World Hunger: Definitions, Causes, and Solutions

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Overview
Each person requires a minimum number of calories to maintain physical health. However, the exact nutritional requirement varies depending on one’s age, sex, and weight. The amount of daily physical activity one performs, and the average temperature where one lives, are also important. Many terms are often times used interchangeably when discussing this lack of calories. However, there are some important differences. Hunger describes the quantitative lack of food, specifically in terms of calories. When one suffers from hunger, the body slows down and becomes weaker. The appetite, liver, and endocrine system malfunction over time. The body’s defensive system also drops, often times leading to chronic illnesses (which are usually preventable). Malnutrition describes the quality of one’s diet, primarily focusing on protein. Even if calorie needs are met, malnutrition can still exist. Protein is important for muscle growth, antibody production, nutrient transport, hormonal activity, and cellular activity. Vitamins and minerals are also vital (yes, they are a diet must), but protein is the primary focus when one describes malnutrition. Starvation is an advanced form of hunger. When a person reaches this stage, he or she has likely lost at least one-third of their original body weight. The longer this stage persists, the more imminent death becomes.

Causes

If distributed equally, the world’s grain production alone could provide every person on earth with over 3,200 calories. When fruits, vegetables, nuts, dairy products, meat, etc. are included, this amount is even higher. Yet, there are millions of starving people across the globe, with the majority from countries with food surpluses. Clearly, hunger is caused not by a food shortage, but by a poor distribution of food.

Too often, export earnings overwhelmingly benefit those who are already prosperous, doing more harm than good to the hungry. Governments use cheap labor as a bargaining tool to get U.S. companies to relocate, rather than trying to address the problem of low wages. Therefore, the average worker continues to earn only a few dollars a day, while owners and executives become wealthy. Without a greater say and reward in the system, this gap will not be narrowed.

Rising consumption rates are contributing to global food shortages. Wealthy nations have a diet that consists of high meat consumption, which is very inefficient in regards to the amount of energy required to produce it. Animals are fed an average of eight pounds of protein for every pound of meat that is consumed. The disparity in food consumption is especially evident when considering the rising rate of obesity across the globe, despite the fact that millions elsewhere are starving.

The New World Order, money, not just individual preferences. Since there is a concentration of economic power, the market responds to those who can pay a privileged minority. Prices for finished goods, exported primarily by developed countries, have increased. This has made trade unfavorable to poorer countries that are trading raw goods. However, these developing countries still make a higher profit by exporting goods than selling them to locals. For example, a higher profit can be made by turning fish into pet food than by selling it for human food. Domestic markets respond to those with the most power. Hard work and high production are required to compete, but only those with considerable economic lead or facilities are rewarded. Consequently, food isn’t brought to those who need it most.

Foreign aid is often used as a political tool. Aid is based on need, but on the degree by which the giving country can benefit. Israel and Egypt receive almost one-third of U.S. economic assistance, while the world’s ten poorest countries combined receive less than 5%. Many aid agreements are conditional on structural changes to a nation’s government, or on the purchase of products from the aid-supplying country.

More recently, a growing emphasis has placed on the production of biofuels. However, the process of producing these fuels does not yield much more food. The goal of escaping a reliance on food fuels was not achieved by biofuel production, as the inputs for commercial agricultural production are based on petroleum. Yet, in the United States, around one-third of all grain produced is now diverted into ethanol. This grain could be feeding the hungry, instead it feeds our automobiles.

A growing population is causing stress on the world’s food supply. With more mouths to feed, production must increase to keep up with demand. In many Third World countries, a high birth rate guarantees security. With a high infant mortality rate, many children will not survive past the age of five. A large family increases the chance of having fewer boys to add to the labor force and to farm the land, which is necessary for labor for caring for the parents when they become older. In other cases, contraceptives are not used for moral or religious beliefs.

In some areas of the world, there is a lack of farmland. In too many cases, food aid intended for food distribution is bought by farmers to quietly change their crops. In other cases, large landowners are able to control prices and limit competition, which affects small farmers’ ability to expand or earn a high profit. Also, agriculture isn’t regarded as something worth teaching in many schools or universities, which results in a decreased interest in a career in production agriculture. Some societies look down upon farming as a career, and view it as a job suitable only for the unemployed, poor, or those lower on the social hierarchy.

Solutions

Educating girls can have a significant impact on lowering birth rates. Birth rates decline for every year of education a girl receives. This education can also provide for a greater income in adulthood. Women are more likely to manage household food preparations. With greater nutritional knowledge, women can make better food choices for themselves and their children.

