**ENDING HUNGER IN CARING COMMUNITIES**

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* *Freedom from Want: The Human Right to Adequate Food,*
* *Global Obligations for the Right to Food,*
* *Ending Hunger Worldwide,* and
* *Regulating Infant Formula.*

**Abstract**

Many studies of hunger in the world have treated it as a technical problem arising from limits in the capacity to produce food. Little attention has been given to the importance of human relationships. The likelihood of hunger occurring in any community depends on whether people care about one another, are indifferent to one another, or exploit one another. In any stable community, if people care about one another’s well being, they are not likely to go hungry. This is true even where people have little money.

Caring communities can protect people from exploitation, and they can establish local food systems that are sensitive to nutritional needs. Protecting and strengthening caring communities could be an effective means for reducing hunger in the world.

Keywords: Caring; ending hunger; community; food security; nutrition.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, “Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs for an active and healthy life (FAO 2009, 8).” Nutrition security, which relates to the health status of individuals, depends on good food security. Ensuring that everyone is well nourished under all conditions requires attention not only to ensuring a good food supply but also to issues such as health care, eating habits, infant feeding, and food safety.

Food security is about long-term food supply, disaster planning, food safety, and many other issues. The focus here is on the unmet nutritional needs of low-income people, commonly referred to as the hunger problem. According to the FAO, on the basis of estimates of deficiencies in dietary energy (calorie) supply, close to a billion people go hungry (FAO 2013a).

How can this be explained? In 2013, global wealth reached an all-time high of US$241 trillion, up 4.9% from the preceding year (Credit Suisse 2013). No child is born into a poor world.

If ending hunger became a high priority for the global community, that goal could be achieved. There are no serious technological obstacles. The challenge is not about charitable assistance so much as it is about how and for whom the earth’s resources are used. Much more nutritious food could be produced if fewer agricultural and other resources were used to produce foods of little nutritional value such as coffee, or non-foods such as tobacco, flowers, and fuel. Hunger could be ended if that was the priority.

Huge amounts of food are produced, as we can see in any supermarket. Viewed globally, there is no shortage of potential for producing food that is needed for many decades to come. There are local shortages of land and water and other resources important for producing food, but globally there is no shortage of such things.

There is a close correlation between poverty and hunger. But why is there so much poverty in the world when there is also so much wealth?

And how is it that there are so many people who are poor but not hungry?

Caring may be defined as *acting to benefit others*. The focus here is on empathetic caring, actions taken primarily because of concern for the well-being of others. This is distinguished from instrumental caring of the sort that might be undertaken by a caretaker in exchange for a salary. The concept is explored in my chapter “On Caring” for a book edited by Michelle Brenner (Kent forthcoming).

The premise here is that *in strong communities, where people care about one another’s well-being, no one goes hungry* (Kent 2011, 137)*.* Apparently this is true even in poor and in so-called primitive societies. Karl Polanyi recognized this in 1944:

[A]s a rule, the individual in primitive society is not threatened by starvation unless the community as a whole is in a like predicament. . . . destitution is impossible: whosoever needs assistance receives it unquestioningly. . . . There is no starvation in societies living on the subsistence margin (Polanyi 1944).”

George Kanahele said much the same thing about pre-contact Hawai‘i:

The starkest forms of famine occur in much more harsh natural environments than Hawai‘i’s and, ironically, in part as a result of the industrialism which makes marginal economies dependent upon international political and economic events over which people in such economies have no control. We cannot honestly imagine absolute hunger occurring among the families dwelling in a self-sufficient ‘iliahupua’a in the days of old (Kanahele 1986, 324).

Others put it this way:

When a community functions well, it is because of the active solidarity among its members. People look out for each other, help each other . . . When individuals slip into poverty it is not simply because they have run out of money - it is also because their community has failed (Dessewfy and Hammer 1995).

