



Te Ope Whakaora



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## Introduction

**When you sow you hope to harvest at least the minimum, but unfortunately my efforts were in vain. I had to feed children and so I sold some cattle to buy wheat and clothes. There are six of us in the family. One sack of flour will last us for 20 days. So, we had to sell one sheep each month to buy flour, and in the end we had no sheep left. One can patch torn clothes, but how can one patch an empty stomach? A farmer, Tash Bulak, Kyrgyz Republic, taken from Voices of the poor, World Bank 2000**

Hunger is ostensibly the most pressing human rights issue in the 21st century. Access to sufficient food is the most basic of human rights. Hunger is not negotiable and cannot be satiated by any other means except by enough nourishing food.

The causes and consequences of hunger are far-reaching and the resultant annual death toll through chronic hunger and its associated effects far exceeds any natural or other human induced catastrophe. Yet catastrophes invoke an immediate worldwide media focus with an ensuing global outpouring of compassionate action, resulting in significant sums of financial aid being given, as well as practical on the ground assistance.

Why, given the on-going magnitude of the deprivation, pain and suffering through lack of food of the majority of our world neighbours, is such a global disaster given little media coverage except as a tool for soliciting charitable funding?

There is an immoral inconsistency in today's world whereby the minority of people are overly wrapped in contagious consumerism, while the majority of the world's population are silently treading a threadbare existence.

## Unwrapping the statistical inconsistencies<sup>1</sup>

The World health Organisation estimates that presently our world-wide neighbours could be divided into three,

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# Treading threadbare



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one third of which is **well fed**, one third is **under fed** and the remaining third is **starving**.

**It is estimated that every year 15 million children die of hunger. Yet:**



- A school filled with hungry children could be given lunch every day for five years for the price of one missile.
- Figures from UNICEF highlight that a majority of humanity live on less than US\$1 per day, while assets of the world's 358 billionaires exceed the combined annual incomes of the countries where 45% of the world's population live.
- Meeting the cost of the world's sanitation and food requirements would cost an estimated US\$13 billion. It has been stated that this same amount is spent yearly in the United States and the European Union on the purchase of perfume.
- It is estimated that in 2010–12, 870 million people globally were chronically undernourished. Data shows that while there has been a significant reduction in the number of people suffering acute hunger, most of this progress was achieved prior to 2007, and since then progress has slowed down due to the effects of the global recession and price shocks. If the Millennium Development Goal target of reducing by half the number of undernourished people by 2015 is to be realised, appropriate actions would need to be taken to reverse the slowing trend.<sup>2</sup>
- Simultaneously, the number of chronically obese people worldwide has risen dramatically. The World Health Organisation states that globally there are more than 1 billion overweight adults and at least 300 million of them obese—and this is a major contributor to the global cost burden of chronic disease and disability.

- It is sobering to accept the reality that about 25,000 people die every day of hunger or hunger-related causes, according to the United Nations. This is one person every three and a half seconds.<sup>3</sup>

**If we knew there would be an end to this crisis, we would endure it somehow. Be it for one year or even for ten years. But now all we can do is sit and wait for the end to come.** A woman, Etropole, Bulgaria, taken from Voices of the poor, World Bank 2000

## Revealing the faces behind the figures

Financial poverty is a collective term that encompasses a broad and complex range of factors and geographical and cultural circumstances. Consistent use of such terminology, though, can render invisible the people who live daily with the reality of not enough resources to lead a life of dignity and wellbeing. Their voices rarely lead research reports or conferences. Their experiences, hopes and dreams seldom feature predominately—or at all—unless it's to give credence to some organisation's appeal for funding. Even then, their portrayal is at risk of being patronised as helpless and needy.

**Pain and suffering can be part of a family's livelihood strategy. A family in Vietnam chose pigs over pain. The husband's illness required medical care. To cover such a cost their only means of security, their pigs, would need to be sold. The only asset they own, the pigs were kept, and the young husband continues to suffer.**  
World Bank, 2000

In 2000 the World Bank published Voices of the Poor.<sup>4</sup> This three-part series was an unprecedented effort to capture the views, experiences and aspirations of more than 60,000 people who were desperately financially poor. Certainly the level of deprivation being experienced was evidenced in feelings of despair and humiliation. Yet clearly coming through the voices was the capacity to survive against all odds and the strong desire for self determination and opportunities to create a better life. The research revealed that amid the diversity of experiences there was a commonality when asked to say what would make the greatest difference in their lives. The emerging themes being:

- To have organisations of their own so that they may negotiate with government, traders and non-government organisations.
- Direct assistance through community-driven programmes so they may shape their own destinies.
- Local control of funds, so that they may put a stop to corruption. They want non-governmental organisations and government to be accountable to them.

