 800 million "absolute poor." UNICEF grimly and properly reminds us, usually at Christmas, that 15 million Third World children died of hunger or hunger-related illness during the previous year. That comes to about 40,000 a day. Such figures engender a sense of helplessness. Who wouldn't feel powerless in the face of such formidable numbers? Who wouldn't, after a lesson on world hunger, feel pangs of guilt in front of the next hamburger and french fries? Who, finally, wouldn't make a point of forgetting as rapidly as possible?

Yet hunger is not an insurmountable problem. Consider these facts: There is an average of 3,500,000 calories in one ton of grain; 2,300 calories a day are usually adequate for a proper adult diet. Assuming that children should eat as much as adults, at 2,300 calories × 365 days, one child would need 839,500 calories a year. Thus, one ton of grain could feed 4.17 children for an entire year; one *million* tons could feed over four million children; and 3.6 million tons of cereals could feed 15 million.

Three tons may sound like a lot, but in 1981 world grain harvests amounted to over a *billion* and a half metric tons. A mere three-and-some million tons pale to insignificance when we calculate that a paltry .002 percent of world harvests could save 15 million children. And this assumes zero food resources available locally, leaving out even breast milk. In the same vein, using the World Bank's figure of 800 million absolute poor, 2 percent of harvests would be needed to feed all the people now going hungry.

Figure 1. The Center and Peripheries of Power Relationships



The Center = Industrialized countries, and people who control economic/political power
The Peripheries = Underdeveloped countries, and people who must submit to the decisions of those at the center. Arrows indicate the flow of power.

Students and teachers *should* be disheartened by the gloom-and-doom tone of most of the available material, which invariably presents poor countries and their people as eternally *lacking* something. The image conveyed, purposely or not, is one of empty stomachs and empty hands, probably outstretched in hopes of alms. Sometimes the implication is that such people have empty heads as well. The "backward peasant" school of thought still thrives among those who believe that Third World people are too stupid to "modernize" their farming systems along Western lines; or that they insist on having more children than they, or we, can afford to feed. In the worst cases, we may believe that the poor threaten our own comfort and security. Lyndon Johnson once informed his listeners that "there are three billion people in the world and we [Americans] only have 200 million of them. We are outnumbered 15 to one. If might did make right, they would sweep over the United States and take what we have. We have what they want."[3] Exposure to this kind of thinking is enough to tempt the most charitable spirit to impatience and exasperation: if poor people have *that* many problems, it must be, to put it gently, their own damn fault.

Why should so many sources subtly or less subtly encourage us to blame the victims? And why do they so seldom mention the positive? The major obstacle to understanding world hunger is the refusal to ask questions that are political in the broadest sense. Third World people, whatever our public or private imagery, are not unfilled bellies and grasping hands, but human beings who have to their credit cultural achievements as praiseworthy as our own, and who have found remarkable and original ways of making a livelihood in a variety of unhospitable environments. The cause of much hunger and poverty lies in the inability of such people, through no fault of their own, to continue practices that traditionally kept their resources renewable and their families alive.

Economics of Hunger

What do hungry people really lack? Power. When a minority of landowners (or foreigners) occupies the richest flatland, the peasants who make up the bulk of the population must make do with second or third best, like the easily eroded hillsides they are accused of "overcultivating." When pastoralists are no longer free to roam from pasture to pasture because the best sites have been fenced off for private use, they become far more vulnerable to drought and starvation. Because our own economy is entirely monetized and because we have such a small proportion of farmers in our midst, we tend to forget that the livelihood of the vast majority of Third World people depends on having enough land to provide food for one's family. Fewer and fewer peasants can compete with landholders who monopolize not only land but also water, fertilizer, bank credit, and other vital inputs not to mention political power.

Such landholders also monopolize rural employment opportunities. If one has no land, then one must find work in order to eat. Again, jobs are at a premium because so many peasants have been expelled by landlords anxious to farm larger and larger areas and because so many workers have been displaced by ill-conceived "modernization" schemes, frequently financed by foreign aid. The International Labour Organization reports at least 300 million unemployed or seriously under-employed people among the "active" population of the Third World, and expects the figure to reach one billion by the end of the century. Paradoxically, most hungry people live where the food is produced—in the countryside. If they have too little land or have lost it altogether, if they have no further hope of employment there, they must take their chances in cities that have already become uninhabitable for all but the privileged minority. This means even more mouths to be fed by a dwindling number of producers.

Many countries have maintained colonial patterns of raising crops for export, to the detriment of food self-sufficiency. They now furnish us not only with the traditional coffee, tea, and cocoa, but also with off-season fruits, vegetables, flowers, seafoods, and much of the meat served in our fast-food emporiums. According to FAO, rich countries' citizens pay about $200 billion a year for food products that originate in the Third World. The producer nations get only $30 billion, or 15 percent; the peasant producers get far less.

When cash crops take priority for land, labor, and financing, the amount of each devoted to food crops diminishes. This in turn reduces the total amount of food available and makes it more expensive. The poorest people may well be cut out of the market—though they may find a job for a few weeks at miserable wages harvesting someone else's sugar or coffee.

A world so proud of its science, technology, and management skills should make child's play of saving 15 million children and assuring every human being on earth of an adequate diet. There is *already* enough food to provide for us all, plus enough land, water, and know-how to keep producing food for as long as anyone can see. If chronic hunger continues, one logical conclusion is that its causes lie beyond science, technology, and management, and in the realm of power relationships, locally, nationally, and internationally. A powerless peasant must accept the dictates of the local landlord. A powerless country will continue to provide cheap agricultural raw materials that are processed elsewhere. What responsibilities do affluent countries bear in this state of affairs?

