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World Hunger

In the midst of a catastrophic food crisis, the world's poor struggle to find enough to eat.

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When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them,

"You give them something to eat."

Mark 6:35-37 (NRSV)

Christian Mission and Food Distribution

by Monica J. Cross

Poverty is pervasive around the world and causes waves and waves of suffering, sorrow and sadness. It is the state for the majority of the world's people and nations. The most tragic parts of poverty are the lack of food due to poor and inadequate food distribution systems and processes that create an associated debilitating effect on the community in the form of social and civil unrest. Food is a basic necessity for the survival of humanity yet many people (our brothers and sisters) are dying for that lack of those basic needs. Here are some facts and figures on hunger, poverty and food distribution:

* In 2005, almost 1.4 million people lived below the international poverty line, earning less than \$1.25 per day.

* Among this group of poor people, many have problems obtaining adequate, nutritious food for themselves and their families. As a result, 947 million people in the developing world are undernourished. They consume less than the minimum amount of calories essential for sound health and growth.

* Undernourishment negatively affects people's health, productivity, sense of hope and

overall well-being. A lack of food can stunt growth, slow thinking, sap energy, hinder fetal development and contribute to mental retardation.

* Economically, the constant securing of food consumes valuable time and energy of poor people, allowing less time for work and earning income.¹

The above figures are important because the lack of food is more closely associated with human poverty and deprivation, at least symbolically if not in fact, than all other basic needs. As such this has led to crises in food distribution.

The food crisis appeared to explode overnight, reinforcing fears that there are just too many people in the world. But according to the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), with record grain harvests in 2007, there is more than enough food in the world to feed everyone — at least 1.5 times current demand. In fact, over the last 20 years, food production has risen steadily at over 2 percent a year, while the rate of population growth has dropped to 1.14 percent a year. Population is not outstripping food supply.

Continued on next page

Global Mission and Food Distribution (cont.)

Continued from previous page

“We’re seeing more people hungry and at greater numbers than before,” says the World Hunger Program’s executive director, Josette Sheeran, “There is food on the shelves, but people are priced out of the market.”²

Famines and endemic undernutrition, until recent decades, seemed to confirm the assumption that population growth was destined to outstrip the capacity to produce food. That has changed. In the mid-1960s, the Green Revolution ushered in a period of rapid food production growth in many poor countries. And although famines still occur, it is understood that they can be deterred or fostered by public policy.³

This idea can be extended to the understanding of endemic hunger. The world’s food supply in 1990 managed to feed 5.3 billion people at an average per person rate of 2,770 calories daily, well above an age-distribution adjusted, nutritionally adequate standard. Of course, not everyone ate the average share. There would have been no food for 25 percent of the world’s population had we all tried to eat as much as the average American. On the other hand, if we had limited ourselves to the consumption level of the average Bangladeshi, there would have been enough left over to feed another 2.2 billion people.

How much redistribution would be required to eradicate under-nutrition? Is the protein-rich diet of those with higher incomes an important cause of calorie deprivation among the poor? Is income really the driving force in reducing the incidence and degree of under-nutrition? Is it correct to think of food poverty as a “demand” problem, not strongly related to the magnitude and structural characteristics of food supply?

Since the mid-1960s, there have been significant changes in the level and distribution of food in the world. But although

food consumption must ultimately be understood at the level of individuals, the limitation of evidence, excepting the data from small and/or infrequently administered surveys, does not permit building a global or even a national time-series picture of food consumption from the individual level up. For this time dimension, we rely on national food balance sheets (or supply utilization accounts) compiled annually by the FAO.

Although food distribution has changed, the problem persists. Food consumption and distribution in the developed countries have increased since 1960s, but food consumption and distribution in the poorer countries have decreased primarily due to political and economic transformation which drastically reduced food subsidies and disrupted food distribution.

Each day families go hungry because of a lack of access to food due to multiple factors, but it is clear that according to studies that distribution is the challenge of this period of history. Transportation, roads, political and social unrest happen around the world and are some of the main inhibitors food delivery systems. The one key issue that is the source of poverty and hunger is world peace. Facilitation of better systems of distribution is necessary at the physical level, but it is also crucial that anyone reading this article pray for peace in our world. Ultimately only a peaceful world will eradicate poverty, hunger and therefore the challenge of food distribution.

¹ www.bread.org, <http://www.bread.org>, accessed March 28, 2009.

² Eric Holt-Giménez, Eric, and Loren Peabody, “From Food Rebellions to Food Sovereignty: Urgent call to fix a broken food system,” *Institute for Food and Development Policy*, May 16, 2008. <http://www.foodfirst.org/en/node/2120>.

³ www.bnet.com, <http://www.bnet.com>, accessed March 28, 2009.

