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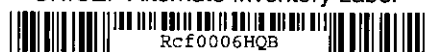
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“Making a Difference on World Hunger”

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Making a Difference on World Hunger

by

James P. Grant

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

- an article submitted for the October 1988 issue of -

Kiwanis Magazine

Who is hungry?

The grim images of children with extended stomachs and vacant eyes, dying in their mothers' arms among the flies and squalor of Ethiopian camps, have faded from our TV screens. A massive global response to their plight eased the immediate burden, and now rains have come, governments have shifted policies somewhat, and the "loud" emergency of African famine has quieted down.

"The great drought of 1988" in the U.S.A., meanwhile, is requiring little more, for the majority of Americans, than a rebalancing of the family budget to account for some higher food prices, even now at harvest time, when its effects should be approaching their worst. There is plenty of food on our planet today to nourish the entire human family. Two years ago the grain surplus in the U.S.A. alone was equivalent to more than the amount needed to feed all malnourished families for a year. And even in this year of the greatest U.S. drought since the dust-bowl days of the 1930s, the Federal Government had to continue its programme to reduce crop surpluses by paying farmers to not plant crops.

Yet amidst this global abundance, United Nations demographers estimate that 1/3 to 40 per cent of the nearly half a billion young children in developing countries suffer from malnutrition: they do not get adequate nutrition to grow and develop into healthy adults. Five per cent of these children - nearly 25 million - suffer severe and debilitating malnutrition. They are joined in their suffering by still more poor children - those who live amidst hardship and poverty - sometimes living alone as street children, sometimes living in families who cannot feed them - in industrialized countries.

They are hungry.

And they are the real emergency - the world's greatest but often "silent" emergency. An estimated one million people died in Ethiopia in 1984 and 1985 as a consequence of the many factors which produced that devastating "loud" emergency. And yet this year, as every year, nearly 14 million young children will die and a comparable number will be crippled for life from causes for which we have long-since discovered low-cost cures and preventions - from causes which mostly either stem from lack of adequate nutrition or themselves exacerbate malnutrition.

We might well ask at this point, if droughts and famines are not to blame, and if there is plenty of food on earth for all, what causes this malnutrition?

First of all, it is not a "food shortage", but rather the lack of food purchasing power which keeps so many families from adequate food. So economics figure prominently.

Secondly, while bad weather such as drought can contribute to acute food situations, especially among people who rely on local crops, the principal causes of mass hunger are more often the consequences of human acts, such as military conflict - and government acts, such as bad policies in agriculture - than "Acts of God".

Finally - and perhaps of greatest significance because it involves factors which we can do something about - we have long underestimated the implications of the fact that much - in fact most - malnutrition in the world is not related primarily to shortages of food at the family gate. It is due rather to the use made of food within the family and to disease. For example, a main cause of malnutrition today is the parents' ignorance of the best weaning practices. All too often a child going into the weaning period is fed the wrong foods - foods that satisfy his hunger but not his nutritional needs. Similarly, diarrhoeal diseases drain away the nutritional strength of a body which was made susceptible to disease by malnutrition in the first place. And fevers, with their loss of appetite, can quickly tax a weakened body.

How can we stop this tragic waste of human life?

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

The United Nations has called this synergistic combination of forces the potential for a Child Survival and Development Revolution (CSDR). The actual medical techniques are becoming increasingly familiar, and include immunization against the six main child-killing diseases; the remarkably simple and inexpensive Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORT) to combat the number-one killer of young children - diarrhoeal dehydration; a return to the practice of breastfeeding with proper weaning; growth monitoring; and family spacing.

As a dramatic demonstration of the new potential of the CSDR in the 1980s, the lives of millions of children - reaching 2 million in 1987 alone - have been saved, and the crippling of millions more prevented, by people and nations which have mobilized to put today's low-cost solutions at the disposal of the majority of families. While the means are now proven, hundreds of millions of families remain unreached by this potential for virtual revolution in child survival and development - a breakthrough which, by the year 2000, could reduce 1980 child death rates by half, save more than 100 million children from death and disablement, improve the health and nutrition of many hundreds of millions more, and slow population growth as well.

What is needed today to realize the unprecedented potential of the CSDR is a society-wide alliance of all those who could communicate with and support parents in doing what can now be done - teachers and religious leaders, mass media and government agencies, voluntary community-service organizations - such as Kiwanis International - and people's movements, business and labour unions, professional associations and conventional health services. Only such a Grand Alliance for Children can create the informed public demand for, and practical knowledge of, those methods which could bring about the revolution in child survival and development.

Today that Grand Alliance has begun to gather. And inroads are being made, in the process, to combat some underlying causes of hunger and malnutrition.

I invite you to join in the revolution that is helping to overcome this ancient scourge, and to build a better world - for the children - and the future - of our civilization.