

# THE HUMILIATION OF HUNGER

George Kent  
University of Hawai'i  
(Draft of August 12, 2009)



“In Zimbabwe, Survival Lies in Scavenging,” according to a *New York Times* story about these children collecting bits of corn that had spilled on a roadway (Dugger 2008). What are these children’s days like? What are their prospects for the future?

Here is a similar scene in Hanoi, Vietnam:



And another:



Similar pictures of intolerable conditions could be obtained from many other places. Usually these conditions are not newsworthy at all, and children quietly slip away.



Around nine or ten million children die before their fifth birthdays every single year, with at least a third of those deaths associated with malnutrition. To build a memorial for the children who die this year we would need a monument about two hundred times the size of the Vietnam War memorial in Washington, D.C. We would need to build a new one every single year.

## HUMILIATION

The humiliation of hunger takes many forms. Sometimes the source is identified as a specific person or agency. However, the structural violence of poverty and hunger usually is mediated through the social system, with no specific identifiable perpetrator (Kent 2006). In the humiliation of hunger, one feels victimized by life itself.

In India many small farmers commit suicide because they cannot feed their families and pay their debts. An estimated 200,000 farmers have committed suicide in the country (Bagchi 2009; Sengupta 2006, Sainath 2009). The world has hardly taken notice. Who wants to trouble the government of India? In many cases farmers have been trapped by their investment in genetically modified seeds that did not delivered promised increases in crop yields. In many cases the instrument of suicide has been poisoning by pesticides produced by the same multinational corporations that produced the seeds.

The problem is not limited to India. In 2008, 14 farmers and ranchers in Colorado took their own lives (Evans 2009), and there are similar reports from many other parts of the world.

Suicide is the last escape from humiliation. The hunger problem is not merely biological; it is about dignity. This is clearly recognized in relation to the human right to adequate food. Certainly one can provide food for individuals that will meet their basic nutrient requirements, as in a prison or an army. However, if people have no chance to influence what and how they were being fed, if they are fed prepackaged rations or capsules or are fed from a trough, their right to adequate food is not being met, even if they get all the nutrients their bodies need. Serving pork to a Muslim prisoner would violate his human rights, even if it contained the nutrients he needed.

Human rights are mainly about upholding human dignity:

Having rights enables us to "stand up like men," to look others in the eye, and to feel in some fundamental way the equal of anyone. To think of oneself as the holder of rights is not to be unduly but properly proud, to have that minimal self-respect that is necessary to be worthy of the love and esteem of others. Indeed, respect for persons . . . may simply be respect for their rights, so that there cannot be the one without the other (Feinberg 1980, 151).

The human right to adequate food is mainly about dignity, and not about meeting physiological needs. Dignity does not come from being fed. It comes from providing for oneself. In any well-structured society, the objective is to move toward conditions under which all people can provide for themselves (Kent 2005, 46).

The hunger problem is not only about the dignity of those who are hungry. It is about the dignity of all of us. When the United States repeatedly speaks out at the United Nations against the very idea of the human right to adequate food (United Nations General Assembly 2008), I am embarrassed by my citizenship. When I see what the world allows to go on and on in places like Darfur and Zimbabwe, I am deeply ashamed, not for myself, but for my species.

## WHO CARES?

There are no technical obstacles to assuring that everyone is adequately nourished. The major obstacle to solving the hunger problem is simple: we do not care enough. Most countries have the capacity to ensure that all of their people are adequately nourished, but they do not do that. In terms of material resources, the world as a whole could ensure that everyone is adequately nourished, but it does not do that (Kent 2008). There is a failure of will, not a failure of capacity. Collectively, we simply do not care enough about the poor and hungry among us.

Yes, there are anti-hunger projects here and there, but support for them is at best in the millions of dollars, when it needs to be in the billions. The head of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations says \$30 billion a year is needed to eradicate hunger (FAO 2008). The gross world product in 2007 was roughly 60 trillion dollars (CIA 2008). Thus the request is for roughly 0.05 percent of the total.

There are many ways to demonstrate that the will is not there. In 1970 the rich countries of the world promised that by the mid-1970s they would provide 0.7 percent of their gross national income for development assistance of all kinds, not just for the hunger problem (United Nations. General Assembly 1970, para 43). That commitment has been reaffirmed many times, but the reality is that their assistance reached an all-time high of only 0.33 percent in 2005, less than half the target level, three decades after the target date (OECD 2006; United Nations. Economic and Social Council 2006, para 2).

In its budget plans for 2008-2009, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, responsible for dealing with all human rights issues throughout the entire world, expected that it would do its work with only \$115.3 million in funding under the regular United Nations budget (OHCHR 2008, 109). With voluntary contributions added, the sum is expected to remain around \$200 million per year. With a sum this small—0.00033 percent of the gross world product—we must conclude that the world does not take human rights very seriously.

The United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund says it “has allocated more than one billion dollars for humanitarian aid to 66 countries around the world since it was launched in March 2006 (United Nations. Office of the Resident Humanitarian Coordinator 2008).” Of course this is only one of many humanitarian programs, but it helps us to understand the meagerness of global funding for the work of saving lives.

In contrast, in December 2008, many national governments came up with huge amounts of money to save their faltering economies. The United States government quickly promised \$700 billion for its financial institutions, asking few questions about accountability. This figure helps us to get a sense of scale in relation to global funding for human rights and humanitarian work. It is easy to find resources to protect those with power, but not to protect the powerless:

This perverse bias in global priorities became palpably clear during the recent global financial crash. People everywhere began to ask: why is it that the governments of the world can summon several trillion dollars to bail out millionaire bankers, and yet no government can afford the money – just \$30

billion dollars a year – that would be enough to bail out the world’s hungry (Parsons 2008)?