There can be serious food supply issues when geophysical hazards such as earthquakes and floods occur, or when armed attacks suddenly disrupt local food systems and entire communities. However, in stable communities, hunger usually results from exploitation, under which some people profit excessively from the fruits of other people’s labor. Usually, when people have decent opportunities and can enjoy the full benefits of their own labor and of the environmental resources around them, they live adequately. They do that even in harsh physical environments. Where physical and social environments are too harsh to sustain life, people move elsewhere if they can.

In many high-income countries, there are low-income groups that go hungry. Their problems may be due as much to the absence of caring communities as to the lack of money. In Japan, for example, where increasing numbers of senior citizens are arrested for shoplifting . . .

“Senior citizens shoplift lunch boxes and bread out of poverty, and they also steal because they are lonely and isolated” . . . . Some steal even when they aren’t really hungry because the traditional support system is breaking down and they have become isolated from society . . . (Nohara and Sharp 2013).

Society’s indifference takes a heavy toll on the isolated elderly.

That hunger depends in part on the quality of relationships among people is clear where some groups suffer from discrimination by dominant groups. Consistently, those who are discriminated against are more poorly nourished than the dominant groups. This is clearly the case in India, for example. It has become a leading exporter of beef and rice while many millions of its own people go hungry, especially its minorities (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2013; Sharma 2011)

Studies of the hunger problem rarely recognize that it has a lot to do with how people treat each other. Lists of relevant factors (e.g., FAO 2013b; IFPRI 2013, 102-120) rarely cover social relationships. They do not look into how people actually live. They may speak about deficits in land availability, water, seeds, knowledge, and trade opportunities, but they do not see that the major problem might be a deficit in caring. The view taken here is that hunger is at root a social problem, heavily influenced by human relationships of compassion, indifference, and exploitation.

In recent years, several global agencies have been working to strengthen the linkage between agriculture and nutrition (Herforth 2012; SCN 2013; Save the Children 2014; World Bank 2007). The Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition hosted an extensive discussion on “Making agriculture work for nutrition (FAO 2012).” This can be seen as a move to counteract one of the major deficiencies of the global industrialized food system, the fact that it responds mainly to money and not to needs.

International agencies ask how agriculture might make a stronger contribution to nutrition, but it is a curious question. Nutrition-sensitive agriculture has been well developed in many places throughout history (Herman 2013, 336-375; Inter Pares 2004; Kuhnlein, Erasmus, and Spigelski 2009). Agro-ecology evolved to meet the needs of people and the eco-systems in which they were embedded, in sustainable—almost timeless—systems. Ancient Mayan cities and ancient Constantinople have much to teach us regarding urban food systems (Stockholm Resilience Center 2013).

In today’s industrialized agriculture, good basic nutrition is no longer the dominant motivation that drives food production. In pre-modern times, before the dominance of markets and before wealth accumulation became so important to so many, agriculture was undertaken to produce food for good nutrition, not for wealth.

This is well illustrated in the history of islands. In pre-contact Hawai‘i, for example, food was abundant, and people were healthy. Taro and other foods were produced to meet people’s needs. One can eat just so much taro. However, with the advent of modernity, agriculture and nutrition were separated. Settlers came along and decided to produce rice for profit. There was a large-scale shift from taro to rice production in Hawai'i in the 1860s.

Rice exports, mainly to California, reached more than 13 million tons in 1887. Long before that level was reached, the rapid displacement of taro by rice led the local newspaper to ask, “where is our taro to come from?” The disconnect between farming for food and farming for money became clear. The people whose taro supply was threatened were not the people who benefited from rice exports.

Since modern food producers are motivated mainly by the income that can be produced and not by the nutritive value of their products, the system delivers too much highly processed food. Many farms and food factories operate in ways that exploit their workers, their environment, and their customers. The impact of the global shift of agriculture from producing food to producing wealth, often for outsiders, is well documented (Kaufman 2012; Lindgren 2013; Rosenthal 2013).

The maldevelopment of modern agriculture is well illustrated in Guatemala:

Guatemala has one of the world's highest rates of land concentration, where 3% of private landowners – a white elite – occupy 65% of the arable land. Small farms (those with fewer than four hectares) occupy only 11% of agricultural land.