The intensity of land use declines as farm sizes increase. Therefore, shifting land ownership from smaller farms would increase land utilization and its effect, food production. Large farms are more energy dependent than small farms, meaning that small farms are better for the environment. Also, farms with small family farms have more local businesses, lower unemployment rates, better services, and more civic participation.

Individuals can play a large role in ending world hunger by promoting policy change. This can be done by educating officials who are passionate about ending hunger. Candidates discuss the issues that are important to voters. Therefore, asking questions and speaking with political representatives can bring more attention to the issue of hunger. Of course, individuals can pursue the strongest form of political participation—running for office—and work firsthand to solve the problems that they care most about.

World military spending exceeds the combined annual budget of the poorer half of the world’s population and more than doubles the total national defense for health and education combined. A giant impact could be made if these funds were reappropriated to finance economic development, education, and food aid programs in Third World countries. The cost of just one fighter jet could set up 20,000 village pharmacies, while the price of one tank could pay for classroom space for 30,000 children.

Developed nations must consider trade preferences for developing nations. For too long, poor countries have been kept at the mercy of the rich due to tariffs, quotas, and monopolies. Even when given loans, one foreign government, poor countries end up paying more in debt than what they originally received. Trading with multiple countries, and building new economic relationships, can promote a strong global economy. When poor countries are exporting goods, they must be allowed higher profits than usual. While initially costly, this will help the developed nations in the long run, as they will eventually have more consumers who can purchase products from them.

Foreign aid conditions must ensure that it goes to those who need it most. Since the majority of the hungry live in the rural areas, the majority of aid should go to rural development. Also, aid should be given only if human rights and worker rights are improved. Trade can only help countries when workers can organize and bargain collectively, and when governments challenge the power of international trading corporations’ control over markets.

Educating farmers in Third World countries about various farming techniques could increase food production. In many countries, agriculture isn’t viewed as a subject worthy of teaching. Therefore, farmers who have no knowledge of new developments, methods, or products in the agricultural industry. Education from farmers developed nations could result not only in dramatic improvements in crop production, but also in soil quality, conservation, hand management, etc.

An increase in federal funding for research in plant genetics could improve plant production and adaptability. New varieties of plants have recently been created that are more tolerant to drought or flooding. New types of seeds are continuing to produce higher harvest yields. If the amount of farmland in developed countries decreases due to increasing populations, the productivity of the remaining farmland must increase in order to meet human needs. More research could help speed up the development process, or create even more improvements.

Ending gender discrimination is vital to ending world hunger. Despite making up the majority of farmers in Third World countries, females are less likely to have the freedom to engage in financial activity. Therefore, labor that otherwise would have been used to engage in productive economic activity is left unused.

New public policies are another possible solution to world hunger. Improved roads would allow food aid to reach more rural areas. Citizens could also travel more easily to villages to make purchases. Affordable public transportation could also play a role, as many people are unable to afford an automobile. Many rural communities lack electricity, which would allow for more productive methods. Also, farmers could increase yields with greater access to water. All of these possible projects would create jobs, providing an income for families that can be used for purchasing food.

A global school lunch program, based off of the school lunch program in the United States, would greatly increase school attendance for both boys and girls. Lunch would serve as an incentive for small businesses and farmers in order to experience long term and sustainable economic growth, rather than relying on large corporations and food aid from economic powers.

References

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Geographical Patterns

When examining the geographical patterns of hunger, it is important not just to see where hunger exists, but by what extent. The foods that are consumed and the sources of protein, one can see the striking differences in nutritional intakes between countries that more fully explains why hunger is occurring.

Poultry as a percentage of total dietary protein consumption

Source: United Nations, Food and Agriculture Organization, 2003-2005

Bovine Meats as a percentage of total dietary protein consumption

Source: United Nations, Food and Agriculture Organization, 2003-2005

Beans as a percentage of total dietary protein consumption

Source: United Nations, Food and Agriculture Organization, 2003-2005

Maize as a percentage of total dietary protein consumption

Source: United Nations, Food and Agriculture Organization, 2003-2005

Wheat as a percentage of total dietary protein consumption

Source: United Nations, Food and Agriculture Organization, 2003-2005

Geographical Patterns

Wheat as a percentage of total dietary protein consumption

Source: United Nations, Food and Agriculture Organization, 2003-2005

Refined sugars as a percentage of total dietary protein consumption

Source: United Nations, Food and Agriculture Organization, 2003-2005

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