## The scarcity of choice

When thresholds are thin, choices pose a quandary and trade-offs in times of extreme shortage can mean choosing one bad thing over another. One agonising trade-off for families is between education and food: do they go hungry or keep the children out of school?

One mother from Sri Lanka put it this way, 'even without filling our stomachs, we spend for the schooling of our two children. Nobody sees what we eat.' A family in Egypt spotlighted the stark reality facing impoverished families, 'we deprive ourselves from food, and we tear from our flesh so that we can find money to pay for the children's education.'<sup>5</sup>

For many families though, education for their children is an impossible dream. Furthermore, a lack of money creates barriers that put a stop to healthy choices and for many impoverished families medical help for illness comes well down the list of urgent priorities.

## Why are so many people suffering from prolonged hunger?

The causal factors behind chronic hunger are interwoven and complex with environmental, political, economical and social issues threaded closely into each other. Moreover hunger can be generational, as studies show that children who have suffered from birth through chronic lack of food spend fewer years in school (if attending at all), have stunted growth, and reduced mental capacity to learn. This in turn impacts unfavourably on their chances to earn an adequate living, and leads to a perpetuation of the poverty cycle.

When unravelling the complex issues surrounding persistent chronic hunger a number of key issues are revealed:

### Availability

Associated causes: rapidly growing populations in developing countries and increasing over-consumption in wealthy countries is causing considerable strain and destruction of natural resources. The consequence has been a significant decrease in available land and resources, which are essential for livelihoods. War, famine and natural disasters all play a significant part on the food access chain. Uneven distribution of the global abundance of food and the ongoing challenge for low-income countries to compete within the global trading framework exacerbates the lack of food accessibility.

### Waste

Largely neglected in the food security debate is the global size of food waste. Wastage takes place in all stages of food production, but predominately occurs in industrialised countries but. It is stated that one third of the food produced for human consumption is wasted—1.3 billion tonnes of food, worth nearly one trillion US dollars.<sup>6</sup>

It is estimated that nearly 65 % of losses occur at the production, processing and post-harvest stages. In industrialised countries, food waste occurs at the consumer end of the supply chain, and further waste is caused by retailers whose intolerance of cosmetic ‘imperfections’ in products causes their suppliers, such as farmers and packers both locally and overseas, to waste edible food.<sup>7</sup>

## Access

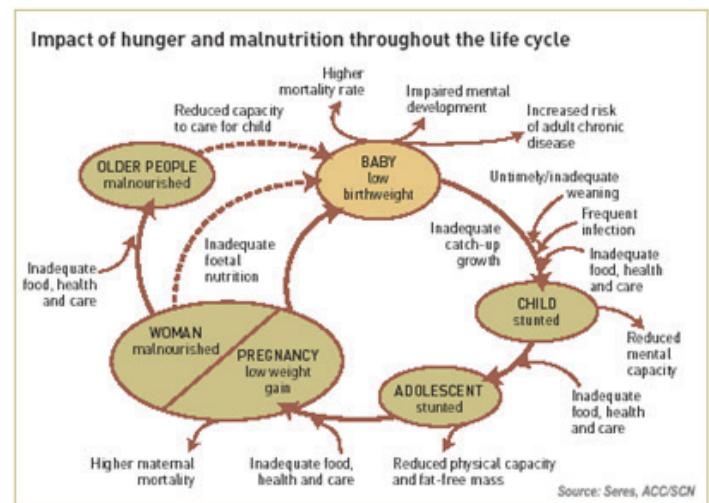
Associated causes: often chronic hunger is geographically specific, located in countries identified as having a poverty of resources, monetarily and structurally. For families without access to land, tools or money, the capacity to farm or purchase food are nearly non-existent. Other contributing factors include living far from roads for transport and water. Of concern too is the susceptibility of marginalised groupings such as women, children, and the elderly.