Poor indigenous farmers scrape out a living through subsistence agriculture, often on the poorest soils, while wealthy plantation owners, or latifundistas, benefit from an agricultural system based on international exports such as coffee, sugar cane and African palm oil – and cheap, mostly indigenous labour (Tran 2013).

When a report on global agriculture showed that production yield levels of some of the world’s major food crops have been declining, one author said,

This finding is particularly troubling because it suggests that we have preferentially focused our crop improvement efforts on feeding animals and cars, as we have largely ignored investments in wheat and rice, crops that feed people and are the basis of food security in much of the world (Fisher 2012).

It is the preferences of people with money that shape prices and motivate producers. People with money usually outbid the poor for the services of farmers and food processors. The system, in its normal mode of operation, benefits the rich far more than the poor, steadily widening the gap between them (Kent 2011, 32-37; Woodiwiss 2013). The dominant economic system does not care much for people without money (Kent 1993). And, the evidence is clear, it does not care much for people who are hungry.

Local pre-modern, non-industrial food systems have tight links between agriculture and nutrition. These systems still function in much of the world, where farming is not tied to modern markets:

Only 30% of the world’s food supply is produced on industrial farms while half of the world’s cultivated food is produced by peasants. More than 12% comes from hunting and gathering while more than 7% is produced in city gardens.

The notion that there is a tremendous exchange happening between countries for food crops is incorrect as 85% of the people in this world live on a domestic diet. . . . .

Food crops are sold outside the traditional industrial marketplace. Much is grown for self reliance and the remainder is bartered or sold at local marketplaces. . . . .

There are about 1.5 billion peasant farmers on 380 million farms; 800 million more urban gardens; and 410 million gathering the hidden harvest of our forests and savannas; 190 million in animal husbandry and well over 100 million peasant fishers. Many of our world’s farmers are women. Better than anyone else, peasant farmers feed the hungry; if we are to eat in 2050 we will need all of them and all of their diversity (Courtens 2012, based on ETC Group 2009).

The ETC Group estimated:

The Industrial Food Chain uses 70% of the world’s agricultural resources to produce just 30% of our global food supply. Conversely, the Peasant Food Web provides 70% of the global food supply while using only 30% of agricultural resources (ETC Group 2013).

The pre-modern is not just ancient history. It is alive and doing well in many parts of the world, but it gets little attention.

Many critics confront the dominant food system directly, and call for it to be replaced (Field and Bell 2013; Hines 2004; Other Worlds 2013; RTFN-Watch 2012; UNCTAD 2013). However, if we try to address the issues on a large scale, we immediately run into obstacles and become preoccupied with them. Large scale, direct challenges are sometimes necessary, but here the idea is to explore what could be done “under the radar”. Living in harmony with one’s environment and one’s neighbors has to be done locally, not globally.

UNCTAD calls on global agriculture to “wake up before it is too late,” but radical transformation from the top is not likely. The challenge as conceived here is to imagine, design, and implement a post-modern world that draws on the best of both the pre-modern and modern worlds, and avoids their worst features. That work can begin locally, at many different nodes, and grow upward from there.

People with little money can live together with no one going hungry, as demonstrated in countless places over thousands of years. Instead of focusing on ways to remedy hunger when it occurs, can we devise ways of living in which the hunger issue never comes up?

Studies of nutrition concerns generally focus on narrowly focused nutrition projects that can be undertaken within communities, sometimes through initiatives by outside organizations, and sometime on the basis of local initiatives (FAO 2005; WHO 2003). The work usually addresses specific issues such as iodine deficiency or obesity. The perspective here is that communities can function in such a way that basic nutrition rarely becomes a problem, so interventions to remedy nutrition issues are less likely to be needed.

**COMMUNITY FOOD PROJECTS**

Communities vary a great deal in the extent to which their people care about one another’s well-being. Some are strongly caring communities, some are not. Caring can be strengthened by encouraging community members to spend more time working and playing together. Joint activities can be supported in many ways. For example, businesses could be organized as cooperatives, and the arts and sports could be encouraged.

