The Contexts Reader

American Sociological Association

Second Edition

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For policymakers, measuring hunger and food insecurity is vital in determining whether they can meet the demands of a growing population. The idea that hunger is a temporary problem that will solve itself with improved economic conditions or technological advances is misguided. Hunger is a complex issue that requires a comprehensive approach, including policies that address the root causes of food insecurity.

The challenge is to create a more equitable, sustainable food system. This requires addressing the underlying social and economic factors that contribute to food insecurity. By focusing on sustainable agriculture, increasing access to healthy foods, and providing support to vulnerable populations, we can create a more equitable and resilient food system for all.

Food insecurity is a complex issue that requires a multi-faceted approach. It is not solely a problem of supply and demand, but also a reflection of broader social and economic factors. Addressing food insecurity requires a collaborative effort among policymakers, NGO’s, and community leaders to develop sustainable solutions that address the root causes of hunger and food insecurity.

The conventional wisdom is that the world is a food surplus, and that food insecurity is a problem of distribution rather than production. However, recent research suggests that a significant proportion of the world’s food is wasted, leading to a misleading perception of food abundance. This highlights the need for a more holistic approach to food security, focusing on both production and distribution challenges.

The societal context in which food insecurity exists is a critical factor in addressing the problem. Sociologists argue that food insecurity is often a result of structural factors such as poverty, lack of access to education, and social inequalities. Addressing these underlying issues requires a multi-pronged approach that includes policy interventions, social programs, and community-based solutions.

The societal fallacy is a trap that many policymakers fall into. It assumes that increasing food production and distribution will automatically solve the problem of food insecurity. However, this fails to recognize the complex interplay between economic, social, and environmental factors that contribute to food insecurity. A more holistic approach is needed, one that addresses the root causes of hunger and food insecurity, and works to create a more equitable and sustainable food system for all.

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Food scarcity has long been the focus of agencies such as the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the U.S. Agency for International Development. Each uses some version of the scarcity argument to shape food security and development policies in collaboration with global agribusiness and food scientists. In such arrangements, concerns about hunger are viewed as production, marketing, and logistics problems that have solutions in the market-based policies of the global food system.

Fighting hunger from this approach means the top priority is reducing scarcity. This is most often addressed by increasing food yields with new technologies and by shipping food to more places more efficiently. The underlying goal in this approach is to facilitate what has been called the “supermarket revolution”—a term used by the World Bank to describe the growing reliance of global citizens on large-scale agricultural industries and commodity chains to obtain their food.

This supermarket model has created steady growth in the global import and export of food. But it can also produce its own problems and be counterproductive. What’s worse is that the increased prices that often accompany market-based production make food less affordable for those in need. Furthermore, increased production may do nothing at all to guarantee more food. For example, the market model has increased use of crops for biofuel, which shifts agriculture away from producing food. In an oft-cited Washington Post editorial, Earth Policy Institute president Lester R. Brown noted that the same amount of grain needed to fill an SUV’s 25-gallon gas tank with ethanol could feed a single person for a whole year.

The bigger problem with emphasizing food supply as the problem, however, is that scarcity is largely a myth. On a per capita basis, food is more plentiful today than any other time in human history. Figures on the next pages reveal that over the last several decades food production (represented here in a common staple, cereals) and the average daily food availability per capita have grown, outpacing what has been the most rapid expansion of human population ever. Data such as these from the FAO reveal that even in times of localized production shortfalls or regional famines there has long been a global food surplus.

The problem is ensuring access to this food and distributing it more equitably. A 2002 New
Beyond scarcity

Beyond food supply: the root causes of health disparities that often accompany the practice of agriculture. Hunger among those who are poor is deeply ingrained. Rather than focusing on food security, we should focus on education, health, and infrastructure. For example, the eradication of poverty in Ghana, the reduction of food insecurity, and the promotion of education and health care can lead to a decrease in hunger and an increase in food security. In short, reducing poverty and hunger is a complex issue that requires a multi-sectoral approach.

The causes of hunger are multifaceted and deeply connected to economic, social, and environmental factors. In many countries, the lack of access to food is a result of poverty, which in turn is caused by factors such as lack of education, lack of job opportunities, and lack of access to essential services. To address these root causes, we need to focus on policies and programs that promote economic growth, education, and health care. This will require a significant investment of resources, both financial and human, but it is necessary to ensure a sustainable future for all.