Money cannot be found to deal with the hunger issue in a serious way, but when the moneyed class faces risks, hundreds of billions of dollars become available to rescue them. Clearly, when the wealthy claim they *cannot* help the poor, it should be acknowledged that they *will* not. This must be deeply humiliating to those who are hungry.

Depending on the plan of action, ending hunger might cost much less than the \$30 billion a year proposed by the FAO. Worldwide, there is no shortage of food. There is a shortage of decent opportunities for poor people to produce food or to earn enough money to buy food for their families. The world’s leaders only have to ensure that all people have decent opportunities to provide for themselves. Then the leaders just have to get out of the way, and let hunger end. It is not complicated, if the will is there.

### **A PLACE AT THE PLANNING TABLE**

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the number of people who are hungry now exceeds one billion, the largest number ever (FAO 2009). Where is the outrage?

And, to be more practical, where is the planning to reduce hunger in the world? The appendix here lists the major global conferences and documents that have dealt with the issue in recent decades. All this talk and all this ink have added up to very little. In its annual reports on *The State of Food Insecurity in the World*, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations tells us that the number of people who are hungry in this world has been going up, not down, over these decades. Hunger is not a mysterious disease with no known cure, like AIDS. What is the problem? One has to wonder whether the issue really has been taken seriously.

Perhaps one reason why these conferences did not produce much is that the hungry themselves were not invited. The hungry do not get a place at the table in the discussions on hunger, an obvious source of humiliation. The absence of the hungry is demonstrated by the planning for the 19<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Nutrition, to be held in Bangkok, Thailand in October 2009. Its theme is “Nutrition Security for All.” The registration fee for international delegates who registered early was \$600. The Platinum Sponsors for the conference were Ajinomoto, Amway, Danone, Mead Johnson Nutrition, Nestlé, and Unilever. GAIN (Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition) and Kraft Foods were Silver Sponsors, and PepsiCo was a Program Sponsor. Young researchers had the opportunity to apply for grants to fund their participation in the conference from PepsiCo. There were no comparable grants available for malnourished people or their representatives.

I come to the same conclusion I reached decades ago:

People commonly ask how it will be possible to feed future generations. The question is deeply insulting. Why ask how people are to be fed, as if this had to be done by some external agent? Are people not motivated to feed themselves? Why is it that people like you and I can be valued as persons, while the hungry are

regarded as no more than passive gaping mouths? Who, when not deprived of the means, would not feed themselves (Kent 1984, 148)?

International agencies often treat the hunger problem through large-scale interventions based on specially formulated foods brought in from the outside. They are sometimes criticized for taking a medical approach to the problems. That is inaccurate, since doctors generally talk with their patients. There is actually more of a veterinary approach, with the beneficiaries not consulted at all, as if they were livestock in a feedlot.

The hunger problem is frequently addressed by the powerful in terms that are inherently humiliating. The issue needs to be handled not as one would approach livestock management, but rather as a partnership, based on genuine concern for the well-being of those who are hungry, and direct engagement with them. I suggest an approach to addressing hunger that respects human dignity at <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~kent/SwarajAgainstHunger.doc>

The powerful may not see much to be gained by agreeing to enter into dialogue with the poor about how to end hunger. However, if they did enter into the planning dialogue, the parties would learn a great deal about each other, understand each other better, and maybe begin to care more about each other.

Perhaps the hungry will be invited into the discussion, locally, nationally, and globally, when it is recognized that they do not threaten to take away something from the power pie. *If* we are serious about addressing the hunger problem, all of us need to recognize that the hungry have roles to play in solving the problem, along with the powerful. There should be a dialogue process that results in a plan of action that can be expected to end hunger as a significant public health problem locally, nationally, or globally.

We already have all the material resources and all the technical knowledge that are required to accomplish this. We come then to the crucial question: Do we have the will to work together with our brothers and sisters and our children to protect all of us from the humiliation of hunger?

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## Appendix. GLOBAL CONFERENCES AND DOCUMENTS ON HUNGER

- The *Manifesto* of the Special Assembly on Man's Right to Freedom from Hunger, held in Rome in March 1963.
- The first World Food Congress, meeting in Washington, D.C. in June 1963, called for "the formulation of a world plan in quantitative terms . . ."
- The Freedom from Hunger Campaign Conference held at the headquarters of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in November 1963 unanimously adopted a declaration "to give whole-hearted support to the Freedom from Hunger Campaign until its final goal is achieved."
- The second World Food Congress met in The Hague, Netherlands, in June 1970.
- 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, 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.
- The *Plan of Action* that came out of the World Food Summit of 1996, and its follow-up meeting, World Food Summit; *five years later*.
- *General Comment 12* on the right to food, prepared by the United Nations' Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations. Economic and Social Council 1999).
- The Commission on the Nutrition Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century of the United Nations Administrative Committee on Coordination/Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN) submitted its report on *Ending Malnutrition by 2020: An Agenda for Change in the Millennium* (United Nations Administrative Committee 2000).
- The World Health Organization's *Global Strategy on Infant and Young Child Feeding* of 2003 (World Health Organization 2003).
- The *Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security*, adopted by the FAO Council in November 2004 (FAO 2005b).
- The Millennium Development Project's *Halving Hunger: It Can be Done*, (UN Millennium Project 2005a).
- The United Nations Human Rights Council's Special Session on the World Food Crisis on May 22, 2008.
- The draft *Comprehensive Framework for Action* released by the High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Crisis in July 2008 (HLTF 2008).
- The G8 Summit Meeting held in Hokkaido, Japan in July 2008, which took up the global food crisis.