Here we focus on food-related activities that can be carried out by groups. Farms could be organized as collective community-based enterprises. People could garden together, cook together, and eat together in many different settings. Food-related skills could be strengthened through the sharing of knowledge and hands-on experience. People who are facing difficulties could be offered food packages or meals, and could also be given support in learning how to grow food, shop better, and cook for themselves (Pascual and Powers 2012). Communities could establish local Food Policy Councils to be permanently attentive to local food and nutrition issues (Burgan and Winne 2012; FAO 2011; Kent 2011, 142-153). Instead of marketing food through supermarkets owned by outsiders, increasing emphasis could be placed on Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), farmers’ markets, and locally owned markets, including cooperatives. In Chicago, local groups are addressing the problem of food desserts by selling fruits and vegetables from a bus that makes regular visits to the neighborhoods (Jennings 2013).

The distribution of most food and other goods might follow conventional marketing methods, but people in caring communities are also likely to share their gardens’ produce with their neighbors, or they might share jams, breads, and cakes. Sharing of this sort can be carried to surprising extremes. In the British town of Todmorden, for example, people raise fruits and vegetables and invite others to harvest them even without asking (Graff 2011; Incredible Edible 2013; Warhurst 2012). Some of the small farms in Detroit supply vegetables for anyone who wants them, there for the taking (Urban Roots 2012). In South Central Los Angeles, vegetable gardens are being placed in abandoned lots and traffic medians (Finley 2013).

Food sharing is routine, especially in low-income communities (Morton et al. 2008). It can be enhanced in many ways, including for example, regular community festivals and pot-luck meals, perhaps on the basis of a regular schedule. Soup kitchens of various forms could be established (Bayne 2013). The sense of community can lead to many different food projects, and those projects in turn can help to build the sense of community (Brown 2013).

The website at [www.shareable.net](http://www.shareable.net) offers ideas for creative sharing, including many centered on food. For example, it suggests ways to facilitate meal sharing (Johnson 2013). The nongovernmental organization Heifer International promotes sharing systematically through *Passing on the Gift*, a program in which low-income people who receive donated animals “share the offspring of their animals – along with their knowledge, resources, and skills – an expanding network of hope, dignity and self-reliance (Heifer International 2013).” The sharing of mothers’ milk is now being supported in systematic ways (HMBNA 2013).

One simple method for sharing food is based on having people set up tables at farmers’ markets to accept some people’s excess fruits and vegetables and give them to other people who need them. Vivian Best began doing this in Hawai'i in 2010, “with a table, a wicker basket from Goodwill and a couple of poster boards decorated with doodles of vegetables”:

Now, her Give It Fresh Today (GIFT) program accepts more than 24,000 pounds of food annually, of which 200 to 250 pounds per week come from its table at the KCC [Kapi‘olani Community College] farmers’ market. The nonprofit Aloha Harvest picks up the food, as does Unity Church, and delivers the goods to various outlets that provide nourishment to impoverished and homeless people throughout Oahu.

“[GIFT is] changing the way people view their excess,” says Best. “In the past you’d bring a box of avocados to work, people would get sick of all the avocados. Sometimes, you can’t eat all the fruit from your trees, so GIFT gets people to think about their food waste. There are families who come to the table, they take a little bit out of each bag, one cucumber, one tomato, two ears of corn. It’s changing people’s shopping habits” (Cave 2013).

In another creative but simple method of sharing . . .

A charitable man who wishes to remain anonymous recently installed a refrigerator outside of his home in Hail, Saudi Arabia. His neighbors can leave their excess food inside the refrigerator where it is kept fresh and clean. Needy people can then anonymously use this excess food without the shame of begging (Nitz 2014).

Such transactions have been studied as the *gift economy*, in contrast with the conventional *exchange economy*. Many pre-modern food systems use non-market modes of exchange that are not very visible. They are beyond the comprehension of modern neo-classical economics, but they can work very well.