The U.S. as Bad Guy

Lord Beaverbrook, instructing his journalists, is said to have told them: "One death in England, ten deaths on the Continent, ten thousand deaths in India is news. Nothing ever happens in Chile." Beaverbrook was wrong. Things do happen in Chile, many of them are related to food and hunger, and some of them affect us. Salvador Allende's government made great strides in eliminating malnutrition in Chile by redistributing income to the poorest half of the population. This was, unfortunately, a mixed blessing. Food demand leaped way ahead of Chile's own capacity to provide it, because people could afford, for the first time, to buy enough for

Continued on page 62

proper nourishment. Chile needed food imports, but U.S. banks cut off all loans and no wheat was available on credit from the transnational grain companies. Shortages and inflation ensued, creating a fertile field for the "destabilization" activities of the CIA, ITT, and their cohorts.

Perhaps the biggest Third World story of the decade was the Iranian hostage crisis, which had incalculable effects on American politics and society. What few Americans realized (and what the formidable media coverage certainly never told them) was the relationship between Iranian food dependency and the rise of a certain Ayatollah. The U.S.-supported land "reform" in Iran during the 60s resulted in the dispossession of some 25 percent of the Iranian peasantry, with its attendant cortège of unemployment and dependency on food imports from the United States—half a billion dollars worth in 1978. American agribusiness corporations invested massively in several Iranian provinces, profoundly disrupting local patterns of rural life. Such activities enhanced Iranian paranoia, already fed by a hundred years of conflict with British and American intervention (concessions for minerals, tobacco, oil, and so on, beginning in the late 19th century had always been opposed). Food dependency and the destruction of the peasantry were major themes in Khomeini's speeches. We are ethnocentric at our peril.

One of the few countries to have made significant progress in eliminating hunger in recent years is Nicaragua. Basic grain production was increased by one-third in a single year after the victory of the Sandinistas—by simply providing more land, fertilizer, and credit to small farmers and using land previously owned by the Somoza clan (fully 25 percent of the total!) for state farming enterprises. Once again, the United States is doing everything possible to wreck this experiment, through military and other means.

Power Plays in the Global Nation

If we are not prepared to admit that the elimination of hunger depends primarily on redistribution of power, then we are, so to speak, stuck with the traditional explanations—overpopulation, climate, and the like. The model in Figure 1 explains present power relationships; educators may want to add their own refinements.

Every country in the world has a "center" made up of those who control economic/political power, and a "periphery" of people who do not control the circumstances of their lives and who must submit to the decisions of those at the center. There are, of course, numerous subdivisions for each category. This kind of model is also reproduced on a world scale, in which the richer and more powerful nations are generally in a position to dictate their own terms to the weaker and less developed ones. As the "power arrows" in the diagram show, the center of the center largely controls the center of the periphery, which, in turn, takes on the job of controlling its own periphery.

Naturally, in order to ensure the continued functioning of a global system that provides substantial monetary and political gains to the minority, the center's center may make concessions to its peripheral counterparts when the need arises. Thus those who complain that "food aid never reaches the hungry people" have a real point. It's entirely true that much food aid buttresses the power of Third World elites. So does bilateral or multilateral aid (of the World Bank, for example), which so often goes to authoritarian or downright repressive regimes that have little interest in the nutritional needs of their own populations. We also know that serious hunger and malnutrition exist on the periphery of the center, particularly when unemployment is high and benefits like food stamps can be cut with impunity.

What Can Be Done?

If it's true that hunger can be conquered, that it is not an intractable problem, then the questions become "Why does it still exist?" and "What can I do about it?" The sad, cynical, yet accurate reply to the first question is that those 15 million children and those 800 million "absolute poor" are of precious little interest to a world system that regards food not as a basic human right but as a commodity to be bought and sold. People who are unable to become Consumers with a capital "C" have no influence whatever on a system that is programmed to understand the language of money.

As to the second question, the collective task for all concerned is to reverse the direction of the "power arrows." Any measure that helps poor people in poor countries build countervailing power in order to satisfy their own needs deserves our support. Any action that helps prevent the center's center from doing exactly as it pleases to the periphery—with or without the cooperation of local elites—is a positive one.

One recent example is the baby-foods campaign that obligated the World Health Organization to adopt a code that constrains, at least morally, the Third World marketing malpractices of the infant formula corporations. Another was food aid to the Cambodian people. None of the major center countries nor the agencies they largely control wanted, for wholly indefensible political reasons, to undertake such aid. The force of public opinion made the difference.

The area in which the most work remains to be done is that of establishing better and closer ties between the two peripheries in order to counterbalance those ties already forged between the centers. I am convinced that these peripheries share basically the same interests, but this we cannot always clearly perceive. Educators could be a tremendous force in helping to create those links, beginning with the links of understanding, and could thus contribute to ending the scandal of world hunger.□

References

[1]There is, of course, no such thing. The term is merely convenient shorthand for a huge variety of peoples and nations on the continents of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It implies no value judgments.

[2]Not entirely a bad thing and not always, alas, the practice in ex-colonies. West African school children, for example, have been heard reciting a history lesson that begins, "Our ancestors, the Gauls. . . ."

[3]Quoted in Noam Chomsky, "The Logic of Withdrawal," in *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), p. 249.

Copyright © 1983 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.