Resources for further study

www.bread.org

Bread for the World is a collective Christian voice urging our nation’s decision makers to end hunger in the United States and abroad.

www.churchworldservice.org

Church World Service is the relief, development and refugee assistance ministry of the thirty-five Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican denominations that make up the National Council of Churches USA. Working in partnership with indigenous organizations in more than eighty countries, CWS works worldwide to meet human needs and foster self-reliance.

www.fns.usda.gov

The Food and Nutrition Service, formerly known as the Food and Consumer Service, administers the nutrition assistance programs of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The mission of FNS is to provide children and needy family’s better access to food and a more healthful diet through its food assistance programs and comprehensive nutrition education efforts.

www.foodfirst.org

The purpose of the Institute for Food and Development Policy – Food First – is to eliminate the injustices that cause hunger.

Global Food Crisis

The Washington Post examines in-depth the causes and effects of the world’s worst food crisis since the 1970s. www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/world/globalfoodcrisis/

Several Problems Feed Crisis in Food Production

by Fay Barnes

There are times when even our best intentions cause unforeseen harm. An example of this can be seen in the global food crisis.

As our atmosphere heats up from an increase in CO² emissions, we look for ways to reduce our carbon footprint. Some have suggested using biofuels, developed from corn, as one answer to this problem. Much research and development has occurred in the last several years to develop genetically modified corn and machinery capable of running on biofuels. As a result of such technology, USAID estimates that nearly half of global corn consumption in 2006-07 went toward biofuel production. Thus, global food prices increased and a shortage occurred due to a lower supply of this food source.

Continents like Africa have only about 30 percent of the average production necessary to support itself. Low production can be attributed to war, climate, and poorer growing conditions. Thus, much of Africa relies on imported food, and as food prices increase, the poor get poorer and are unable to feed themselves.

In places like China and India, the population has grown dramatically in recent decades and so has income related to the industrial boom. As a result, the demand for meat, dairy products and processed food has increased. Neither country has been able to develop appropriate agricultural practices fast enough to keep pace with demand. The likelihood for famine has dramatically increased as a result of this situation.

Australia, a highly developed nation, has experienced years of drought and now raging wildfires, which destroy land and make farming nearly impossible. Situations like these lead to the necessity to rely on imported food.

As the population grows, the demand for food will increase, resulting in further crisis. Those nations with the resources to develop and help others develop new and ap-

propriate agricultural technologies have failed do so. However, it may not be the sole responsibility of leading national governments, but also that of NGO's and faith-based humanitarian groups. Non-governmental organizations such as Foods Resource Bank (FRB) have made it their mission to educate individuals and communities around the globe in effective and sustainable agricultural practices. Specifically, FRB engages U.S. farmers and agribusiness in resource development and support to implement necessary educational programs in developing countries. The goal of FRB is to teach and provide primary resources to individuals and communities and leave them self-sustaining.

I had the opportunity to visit a FRB site in Bosnia this past summer. The war in Bosnia-Herzegovina ended in 1995, but even today tens of thousands of people are hungry due to lack of appropriate agricultural practices. Foods Resource Bank, in cooperation with Merhamet, a faith-based group, developed a sustainable farm using greenhouses and natural irrigation from local springs. The farm will allow for three growing seasons, producing enough food to supply all of Merhamet's programs, which feed

the majority of those in need. The excess produce is sold, providing income for future farming needs. FRB provided the education and primary material resources to make this project possible.

Foods Resource Bank. <http://www.foodsresourcebank.org/>

Merhamet. <http://www.merhamet.ba/index.php>.

Peter McPherson. *The Global Food Crisis: Causes and Solutions*. May 14, 2008.

<http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/110/mcp062508.pdf>

Non-governmental organizations such as Foods Resource Bank (FRB) have made it their mission to educate individuals and communities around the globe in effective and sustainable agricultural practices.

He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him,

"Feed my sheep."

John 21:17 (NRSV)

Food vs. Fuel — Do the Poor Stand a Chance?

by Gage Church

Poor people increasingly are left to starve as affluent drivers use more and more food crops to create fuel.

Converting food crops into biofuel is "a crime against humanity" because it creates food shortages and price increases that cause millions of poor people to go hungry, Jean Ziegler, the United Nations' independent expert on the right to food, has said. Ziegler said that "the effect of transforming hundreds and hundreds of thousands of tons of maize, of wheat, of beans, of palm oil, into agricultural fuel is absolutely catastrophic for the hungry people."¹

Using biofuel such as ethanol instead of or in addition to gasoline in cars and trucks cuts carbon dioxide emissions, which contribute to global warming, although some scientists say that the production of the biofuels releases more greenhouse gasses than are saved by using ethanol.

The catastrophic food shortages that began in 2007 are caused only in part by using food crops for fuel, but they serve as a warning of how poor people will be affected as industrialized nations ramp up their production of ethanol. As the price of grains skyrockets, people in Haiti are reduced to eating mud,² and mothers in Africa feed their children leaves from trees.³ In 2007, riots occurred in Mexico because of the skyrocketing price of tortillas.⁴

One person could be fed for one year "on the corn needed to fill an ethanol-fueled SUV."⁵

Even so, the use of food crops for fuel continues to increase in the United States, Europe and Brazil.