Local gardeners could set up their own groups, and they could learn from nongovernmental organizations such as the American Community Gardening Association, whose primary purpose is to build community through community gardening. Farms, markets, and restaurants could be set up as cooperatives of various forms. There are organization that can advise on how to set up cooperatives in harmony with local cultural practices and traditions (Kohala Center 2011). Northern Italy demonstrates the benefits of having entire regions organize their businesses as cooperatives (Luna 2013).

Permaculture specialists have shown great skill in applying their broad principles in ways that harmonize not only with local physical environments but also with local cultures, and use social processes that encourage community building (Birnbaum and Fox 2014; Hills 2013; Macnamara 2012). Increasingly, people are coming to understand that they are not separate from their food systems, but are in them, and must live synergistically with them.

Commercial food production tends to serve middle- and high-income people because it is designed primarily to produce good incomes for the owners. Government agencies at every level tend to favor the same middle- and high-income people. People with low incomes and little political power often get their food outside the dominant commercial system, by producing food themselves in subsistence farms or backyard gardens, by purchasing from small-scale farmers who have little access to major markets, and by cooperative efforts such as community gardens.

Community-based food production is based on the recognition that, while participants might have little cash income, they have other kinds of wealth such as their labor power, their motivation, and their knowledge of the local culture and the local environment. There is natural wealth in the local land, water, and sunshine that can be used in sustainable ways. Strong communities also have an important asset in that their members care about one another’s well being.

The inputs to community-based food operations are different from those used by commercial ones, and their managers are likely to have different priorities regarding what are the important outputs. With their unconventional economics, community-based food operations might be feasible even where commercial operations are not.

**ROLES OF NATIONAL AND GLOBAL AGENCIES**

Mary Robinson, formerly president of Ireland and also the UN’s High Commissioner for Human Rights, said, “if you want change, it has to happen from within communities, not from the outside. Those from the outside can only support change by being patient and being respectful (The Economist 2012).”

The concept of food sovereignty is based on the same idea. It refers to the localization of control of food in communities, based on increasing local self-reliance. In this perspective, the center of decision-making should be local, not national or global. The higher levels should facilitate and support local decision makers in doing what they want to do. Under the principle of subsidiarity, the higher levels should serve the lower levels, and not the reverse (Mann 2014).

The global agencies could support research on how to strengthen local communities. There have been excellent studies of “positive deviance” that explain why some children and some families are better nourished than would be expected on the basis of their socio-economic circumstances (Zeitlin, Ghassemi, and Mansour 1990). The global agencies should also study positively deviant communities. There are places like Kerala, in India, in which malnutrition levels are consistently lower than would be expected on the basis of their income levels. Undoubtedly this is due in some measure to the extent to which people look after one another’s well-being.

Similarly, while communities in the Global Ecovillage Network give a great deal of attention to the technical aspects of food production, they also give attention to the quality of human relationships:

GEN offers inspiring examples of how people and communities can live healthy, cooperative, genuinely happy and meaningful lifestyles --- beacons of hope that help in the transition to a more sustainable future on Earth. We foster a culture of mutual respect, sharing, inclusiveness, positive intent, and fair energy exchange (Global Ecovillage Network 2013).

The Global Ecovillage Network is concerned specifically with *communal* pathways to sustainable living. Its website offers a rich variety of resources offering how-to-do it guidance for creating and operating what have been described here as caring communities. The Fellowship for Intentional Community offers similar guidance (Fellowship 2014). There are many others groups that promote the strengthening of local communities, in both low-income and high-income countries.

One can propose reconfigurations of the global food system that would make it more responsive to the needs of the poor (e.g., Mulvany and Ensor 2011; IFPRI 2013), but if those who control it are not sufficiently motivated to make these changes, not much will happen. That motivation is more likely to be found where people deal with each other face to face. The global agencies should support local community-building initiatives.

If the linkage between nutrition and agriculture is to be restored, it will have to be done at ground level, in the communities. High-level agencies could offer important support services, but the main action would have to be local, in the communities. The restoration of that linkage would come not from market forces but from the fact that people care about each other’s well being. If all communities’ food systems were designed to ensure that their people were well nourished, we would have a world without hunger.