## Utilisation

Associated causes: malnutrition and illness are both a cause and a consequence of extreme food deprivation. Children in particular are very vulnerable to recurrent ill health and disease as young bodies require sufficient nutrition to develop properly. Moreover bodies that are constantly under-fed are unable to process food correctly. While the emphasis has tended to focus on widespread hunger in a world of plenty, there is less prominence placed on hunger being both a cause and consequence of poverty; and something that reduces the capacity for physical activity and hence the productive potential of the labour of those who suffer from hunger—and this is often their only asset. Chronic hunger also:

- Impairs people’s ability to develop physically and mentally, retarding child growth, reducing cognitive ability and seriously inhibiting school attendance and performance—thus compromising the effectiveness of investment in education.
- Causes serious long-term damage to health, which is linked to higher rates of disease and premature death.
- Passes from generation to generation: hungry mothers give birth to underweight children, who start life with a handicap.
- Contributes to social and political instability, which further undermines government capacity to reduce poverty.<sup>9</sup>

The following graph illustrates the heavy cost of prolonged hunger during a person’s life cycle. This cannot be underestimated or ignored.<sup>10</sup>

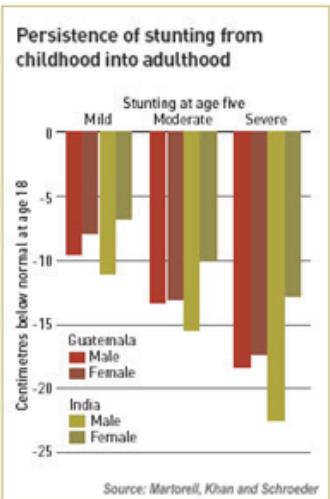


## The Millennium goal of halving hunger by 2015?

With such ambitious goals set by the United Nations in 2000, what has been achieved to date? What further needs to be done?

Looking back to 1974 and the World Food Summit when leaders first made the commitment to ending hunger within a decade, it would be easy to become cynical as to any real

progress being achieved. Yet earlier still in 1963, President Kennedy made a statement that remains valid today when he said, ‘we have the means, we have the capacity to eliminate hunger from the face of the earth in our lifetime, we only need the will.’<sup>11</sup> Fifty years later this statement still rings true. Yet while significant progress has been made and the hunger reduction target appears to within reach, the reality remains that one in eight people in the world today remain chronically undernourished. Worldwide the proportion of people suffering from chronic hunger has decreased from 23.2 % in the 1990–1992 period to 14.9% during 2010–2012<sup>12</sup> which is heartening progress nevertheless significant prolonged poverty persists in a number of geographical areas, predominately these areas are rural and found within developing countries.<sup>13</sup>



The World Bank states that, ‘a meaningful path out of poverty requires a strong economy that produces jobs and good wages; a government that can provide schools, hospitals, roads, and energy; and healthy, well-nourished children who are the future human capital that will fuel economic growth’<sup>14</sup>

However, crucial to promote effective interventions for chronic hunger is understanding who those suffering extreme hunger are, and where they live. The actual design of programmes to eliminate chronic food insecurity must be context specific and timely. Furthermore previously overlooked or under reported causal factors such as food waste, globalisation and over consumption by industrialised countries require urgent attention. It is clearly immoral that within our global neighbourhood we have those suffering the chronic effects of over consumption and waste, alongside those whose lives are threadbare.

**Chris Frazer**

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- 2 Food and Agriculture Organization. 2012. The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2012. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/016/i3027e/i3027e00.htm>
- 3 <http://www.poverty.com>
- 4 Narayan, Deepa et al, 'Voices of the Poor, Can anyone Hear Us?', World Bank, Oxford University Press, 2000.
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- 9 <http://www.fao.org/docrep/003/y6265e/y6265e03.htm>
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- 12 <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/report-2013/mdg-report-2013-english.pdf>
- 13 <http://www.fao.org/docrep/007/y5650e/y5650e03.htm>
- 14 [http://www.worldbank.org/mdgs/poverty\\_hunger.html](http://www.worldbank.org/mdgs/poverty_hunger.html)