

# FOOD: A Human Right

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for Canadian University Press

**A**s you read this article, more than 1,000 people will die of starvation.

Each year upwards of 50 million people die of hunger and hunger-related diseases.

Spewing out figures such as these is a typical approach to the complex problem of hunger in the North America media. Reams and reams of horrifying statistics, coupled with heart-wrenching photos and videos of starving babies and emaciated corpses project a clear message into the living rooms of the overfed: 'we' are the 'haves' and 'they' are the 'have-nots'. Or normal response is a short pang of guilt and perhaps a sigh of relief that we're lucky. When prodded by mega-rock concerts and mind-numbing stats and pictures our response is pity. We reach for our cheque-books (Canadians gave \$132 million to famine relief last year, \$5.28 per person) and gather round the TV once again to see Bob Geldof launch a ship laden with food, medical supplies and goodwill.

It is a clear and uncomplicated response to a complicated problem. It eases our conscience.

Unfortunately, for the 1 billion undernourished people of the world, poverty is not a single event, but a continuing reality that no Band-Aid can heal. There are no ships streaming to the aid of Brazil's 35 million street children, no medical supplies headed for the shantytowns of the Phillipines, no planeloads of grain airlifted to the Indonesians, the most malnourished people in the world.

In any case, no number of flotillas or relief planes, no matter the gifts they contain, could begin to address the needs of the chronically poor. Charity, no matter how generous, can never be more than piecemeal, temporary relief. The will-fed soon become bored or, worse yet, accustomed to 'normal' levels of starvation and their pity soon turns to the latest Ethiopia, or Bangladesh or Biafra, while poverty persists and deepens in the last charity zone.

More often than not, a massive influx of aid serves to make a bad situation worse in the long term. "Free" food carries a heavy price. Assistance keeps poor countries tied to richer ones because most, like Canada, make aid conditional on recipients buying Canadian goods and services in return. Tied-aid, as it is known, impedes self-help and undercuts prices local farmers ask for their products. These farmers are forced out of business, their land is bought up by the rich, and they are forced to compete for already scarce industrial and agricultural jobs to survive, while an entire generation is stripped of time-honoured agricultural skills.

Bangladesh, the media famine event of the 1970s is a prime example. Bangladesh was once not only self-sufficient but served as the bread basket for India. The 1973-75 famine, much like the Ethiopian famine of the mid-80s, elicited a massive outpouring of donations and even a mega-rock concert. Ten years later, peasants are still starving but as an added bonus, they are landless, their land having been bought up by the elite (farmers could not compete with grain handouts) who export food by the ton and use "aid" to buy arms to protect their valuable food stocks from starving.

No amount of aid will keep Ethiopians from the same fate. The only hope for the poor is political change, a political upheaval so drastic that it ends the systematic repression of the poor by the rich.

Unfortunately, when people set out to put food in the mouth of the starving child they have seen on the TV news, they have no intention of becoming embroiled in a complex moral dilemma or wide-ranging political debate. Like it or not, donations and inaction, both imply political and moral statements.

The lot of the world's underfed will only be improved once we start treating food not as a commodity or a luxury but as a right, a right as fundamental as living or breathing. While viewing food as a human right may seem self-evident to many, when we begin to realize how our existing economic systems and way of life violate that right, political will soon dissipate and most people abandon the idea as too utopian or complicated.

Food as a human right is a concept that is difficult to imagine in our capital-oriented society so University of Maryland philosopher Henry Shue provides an analogy that makes the principle easier for us to relate to.

Shue says, there are certain rights in society we accept and expect to be respected. These rights can be violated by social threats (death, beating, deprivation) and natural threats (floods, earthquakes, tornadoes). Natural threats we have no control over, but we can plan for and lessen their negative impact. Social threats, on the other hand, are controlled by government policies — laws — and regulated by social guarantees — punishments. Our vulnerability can be physical or economic.

For example, Shue says, government policies protect us from beating and, if that right is violated we have the social guarantee that the violated will be prosecuted and we will be compensated (medical treatment and sometimes money). Most people accept this argument at face-value because it is easy to relate to in our violent society.

