

This is the 13th in a series of 15 articles exploring "Food and People." In this article Janet W. Lowenthal, technical assistance specialist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, suggests measures for attacking the poverty that is the root cause of hunger in much of the developing world. This series was written for Courses by Newspaper, a program of University Extension, University of California, San Diego, with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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THE UNIVERSAL right to eat is generally recognized by men and women of every nationality, color, creed and income level. Nevertheless, at least half a billion people — one out of every eight men, women and children on earth — are chronically undernourished today.

But hunger is not inevitable. Most experts agree that the world has the physical, economic and technical capabilities to eliminate hunger. The real question is whether political leaders will have the courage to insist that these resources be used to benefit the world's poorest and hungriest peoples.

In the most immediate sense, hunger can be relieved simply by giving food to needy people. Paradoxically, however, we can never permanently eliminate hunger if we focus on food and hunger alone.

The major world hunger problem today is not starvation but chronic under-nutrition caused by poverty. The corollary is that hunger is not primarily a food-production problem but a poverty problem.

Producing enough food makes possible — but does not guarantee — overcoming hunger. People must be able to buy the food. For this, they need jobs that pay a living wage and a price system that places basic food within reach of the poor.

The elimination of hunger, therefore, is a dual challenge: to attack the causes while simultaneously treating the symptoms. The immediate goal is to eliminate suffering; the ultimate goal is to build a world without hunger by overcoming the poverty of individuals and nations that permits hunger to persist.

The developing nations themselves will have to make the most difficult decisions required to raise food production, reduce economic inequalities and alleviate hunger. But the international community — and the United States in particular — can make a crucial difference in the ability of national governments to carry out the necessary actions.

Equitable economic growth, which increases per-capita incomes among the poor, is the surest, most lasting strategy for combating hunger. This approach requires investment capital, appropriate government policies and technical know-how to create millions of new jobs so that hungry people can earn their own bread instead of having to depend on handouts. It also requires a strong focus on agriculture and rural devel-

In the poorest developing countries, up to 80 percent of the population may be engaged in subsistence agriculture. Conse-

**food and
people**

quently, substantial investments in Third World agriculture are needed to help low-income farmers obtain the training, credit, storage, marketing and transportation facilities they need to raise yields on plots that are often as small as 2½ acres.

Small rural industries for processing food, repairing farm equipment and producing consumer goods complete an agriculture-based strategy simultaneously to create jobs, boost food production and reduce hunger.

But manufacturing and service occupations must also grow — both to create jobs and to enable developing countries to earn the high profits characteristic of those economic sectors.

Creating enough jobs will be a formidable task. The International Labor Organization estimates that over the next 20 years another 550 million people will join the Third World labor force.

Their fate, in turn, will depend largely on progress within the international economy as a whole, and the prognosis is not good. The 1970s were marked by a surge in ener-

The 1970s were marked by a surge in energy prices, recession, inflation and unemployment, even in the rich nations. Still harsher economic conditions are forecast for the 1980s, particularly for the poor nations.

Today, in fact, protectionist trade sentiments (despite rhetoric to the contrary) combined with an apparent determination to boost U.S. military spending and arms sales at the expense of social needs at home and abroad, are further undermining efforts to avert a global famine.

Ultimately, a world without hunger can exist only within an international economic environment that enables poor people in poor nations to become genuinely self-reliant by marketing abroad their labor-intensive products.

Adequate food production remains a major challenge because of population growth and economic progress itself. As incomes rise, people buy more meat and poultry which in turn requires more grain for animal feed.

Efforts to lower the rate of population growth have begun to pay off. But 75-80 million people are added to the world's population each year; the world must therefore increase its food production by 30 million tons each year just to stay in place.

Moreover, most of this increase must occur in the developing nations themselves where both the need and the under-utilized agricultural potential are greatest. Although the United States has traditionally served as breadbasket for the world, it cannot grow all the food that will be needed to

not grow all the food that will be needed. In any case, there wouldn't be enough foreign exchange to buy it, ships to carry it, ports to unload it or roads and transportation and storage facilities to get that food to the people.

The goal for the U.S. is not to feed the

Admittedly, there are important policy problems to be solved. Increasing food production will become more expensive if energy prices continue to rise. And water and land resources must be carefully managed to protect the earth's ability to produce food for future generations.

Finally, increased food production will not occur without an expanding market — and will not, in any case, benefit hungry people unless they acquire the purchasing power to enter that market.

Nevertheless, many developing countries that now import food have enough land and water to provide for themselves. Some, such as Cameroon, Zimbabwe and Kenya, should even be able to export food. There are not physical reasons to prevent all the world's people from getting enough to eat.

But even the most rapid and most equitable economic growth that could possibly occur will leave millions of people in absolute poverty for several decades. Specific programs are needed to attack hunger and malnutrition now.

In the less-developed countries, these measures may include subsidizing the food that poor people buy (as the U.S. does with its food stamp program); providing extra food to school children and pregnant and nursing women; educating people about proper nutrition (including breastfeeding of infants); and fortifying staple food with essential vitamins or minerals that the local

Such efforts to alleviate immediate hunger are no substitute for social and economic progress. But the development programs necessary to overcome poverty cannot themselves be carried out if much of today's and tomorrow's workforce is allowed to suffer from malnutrition and associated ill health.

The United States can do much to help by providing more technical assistance, substantial investment capital and more open markets. The pricetag is relatively high — much higher than this or previous administrations have been willing to accept. But prompting development is even more a problem of priorities than of price. This nation now spends many times more dollars on military aid abroad than on assistance for development.


To quote the 1980 report of the U.S. Presidential Commission on World Hunger, "To the end, the issue of ending world hunger comes down to a question of political choice — a factor that is no more predictable than the weather but far more susceptible to human control."

Effective action will often demand a degree of political courage that is rare everywhere in the world. Everyone is in favor of ending hunger, but few are in favor of sharing their own economic and political power with the poor. In the last analysis, this is what ending hunger is all about.

The views expressed in Courses b, Newspapers are those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the University of California, the National Endowment for the Humanities or the participating newspapers and colleges.

Next week: Frances Moor Lappe, Nic Allen and David Kinley of the Institute for Food and Development Policy in San Francisco discuss American food aid.

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