



STRATEGIZING THE END OF GLOBAL MALNUTRITION

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International agencies have taken to putting out "strategies" to achieve many lofty goals. Examples include the World Health Organization's *Global Strategy on Infant and Young Child Feeding*, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations' *Strategy to Enhance Food Security in Africa*, and the World Health Organization's *Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health*. Despite the fanfare, examination of the resulting documents generally reveals vague goals, little commitment, uncertain time frames, and soft recommendations. Serious strategies should lead to serious expectation that specific goals will be achieved in a well-defined time frame. Vague guidelines do not constitute strategy.

The objective of the Millennium Project in relation to hunger is clear:

The mandate of the Millennium Project's Hunger Task Force is to produce a plan—what it takes—for humanity to reduce the proportion of hungry and malnourished people in half by the year 2015 (Millennium Project Hunger Task Force 2003, 9).

The Task Force offered a "Review of Ongoing Strategies" for ending hunger, beginning with the Plan of Action that came out of the World Food Summit of 1996. The group could have gone more deeply into past failures to implement previous agendas addressing malnutrition on a global scale, such as:

- the *Manifesto* of the Special Assembly on Man's Right to Freedom from Hunger, held in Rome in March 1963.
- the *International Undertaking on World Food Security* and the *Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition*, issued by the World Food Conference held in Rome in 1974,
- the *Plan of Action on World Food Security* of 1979,
- the *Agenda for Consultations and Possible Action to deal with Acute and Large-scale Food Shortages* of 1981,
- the *World Food Security Compact* of 1985,
- the *Plan of Action for Implementing the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection, and Development of Children*, issued by the World Summit for Children held at the United Nations in New York in September 1990, which included a major section on reducing children's malnutrition,
- the *World Declaration and Plan of Action on Nutrition of the International Conference on Nutrition* held in Rome in December 1992.

There is much to be learned from all these experiences. How is the current effort different?

One common thread in all these past efforts is that they focus on country-level planning and action. What are the responsibilities of the international community? What is the programme of action that the richer countries of the world and all the intergovernmental agencies are to undertake? In placing such heavy expectations on the poor people and the poor countries of the world, are we in effect blaming the victim?

The Task Force summarized its proposed strategy as follows:

1. Mobilize political action to end hunger—on a global scale as well as on national and local scales, in rich and poor countries.
2. Align national policies that restore budgetary priority to agriculture as the engine of economic growth, build rural infrastructure, empower women, and build human capacity in all sectors involved in hunger-reduction actions.
3. Implement and scale-up proven actions that improve the nutrition of vulnerable groups, raise agricultural productivity in smallholder farms and improve market functions—in ways that create synergies and result in positive transformations.

This points in good directions, but does it qualify as a strategy?

The Hunger Task Force's approach was to make a list of the many different types of action that could be considered, and then offer "Guidelines for Selecting Among Candidate Actions". It is not always clear who is to take the selected actions, what is to motivate those who are required to take action, and what agency is to coordinate the separate actions so that they come together to form a cogent programme.

The Task Force's approach hints at some of the resources that might be used, but it does not tell us how they are to be pulled together. If ending hunger in the long term is a serious objective, and if reducing the proportion of hungry people by half by 2015 is to be taken as a serious intermediate target, then



there is a need to prepare a detailed plan, something like the plan one would need to build a bridge across a river. We would need to establish a clear vision of the thing we intend to build, we would need a commitment of resources of many different kinds, and we would need to formulate a detailed workplan, a series of steps that would transform piles of resources into that bridge.

That plan could not take the form of a simple list: do A, then B, then C, etc. There would have to be a primary contractor, and several subcontractors. The various contracts would have to anticipate that some subcontractors might not perform up to expectations, materials would sometimes arrive late, and some workers would call in sick or go out on strike. Nevertheless, the task is not to deliver excuses, but to get the job done, no matter what. We know that we could not simply launch the plan and go away. We would have to stay on it, constantly steering the job toward its completion.

Of course, the task of ending hunger and malnutrition is not like building a bridge. While our proposed bridge might be new and unique in many ways, the fact is that many other bridges have been built in the past, and there is a lot that can be learned from past successes, and also past failures. Ending malnutrition, however, is an entirely new sort of challenge, one that requires tools and approaches that have never before been imagined. In some respects the challenge is comparable to President John Kennedy's call in the early 60s to send men to the moon. He had no idea how the job would get done, but he was able to provide the vision.

While the challenge of ending hunger and malnutrition is unique, like the call to send men to the moon, there are important differences. President Kennedy was able to supply not only the vision, but also the resources. And he was able to provide an authority structure through which contractors and subcontractors could be hired and paid and asked to do the bidding of the United States government. The task of ending hunger in the world is far more difficult. The vision has to be so compelling and so complete that it must include finding ways to muster the required resources, and it must include the creation of an organizational structure adequate to meet the requirements of the job.

The major missing piece in the Hunger Task Force's report is the vision. If we are to end malnutrition in the world, we need to sketch out how that world would work. How should social and economic forces be reconfigured so that the world no longer reproduces poverty and hunger? We need a mental picture of that world if we are ever going to build it.

There is a need to formulate a vision together with a plan that we confidently believe will get the job done. It must be articulated with enough clarity to inspire commitment and action, just as the early visions of the great cathedrals inspired generations of people to commit themselves to the fulfillment of the original vision.

If we were serious about ending malnutrition in the world, we would need many things, such as:

- a clear vision of what is to be created
- some way to know when the job is done
- a workplan that would take us to completion
- a series of steps to assure the completion of each part of the plan
- clarity about who needs to do what to get the job done
- clarity about the incentives that would induce the people who need to act to take the actions required of them; and
- contingency plans and a system of mid-course corrections to deal with every sort of obstacle.

Bridges don't get built through wishful thinking, and neither will the ending of hunger. Any serious plan to end hunger should include elements such as these. If it is to fulfill its mandate, the Millennium Task Force on Hunger should give us a picture of what is to be built, and a detailed programme of specific actions that would lead us to confidently expect that hunger will in fact be reduced by half by 2015.

The most discouraging thing about the Task Force is not in the content of its documents, but in the fact that the Task Force itself will be disbanded soon after it submits its final report. What will happen then? Who will be in charge? Who will see this project through to completion? Will we have here a situation in which the architects drop their blueprints on the table, and then they and everyone else goes home?

We need to take the concept of strategy much more seriously, and work out the means for getting to the goal. If the task of strategizing is not taken more seriously, the Millennium Project Hunger Task Force could simply elevate the level of disappointment and disillusionment for the poor and hungry of the world. Perhaps the work of the Hunger Task Force so far should be understood as a prelude, only the beginning of the work that needs to be done to formulate the vision and the commitment and the



planning that are required if the project of ending hunger and malnutrition is to succeed. Who will carry that work forward?

Reference

Millennium Project Hunger Task Force *Halving Hunger by 2015: A Framework for Action, Interim Report of the Millennium Project Hunger Task Force*. New York: Millennium Project, 2003.
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