"We need food for the same reason we need to not be beaten up," Shue says. Not beating someone is not an act of charity,

it is a social responsibility. And when someone has been beaten their rights have been violated and the violator should be punished.

Depriving people of food, according to Shue, is an act of violence equivalent to constant beating. Moreover, when one considers the scale of hunger today, it is perhaps more appropriate to state that it is an act of war equivalent to bombing. An economic bombing so fierce that the human toll surpasses that of the Hiroshima bombing every 3 days. Yet, as citizens of the world we continue to ignore our social responsibility to provide food for everyone, and the violators, the proponents of our flawed economic systems, go unpunished.

Shue summarily rejects the easy out, that hunger is a natural threat. There is more than ample food to go around, tons of food destroyed each day and plenty of uncultivated land. The malnourished have their rights violated by human institutions and human agents.

To assert the right to food, many will argue, is simple. The difficulty they say, is translating the philosophical into the practical.

Institute for Policy Studies economist Susan George is one of the leading proponents of a human rights approach to famine and has dedicated her career to translating this philosophical premise into a sound economic approach laypeople can understand.

"Hunger is a reflection of inequity at the local national and international levels. The correct response to hunger is justice, not charity," says George.

While George is quick to point out the problems with charity, she does not dwell on them. Instead, she encourages people to learn the real problems in the Third World (a reading of her book *How the Other Half Dies* is a good starting point) and to move away from pity, through the three stages she herself has experienced: outrage, then inquiry and, finally, action.

"People throughout the world must move from indignation (without which there can be no motivation) toward accurate analyses of the issues (without which there can be no effective action) and from this anger and understanding onward to organization and practical politics."

George's analysis runs counter to much of the 'conventional wisdom' that say the West is the best and all countries should 'develop' by mimicking Western policies. The fundamental problem with this holier-than-thou attitude, she says, has been the insistence on transferring the Western-style food-system to the Third World. The system will never work, George says, because it is capital-intensive rather than labour-intensive.

"Hunger is not primarily a scientific, technical or organizational problem, it is a political one."

Decades of failed trickle-down theories and insistence on imported technologies rather than tapping local knowledge and ingenuity proves this.

George can easily cite a plethora of statistics to demonstrate the magnitude of starvation but decries the "numbers approach" prevalent in the Western world. Many numbers are irrelevant and others are deceiving. Averages, for example, means nothing if you are discussing calorie intakes because the rich are so grossly overfed, and there is no use quoting figures demonstrating their resources theoretically available to

the poor so long as the poor cannot express their needs in terms the market understands which is the current market economy means the poor must speak the language of money.

Brazil is a prime example of our economic system's focus on money and failure to recognize human rights. Brazil is the second-largest agro-producer in the world (after the U.S.) but a startling 60 per cent of the population, many of whom cultivate the export products for huge corporations, are wasting away from starvation.

Susan George takes philosopher Shue's argument one step further, declaring that people have not only a right to food but a right to feed themselves, (Using Shue's analogy, people have not only a right to not be beaten up, but a right to be protected from beating with a police presence, for example.) Approaching food as a human right issue means you must grant people more than the right to beg or be treated like animals in a zoo but a right to self-determination in food policies. And it goes without saying that this right implies many others: the right to organize, the right to land and the right to determine food policies democratically.

By focusing on victims, as charity does, we again set ourselves within the non-productive 'us' versus 'them' mentality and lose sight of many crucial questions which must be asked and answered in our approach to food as a human right:

\*Who controls food and food producing resources, especially land?

\*Who decides what constitutes agricultural "surplus" and how it is distributed?

\*Who has the power to determine that some will eat and others will not?

In many Third World countries the power to decide who will and who will not eat — in effect who will live and die — lies in the hands of a select few non-producers with monetary muscle who have their best interests in mind. These non-producers come in many shapes and guises: trans national corporations, banks, business elite, government leaders and even development aid agencies tied for foreign governments.

What they all have in common is that none escapes the wrath of world-renown agronomist Rene