In conclusion, while the global food system is complex and multifaceted, it is clear that addressing the root causes of hunger and food insecurity requires a comprehensive approach that involves not only government and humanitarian organizations but also civil society, the private sector, and individuals. By working together, we can ensure that everyone has access to healthy and nutritious food, and that we create a world where everyone can live a full and healthy life.
very simple meals each day now may have to cut back to one.
These statistics reveal a clear link between poverty and hunger. Two-thirds of the countries in the world with the most severe extreme poverty—rates greater than 35 percent—also have child hunger rates of 35 percent or more. As evidenced by the prevalence of hunger in the world’s 77 low-income food deficit countries (LIFDCs) as designated by the FAO, poverty is inseparable from hunger and should thus be considered its primary root cause. No wonder the 2000 UN Millennium Summit concluded that the most serious problem confronting the world is persistent poverty and its connection to hunger. The prevalence of hunger in LIFDCs is particularly important because these countries are not only among the world’s poorest by World Bank classification standards but are also net importers of basic foodstuffs because they are unable to produce amounts to meet their own needs. This makes them more at risk in that they lack sufficient foreign exchange in the international marketplace, something further exacerbated by global price spikes like those experienced in 2007. As evidence of the prevalence of food insecurity in LIFDCs, 23 of the 25 countries with the highest rates of child hunger in the world are also designated as LIFDCs (the exceptions being Burma and Maldives) and they continue to be predominant well down this list. Without guaranteed entitlements or other assistance, hunger is certain to persist among these most vulnerable nations, where addressing it is least affordable.

Moreover, most of the LIFDCs are in sub-Saharan Africa, where very little progress on hunger has been made over the last couple of decades—children, for example, fare only slightly better now than in 1990, child hunger having declined only 0.5 percent. In contrast, the remaining regions of the world have made much larger gains; East Asia and the Pacific, for example, have reduced child hunger 16 percent. Stagnation in the African subcontinent can be attributed directly to its persistent and pervasive poverty and underdevelopment, which creates further problems with conflict, health crises, and political instability, among other problems that contribute to hunger.

The developing world isn’t alone in its hunger and poverty, though. Demand on food pantries in the United States is increasing according to a 2009 survey of food banks by the organization Feeding America (formerly America’s Second Harvest). Evidence of poverty and loss of employment income as a primary cause of food insecurity can be even more evident in stark contrast to the relative well-being of U.S. citizens or elsewhere in the industrialized world.
Global Population and Food Production

- The scarcity of food in the world, especially in countries with high levels of poverty and inequality, can also contribute significantly to world hunger.
- Economic inequality is a contributing factor in the high numbers of children who suffer from hunger and in the concentration of poverty, inequality, and hunger.
- Women and children are disproportionately affected by hunger and poverty, which are often concentrated in societies where there is gender inequality and other forms of discrimination.
- Poverty, in turn, is only one form of inequality that contributes to hunger.

The chart above shows the relationship between global population and food production from 1960 to 2000. It indicates a growing gap between the two, highlighting the challenge of feeding the world's growing population.

Source: FAO Food and Agriculture Organization, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), and World Food Programme (WFP).
with marginalized minorities and a history of present situation of ethnic violence. Such “minorities at risk,” as social movements scholar Ted Gurr calls them in *People versus States*, have long been threatened with hunger. Eritrea, Indonesia, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, and the Sudan are among many such places. While contributing to rampant militarism and armed conflicts, ethnic discrimination also silently marginalizes minorities to less desirable lands and occupations. The effects of ethnic discrimination then go beyond immediate violence, creating market disruptions, dispersed labor, and land degradation that destroys what for many is their only chance to produce or earn money for food.

Further exacerbating the effects of these social inequalities, international food aid—initiated by the U.S. government in the 1960s to remove surplus grain from domestic markets and assist military allies—has long been ineffective and misdirected. According to Public Law 480, U.S. aid must travel in U.S.-flagged vessels and depends on market surpluses. The results, critics contend, is that the major beneficiaries are not those in need of food but U.S. shipping companies, agri-business, and countries with geopolitical value for the United States.

Studies of who gets food aid partially support this criticism. In an article in *Food Policy* aid specialists Daniel C. Clay, Daniel Molla, and Debebe Habtewold, for example, found no relationship between need and food aid in Ethiopia. Food aid was instead allocated to areas where organizations had stable operations, to favored ethnicities, and to female and aged heads of households regardless of need. Tina Kassebaum, a senior research scientist at Strategic Research Group, has found that program aid (bilateral U.S. donations) is unrelated to a country’s share of child hunger, while emergency/project aid (multilateral World Food Programme donations) is targeted at needy countries.