We often talk about global hunger, and ask how the world will be fed despite the challenges of growing populations, climate change, and other concerns. This thinking has led to many top-down proposals, most of them ineffective. We should acknowledge that *all hunger is local*. The primary role of agencies at national and global levels should be to help strengthen local communities. *Yes!* magazine got it right when it said, “Instead of Trying to Feed the World, Let’s Help It Feed Itself (Hayes 2013).” More attention should be given to localized food systems that are responsive to local needs. A step backward toward the pre-modern might be the right way to get beyond our flawed present to better post-modern times.

**CONCLUSION**

Many people view malnutrition as a technical problem, and focus on interventions that address specific deficiencies. For example, many agencies work on addressing vitamin A deficiencies with different types of rice or bananas. The interventions may be effective for a time, but their impacts may dissipate soon after the interveners and their funding leave. Many interventions are not very useful. A package of ten nutrition-specific interventions covering 90 percent of the countries with high levels of child stunting would be expected to avert only one-fifth of the stunting in those countries. The annual cost of doing this was estimated at $9.6 billion per year (Bhutta 2013).

Even effective interventions are not likely to change deeply entrenched undernutrition that continues from generation to generation. Deep hunger results more from social forces than from specific nutrient deficiencies. Just as health does not depend only on medicine, good nutrition status does not depend only on issue-specific interventions. It also depends on the quality of the relationships among the people.

Hunger in the world is not explained by a lack of knowledge about nutrition or by a global shortage of resources. In a world with very great wealth, hunger persists because many people don’t care about others and often exploit others. This results in local shortages of various kinds, rooted in conflicts of interest about how the earth’s abundant resources should be used. Often local resources are used to provide goods and services for people with high incomes, locally or at a distance, rather than providing basic nutrition for local people who have serious needs but little money. The problem has to do with priorities, not absolute resource levels. The earth’s resources could be used to feed billions more people, but that would happen only if ensuring adequate food for all became a high priority

In efforts to explain and respond to the hunger problem, there has been little appreciation of the importance of exploitation, indifference, and caring. This is especially clear at the global level, where there has never been a serious plan for ending hunger in the world. A serious plan is one for which adequate resources have been allocated and an effective management system has been set up in a way that gives observers confidence that the goal will be achieved. The problem is not that the global plans have failed, but rather that there has never been a serious plan for ending hunger in the world (Kent 2011, 170-172).

At the level of the global “community” the geographical and social distances are too great to stimulate caring that is deep enough to motivate serious efforts to end hunger. It would be useful to focus on how hunger can be ended locally, viewing communities as the fundamental unit of analysis and activity.

Food systems are social as well as technological, establishing specific relationships among people in the community. Well-designed food systems reflect and strengthen positive, caring relationships among the people, and through that means help to ensure the food security and general well-being of the entire community.

Local communities can be the site of conventional issue-centered nutrition interventions, but in strong caring communities, there would be much less need for such interventions.

The argument here can be summarized in three propositions:

* Hunger is less likely to occur where people care about one another’s well being.
* Caring is strengthened when people work and play together.
* Therefore, hunger in any community is likely to be reduced by encouraging its people to work and play together, especially in food-related activities.

In *The Conquest of Bread*, Peter Kropotkin argued, “Well-Being for all is not a dream. It is possible, realizable, owing to all that our ancestors have done to increase our powers of production (Kropotkin 1906).” To make good use of that potential, everyone should have the opportunity to live in a strong caring community.

It is not easy increase the caring, but if hunger is to be ended, that is what we need to do. We have to find better ways to live together with some local people, and perhaps apart from some others. Rather than finding ways to fix communities that are broken, we should find ways to make them strong so that they do not need fixing.

We should get beyond talking about how we ought to live and actually demonstrate it. Caring communities can protect people from exploitation, and they can establish local food systems that are sensitive to local nutritional needs. Caring communities could remedy hunger when it occurs, but their main contribution would be to prevent it from ever occurring.

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