

# Introduction: halving hunger

The effort to overcome hunger lost ground in the 1980s. As the decade of the 'lost eighties' neared its close, new assessments and initiatives emerged from national and international agencies, voluntary organizations and research institutions. These took stock of the experience since the World Food Conference in 1974, the progress or lack of progress in overcoming hunger, the experience with promising programmes and policies. What worked well? What worked poorly? What might be achieved in the 1990s? Taken together, the findings from such studies and new initiatives have the potential to halve hunger in the 1990s.

Sara Millman's review of the state of world hunger at the turn of the decade shows that we have only imprecise numbers to take measure of the hungry. These tell us that a billion people live in households too poor to obtain the food they need for work; half a billion in households too poor to obtain the food they need to move around. One child in six is born underweight and one in three is underweight by age 5. Hundreds of millions of people suffer anaemia, goitre, and impaired sight from diets with too little iron, iodine or vitamin A.

To overcome this enormous toll of hunger, some promising programmes and policies emerged in the 16 years since the World Food Conference in 1974. In preparation for its Cyprus Initiative, the World Food Council undertook a review of 'policies and instruments to combat hunger and malnutrition'. At about the same time, an interdisciplinary faculty seminar at Brown University scrutinized recent interventions designed to end hunger. The Brown University faculty seminar taps these and other reviews to provide a menu of opportunities for the 1990s.

The menu features an array of successful recipes for halving hunger. To eliminate food shortage it offers programmes to prevent famine and increase agricultural production. To reduce food poverty it lists activities to distribute food and income, to create employment and new sources of income, and to increase and maintain access to natural resources. To diminish food deprivation, it identifies interventions to provide for the special needs of mothers and children, to prevent infectious and nutritional diseases, and to reduce abuse and neglect.

A systematic assault on the hunger problem in the 1990s will inevitably require additional flows of money and food aid from the rich to the hungry and poor – and a limitation of the flows that are now in the opposite direction. A realistic programme to combat hunger in the 1990s might require \$5–10 billion per year in new resources, or about a 10–20% increase or reallocation of global foreign-aid disbursements. Susan George explores the possibilities for reducing the imbalances in South–North resource flows and increasing financial resources from debt-retirement initiatives and reductions in military expenditures. Raymond Hopkins reviews the prospects for increasing food aid and using it more effectively in the coming decade. Neither author is sanguine about these prospects in the absence of radical shifts in public support for overcoming hunger.

But even more important are the needs for renewed social energy and

political will, the creative use of local institutions and underutilized resources, and increases in public support. Efforts to overcome hunger can proceed in different ways. The most promising empower people to assess their own condition and to act in their own behalf, provide short-term hunger relief while addressing deeply rooted causes, and are sustainable over the long term. Non-governmental and private voluntary organizations are particularly important in reaching the hungry and poor and at their best they constitute hungry people acting in their own behalf. Goran Hyden compares the coping mechanisms of two villages in Tanzania in responding to food shortages, detailing the strengths and limitations of responding from below. Akin Mabogunje reports on an innovative effort in Nigeria to reach out from the centre to encourage grassroots efforts by local governments, women's groups and ethnic communities. Ellen Messer and Peter Heywood realistically examine obstacles that thwart effective harnessing of the potential of biotechnology to alleviate hunger in developing countries.

The last decade has also witnessed a slow emergence of new public voices for the hungry and impoverished. These have been based in development and populist organizations and religious and political groups. These emerging voices need to be strengthened, particularly in countries where the voice of the hungry is faint. Sam Harris describes the efforts and techniques of one such group, now active in seven countries and concentrating on the media and legislative actions.