Making matters worse, emergency food delivery, which has become one of the most visible forms of assistance to those in need of food, has been corrupt on many fronts in recent years. According to Michael Slackman at the *New York Times*, in Egypt, the government subsidizes flour so that it can be baked into bread and sold cheaply to the population. However, the aid is routinely diverted into the black market and sold at a much greater profit while corrupt inspectors are bribed to certify that it has gone to assist the hungry. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, a 15-year civil war has been fought between the remnants of the Hutu guerrilla force that perpetrated the 1994 Rwandan genocide and other parties. In refugee camps, food is often used as a weapon—camp guards allocate it to those who will keep order, not to those most in need, while also having connections to widespread use of rape. Grim reports such as these have appeared in media outlets such as *The Guardian*, *The Gazette* (Montréal), and the *New York Times* who further note a key tactic in this battle has been attacking food aid and relief convoys, leading to threat and withdrawal of relief agencies, thus further compounding hunger as refugees and internally displaced persons flee for safety, left to fend for themselves. Similar patterns have occurred in Darfur and other conflict-ridden zones.

Some argue that corruption is a product of scarcity, and that if food did not have to be delivered to areas where it was in short supply such fraud would not exist. This argument is true to a point, but such disruptions in the food distribution chain are much more attributable to conflict and inequality, with power and powerlessness at the core of the problem. Corruption is simply another barrier to access—especially in times of acute conflict. Indeed, the poor and powerless are ultimately those most affected by these failures in the systems designed to help them.
human rights, along with the need for international cooperation and assistance to combat and resolve the root causes of hunger.

Addressing hunger

In order to address hunger, it is crucial to address the root causes, such as poverty, conflict, and climate change. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that involves both short-term interventions and long-term solutions.

Poverty is a fundamental driver of hunger, as people living in poverty often have limited access to food, education, and healthcare. Addressing poverty requires targeted interventions that improve job opportunities, provide access to education, and increase access to healthcare.

Conflicts, both internal and international, exacerbate hunger by disrupting food production and distribution. Peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts are essential in reducing conflict-related hunger.

Climate change, with its impacts on weather patterns, natural disasters, and sea level rise, is a growing threat to global food security. Adaptation strategies and mitigation efforts are necessary to address the impact of climate change on food production and distribution.

In conclusion, addressing hunger requires a comprehensive approach that addresses its root causes and promotes sustainable solutions. By working together, we can ensure that everyone has access to adequate and nutritious food, regardless of their background or circumstances.
undermines local food production and markets in the developing economies it purports to help. A better solution would be to provide direct cash assistance to promote food purchases in local or regional economies. Recognizing that many poor depend on land for their income, such an approach would channel money to those who need it most, rather than to global agri-business and shipping companies profiting from food aid politics (this is a more ecologically sound practice as well). If reformed and effectively managed with minimal corruption, this approach could have a huge impact at minimal cost.

Leading up to the 2009 G-20 meetings in London, World Bank president Robert Zoellick noted that it would cost less than one percent of the current U.S. stimulus package to save a generation around the world from poverty and its consequences, including hunger. An influx of money could stabilize hundreds of countries throughout the world, not just with regard to hunger but politics and social conditions as well.

Fiscal challenges are further complicated by the fact that they are intricately connected with the global political economy, a third focus area. A number of ideas exist for making the globalized world more equitable so that ending hunger is a significant positive outcome. Strategies should empower societies and individuals to become more food-sovereign (able to exercise power over their food decisions).

Promoting sustainable agriculture with an emphasis on local food systems and empowering farmers to compete in their own markets is one such dimension. It will reduce ecological scarcity and go far toward ensuring food security, and ultimately food sovereignty, while having the added benefit of injecting additional money into local communities.

Effective long-term solutions through development of production capabilities, however, won’t succeed unless ethnic and gender inequality are reduced or better yet, eliminated. Freeing ethnic minorities from the fear they will face violence if they come to aid distribution stations or, better yet, providing them with the tools to produce their own food and economic sustenance, will contribute greatly to reducing hunger. Too, providing women with control over childbearing, giving them access to education, allowing them the right to own land and businesses, and facilitating their economic activities with micro-credit and other innovations will significantly reduce hunger. Investing in the well-being of women and reducing gender inequality not only can improve their lives but benefit entire countries.

The challenge, in short, is to create a more equitable and just society in which food access is ensured for all. Food scarcity matters. However, it is rooted in social conditions and institutional dynamics that must be the focus of any policy innovations that might make a real difference.

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**RECOMMENDED RESOURCES**


A social scientific treatment of the causes and conceptualization of hunger as well as appropriate responses to it.

Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN. *The State of Food Insecurity in the World* (FAO, various years).

An annual assessment of world hunger, including the latest figures and most recent policy discussions.

2. The authors assert that food must be upheld as a human right. Do you agree? How might this be enforced?

3. Activity: At the start of the new millennium, the United Nations set eight Millennium Development Goals for all member nations to achieve by 2015. Goal 1 is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. Visit www.un.org/millenniumgoals/poverty.shtml and read the specific targets associated with Goal 1. How could policymakers use what you have learned from this article to achieve these objectives?

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why is food scarcity a fallacy? What do the authors suggest that we focus on instead?