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WORLD HUNGER: WHAT'S TO BE DONE?

by

James P. Grant

Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

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"Food Monitor"

How do we end world hunger? We used to think it meant growing and giving more food. Then we realized that it wasn't only the quantity of food that mattered, but also its distribution. While quantity and distribution remain important factors, are they still the most critical? In the past decade, the answer has changed. The answer is, "No".

While the actual lack of food per se has seldom been the sole cause of hunger, whether it takes the dramatic form of famine or the more quiet guise of malnutrition, the current world food surplus has brought to the public eye very strikingly the fact that we have - at the very least - the raw material for ending world hunger.

That physical limits are not the issue (though they still present an enormous and complex challenge) is further underlined by our unprecedented transportation capabilities, which break the back of the distribution factor. Fifty years ago we did not have anything like the international transportation networks nor means of distribution within countries that now exist. For the first time in history, we have enough food to virtually eliminate malnutrition and hunger, and we have the ability to deliver it.

Yet, the lives of two million Sudanese are threatened by starvation this year, and millions of the world's poor face daily hunger and malnutrition. If we have enough food, and it is within reach of virtually every area, what is the remaining obstacle?

What more do we need in order to relieve hunger? We need the will to do so.

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How do we develop the political will and the popular will that will make these historic possibilities reality? How do we participate in and understand the complex endeavours required?

The widespread realization of our new-found capacity to solve previously overwhelming problems is affecting not only political and popular will, but international standards of morality. This is translating into concrete action that saves lives.

It is difficult to believe that as recently as 1943, as the great Bengal famine took the lives of three million people, the British Government felt no responsibility to release food from immediately available and abundant food stores to the families dying alongside them. Similarly, in the Irish potato famine one century before, the same climatic factors which helped bring the blight that killed the potatoes resulted in boom years for corn production; yet the British government of Ireland felt no responsibility to care for the hundreds and thousands of starving Irish.

By contrast today, when headline-capturing emergencies have erupted - in Biafra, Kampuchea and Ethiopia, for instance - world public opinion has insisted on a meaningful response from governments toward those who have suddenly faced a disastrous retrogression in their circumstances. In each of these cases governments knew of the situation but were offering only meagre assistance. Only when public opinion around the globe demanded an adequate response did we see the massive efforts that alleviated so much of the suffering in these disasters.

A new ethic has emerged around these "loud emergencies": we no longer allow people to die when we know that they are dying and we know that we can prevent their deaths.

There are other emergencies with regard to hunger and malnutrition, however, that take a far greater toll of lives than even these headline stories that have inspired such effective public response, and we have an even greater capacity to avert the resulting suffering and preventable deaths. They are the "silent emergencies" of hunger and malnutrition that claim the lives of 40,000 young children daily and incapacitate an equal number for life, due to the crippling side effects of malnutrition and disease. It is time for the emerging ethic that results in such a noble response to crisis situations to encompass the ongoing under-development problems of the world's poor that are so readily preventable at low cost that it constitutes virtual child slaughter not to act.

It is surprising to many that the major causes of malnutrition today are not determined primarily by the amount of food available to the family. They are due rather to the use made of food within the family and to diseases. Thus, all too often, a child who is weaning is fed the wrong foods - bulky foods, for example, that satisfy the child's hunger but not its nutritional needs. A life-saving variety of nutritious foods may be readily available,

but the ignorance of the parents regarding correct feeding practices keep them from him. Again, fevers - which destroy a child's appetite - can also keep him from eating the foods he needs to combat diseases. Another vicious cycle involves diarrhoeal diseases, which drain the body's nutritional strength, exacerbating further the condition of an already malnourished child.

In recent years we have seen mammoth changes that make these three major causes of malnutrition immensely easier to manage. First of all, directly applicable new, improved, or rediscovered knowledge and technologies have emerged. And secondly, this has been coupled with a greatly improved potential for social organization and communication at a cost so low that we can, for the first time on such a large scale, make the new knowledge and techniques available to those who need them.

Thus in the realm of new knowledge and technologies we have such innovations as oral rehydration therapy (ORT), the remarkably simple sugar and salt solution capable of combatting the diarrhoeal dehydration that takes the lives of 12-14,000 children daily - that is 4-5 million annually. Immunizations against the six major child-killing diseases are available at a cost so low that virtually every country could immunize its children. If the United Nations goal of Universal Child Immunization by 1990 is reached - and as popular and political will are emerging, prospects look good - 3.5 million children's lives will be saved annually and an equal number will be spared from lives of crippling disabilities.

Other readily available yet grossly underutilized methods that show comparable promise are described in UNICEF's annual publication, The State of the World's Children, and include the monitoring of children's growth with simple weight charts to warn of impending malnutrition, a return to the widespread practice of breastfeeding, proper family spacing, promotion of female literacy, food supplementation, and the addition of vitamin A to the diet, to name a few.

Together these techniques, whose effective use give us the potential for a Child Survival and Development Revolution, are capable of saving a full half of the 40,000 young child lives now lost each day, while at the same time reducing birth rates and greatly increasing the health and well-being of "survivors". But they will only work if people use them, and to this end it is the coupling of these techniques with our vastly improved ability to communicate with the world's poor that makes this revolution possible.

Through modern social mobilization techniques spurred by popular and political will - from heads of state to mass social movements - these methods were used to save significantly more than a million young children's lives last year. And the potential is far greater.

As our "new ethic" evolves and people participate in accomplishing clearly achievable goals that greatly improve the well-being of the world's poorest people, a potent source of social force is unleashed. Our moral reactions become the motivational trigger behind popular and political will.

At the launching of a massive child survival campaign in Northeast Brazil early this year, President José Sarney wisely observed that some things are unconscionable, but are not seen as unconscionable until a certain moment. Slavery, long seen as an immutable facet of many societies, was one such crime. Then segregation became another. And then discrimination another. Similarly, colonialism seemed appropriate - even "enlightened"! - at the time. And nobody thought twice about abusing the environment. Or keeping women in the home. Years later, in retrospect it seems unconscionable how the great majority of people accepted the status quo until a foresighted few had the courage to challenge it. President Sarney applied this phenomenon to our allowing the perpetuation of preventable child deaths. "It is time," he declared, "to promulgate a new law of emancipation to liberate those born into the slavery of instant death."

The Child Survival Revolution is one example of how we can effectively reduce hunger and malnutrition today. There are several other successful approaches, from employing adjustment policies that ensure human well-being in impoverished and indebted nations, to devising effective food entitlement programmes as a means of relief in lieu of the often more cumbersome food shipment efforts.

What is important is that we take responsibility for realizing solutions; that we accelerate our efforts, and that we increase the ranks of participants as well as the level of participation. As societal morality keeps pace of our newly expanded potentials it is becoming increasingly unconscionable not to act when so much can be done with so little.