It is possible to reduce the toll of hunger within a decade, perhaps by as much as half. Documenting these good intentions, we present in full three important declarations. In March 1988 a task force consisting of the Rockefeller Foundation, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef), the World Bank, the World Health Organization (WHO), health ministers and leaders of bilateral aid agencies meeting in Talloires, France, adopted a comprehensive list of goals for 'Protecting the World's Children: An Agenda for the 1990s'. These were recently revised and affirmed in Bangkok in March of this year. In May 1989 the 36 member states of the World Food Council (WFC) declared in Cairo that they would 'make all efforts to achieve, during the next decade, the elimination of starvation and death caused by famine; a substantial reduction of malnutrition and mortality among young children; a tangible reduction in chronic hunger; and the elimination of major nutritional diseases . . .' In November 1989, 24 advocates, planners and scientists from 14 countries met in Bellagio, Italy, and concluded that it is possible to end half the world's hunger before the year 2000. Together these create an agenda of opportunity based upon the promising programmes and policies, reviewed by the Brown group, that have already successfully reduced hunger in many places. Supporting this agenda are the new science and scholarship, reported on by William Crossgrove at the Third Annual Hunger Research Briefing and Exchange and the recent books reviewed by Richard Longhurst, William McNeill and Shlomo Reutlinger.

Leading the agenda is the virtual elimination of deaths due to famine among the 15-35 million people annually at risk, through implementing existing early-warning and famine-prevention systems and continuing efforts to provide safe passage of food in zones of armed conflict. Equally amenable to eradication are two of the three major nutritional diseases. By iodizing salt or injecting iodized oil, most of the 190 million

cases of goitre could be eliminated by the end of the century. A capsule given twice a year to the 280 million children at risk of vitamin A deficiency could virtually eliminate the disease in the crucial ages between 1 and 4 years.

It is also possible to halve malnutrition among women and children. The impact of disease on the wasting and stunting of hungry children is being reduced by the rapid progress in immunizing infants and providing simple, home-based treatment for diarrhoea. Breastfeeding of infants is continuing or even increasing in many developing countries, perhaps as a result of efforts to encourage it and to discourage the use of infant formula. Innovative programmes in Africa and Asia combine the monitoring of growth by child weighing with supplementary feeding if needed. These activities can be combined with efforts to ease the burden on already overworked mothers and to reduce the nutritional anaemia found in half of all women of reproductive age.

Most hunger is rooted in poverty, but the hunger of at least half of the poorest households can be ended. Extensive experience with food subsidies, coupons, ration shops and feeding programmes demonstrates that careful targeting and effective application of such measures could reduce much urban food poverty. In rural areas, providing wage and food income in return for labour to construct needed agricultural and environmental improvements reduces food poverty immediately while increasing long-term agricultural productivity and income. Also valued are programmes providing self-sustaining credit, especially to women, to start small businesses or to produce local products and services.

Food-poor households that raise their own food have to cope with the deterioration of their natural resources, the loss of crucial access to common resources, and exclusion from all but the most ecologically marginal land. There are important opportunities for redistribution to smallholders of land that is little used and a variety of low-cost techniques have demonstrated ability to sustain productivity, provide fuelwood, limit soil erosion and increase food and income.

The intent of this special issue of *Food Policy*, in the words of the Bellagio Declaration, is that of 'creating alternatives between the acceptance of hunger as always with us and the postponement of action until the world can be set fully right, and weighing in with promise on the fine balance between hope and despair'. In a world where at this writing hunger again stalks Ethiopia, readers may well question such promise. Indeed, William McNeill's scepticism of the conclusions of *Hunger in History* may well speak for a larger readership: 'As an all-too-well-fed historian I certainly wish them well in the effort to enlarge political sympathies and improve global management so as to abolish human hunger – however improbable such a vision of the future may seem to an observer who takes selfishness, depravity and irrationality to be enduring features of human behaviour.'

Abolishing hunger, however, is not the focus of our argument; halving hunger is. By at least one measure of hunger – the proportions falling below the minimum threshold of dietary energy adequacy – hunger has been halved in our lifetimes, primarily during the 1960s and early 1970s. It can be given yet another half-life. Halving hunger a second time requires the earnest efforts of the hopeful and the continued good wishes of the sceptics.

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