The United Nations' World Food Program has been hit so hard by grain prices that it may be forced to cut off some food aid to the world's poorest countries, while the United States is planning to turn a record amount of corn into fuel.⁶ The increased use of ethanol could cost the U.S. government up to \$900 million for food stamps and child nutrition programs, a congressional report says.⁷

Even so, ethanol producers have asked the Environmental Protection Agency to increase the amount of ethanol that refiners can blend with gasoline from a maximum of 10 percent to 15 percent, which could boost the demand for ethanol by as much as 6 billion gallons a year. U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack has said he believes the administration could move quickly to raise the cap to at least 12 or 13 percent, but the EPA has not yet made a decision.⁸

Already, about a quarter of U.S. corn goes to feeding ethanol plants rather than people or livestock.⁹

Market demand works against the needs of the poor because it responds to money, not need. "People who own cars have more money than people at risk of starvation. In a contest between their demand for fuel and poor people's demand for food, the car owners

"The effect of transforming hundreds and hundreds of thousands of tons of maize, of wheat, of beans, of palm oil, into agricultural fuel is absolutely catastrophic for the hungry people."

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Food vs. Fuel (cont.)

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win every time." Will that really happen? The world has already seen something similar occur. "... 800 million people are permanently malnourished, the global increase in crop production is being used to feed animals: the number of livestock on earth has quintupled since 1950. The reason is that those who buy meat and dairy products have more purchasing power than those who buy only subsistence crops."¹⁰

World Bank President Robert Zoellick sees a crisis looming. "While many are worrying about filling their gas tanks, many others around the world are struggling to fill their stomachs, and it is getting more and more difficult every day," Zoellick has said.¹¹

Bruce Babcock, director of the Center for Agriculture and Rural Development at Iowa State University, calls high commodity prices a wake-up call to governments around the world that they cannot take adequate food supplies for granted. "Given current federal policy, there will be no burst in the ethanol bubble. Even if we are lucky and crude oil prices drop to \$50 per barrel, we will still have \$4-plus (per bushel) corn because of the (federal) mandates and tax credits and import tariffs," he has said. "... We are asking agriculture to provide a significant portion of the U.S. transportation fuel supply. This does not come free. ... \$4-plus corn is with us as long as we have federal ethanol mandates and an ethanol industry."¹²

There is hope, both for those who are combatting global warming and those hoping to feed the world's poor. Scientists are working to turn cellulose into fuel. Cellulose can be reaped from switchgrass and other nonfood crops, thus easing the need for corn and soybeans to be used for ethanol and biodiesel. Babcock cautions, however: "Switchgrass ethanol will not be viable if it is going to be grown on the same ground as crops. Only if it can be grown on unused land will it be viable."¹³ The poor again suffer if food crops are pushed off of land to make way for nonedible fuel crops.

Ziegler, the U.N. expert, has called for a five-year moratorium on biofuel production – a plea ignored by the industrialized nations. A moratorium, he said, would allow scientists time to learn how to create ethanol from crop residue such as corn cobs, rice husks and banana leaves.¹⁴

¹ Lederer, Edith M., "UN Expert Calls Biofuel 'Crime Against Humanity,'" *Associated Press*, October 27, 2007. <http://www.livescience.com/environment/071027-ap-biofuel-crime.html>
Accessed May 1, 2009.

² "Dirt poor Haitians eat cookies made of mud," *WorldFocus*, February 19, 2009. <http://worldfocus.org/blog/2009/02/19/dirt-poor-haitians-eat-cookies-made-of-mud/4120/>
Accessed May 1, 2009.

³ Faiola, Anthony, "Where Every Meal Is a Sacrifice," *Washington Post*, April 28, 2008. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2008/04/27/ST2008042702198.html>
Accessed May 1, 2009.

⁴ "Mexicans stage tortilla protest," *BBC News*, February 7, 2007.

⁵ "The Clean Energy Scam," *Time*, April 7, 2008, pp. 40-41.

⁶ "Food or fuel?" *Los Angeles Times*, February 26, 2008. http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-ed-food26feb26.0.3838970_story
Accessed May 1, 2009.

⁷ Jalonick, Mary Clare, "Report: Ethanol raises cost of nutrition programs," *Associated Press*, April 9, 2009. <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5j6ogZotbuhkV2EmKFNNILN2VDjmQD97F7C203>
Accessed May 1, 2009.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Mufson, Steven, "Siphoning Off Corn to Fuel Our Cars," *Washington Post*, April 30, 2008. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/29/AR2008042903092_pf.html
Accessed May 1, 2009.

¹⁰ George Monbiot, "Comment: Fuel for Thought," *The Guardian*, November 23, 2004, p. 56.

¹¹ Mufson.

¹² Babcock, Bruce, "Wheat, Corn and Ethanol Fight for Acres," *Washington Post*, April 30, 2008. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/discussion/2008/04/25/DI2008042502592_pf.html
Accessed May 1, 2009.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Lederer.

Global Ministries Council of Theological Students Roster – 2008-9

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