



Book Enough

Why the World's Poorest Starve in an Age of Plenty

Roger Thurow and Scott Kilman
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Recommendation

Farm subsidies started out as a good way to protect hardworking US and European farmers against the vagaries of the marketplace and the weather. But they’ve morphed into a major reason why the developing world suffers regular, devastating famines. The effects of subsidies on commodity prices often mean that poor farmers, particularly those in Africa, cannot make any money selling their harvests, so they cannot buy the seeds and fertilizers they need to grow future crops. Without incomes, they and their families starve. In this revealing, shocking book, *Wall Street Journal* reporters Roger Thurow and Scott Kilman examine how – as they contend – practices by rich nations keep developing nations poor and hungry. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to those who want to know why, in the 21st century, people still starve to death, and what’s to be done about it.

Take-Aways

- Agricultural advances made since the mid-20th century constitute a “Green Revolution” that once promised an end to global hunger.
- Yet periodic famines continue, despite the Earth’s capacity to feed everyone.
- In 2008, almost one billion people globally were undernourished, the most in decades.
- Western institutions contribute to this man-made calamity through their wrongheaded, shortsighted and selfish decisions.
- Rich nations’ farm subsidies and food aid policies often make things worse, not better, for subsistence farmers.
- Western-imposed free-market policies doomed Africa’s fledgling farm programs.
- African crop production cannot compete with subsidized Western commodities.
- Norman Borlaug (1914-2009), “the father of the Green Revolution,” created new seed strains that wiped out famine in Asia and South America.
- To end worldwide hunger, the US must increase its agricultural development aid.
- Africa must do its part, too, by spending more on farm and infrastructure support.

Summary

Abundance, Then Starvation

Massive famines continue to plague humanity, despite the Earth’s capacity to feed everyone on the planet. The world’s nations are well-aware of the scourge of starvation; they send food and aid once famine hits a country or region, yet the help often comes too late to save millions and does little to address the reasons for hunger. In the face of recurring food shortages, attempts to stem the causes of famine have so far failed.

“In the modern world, like never before, famine is by and large preventable. When it occurs, it represents civilization’s collective failure.”

Take the case of Ethiopia. Reeling from devastating starvation in 1984, Ethiopia opened its farms to scientists and activists who came to Africa to introduce new miracle seeds, along with improved farming methods and other technological advances. Food production soared as a result; by 2000, it appeared that Ethiopia would finally be able to feed itself. In 2002, its peasant farmers enjoyed bumper crops, but its primitive food markets were not up to handling this influx, so food prices plummeted. As a result, farmers could not earn enough money to cover their expenses. To reduce their 2003 planting costs, they purchased cheaper, low-quality seed. They stopped buying fertilizer. They turned off their irrigation systems. They ceased planting on some of their lands. They hoped these cautionary steps would tide them over to the next season.

“Since the time of the Green Revolution, the world has known how to end famine and tame chronic hunger. We have the information and the tools. But we haven’t done it.”

But then there was no rain, and crops withered. To cope, the farmers and their families ate their unsold food reserves. When those were gone, the farmers sold their meager belongings, including their oxen, which pulled their plows, and their cows, which provided milk. Soon, they had nothing left to sell. With no options, no food and no way to earn money, they and their families began to starve.

“Borlaug’s seeds made him a celebrity in Asia, which he exploited to grab newspaper headlines in order to cajole government officials into helping farmers get fertilizer, credit and subsidies.”

The cycle of abundance and hunger was not solely an Ethiopian problem; it was an African calamity. In 2003, upward of 40 million Africans were starving to death, including 14 million Ethiopians. Additionally, hundreds of millions more Africans could not get enough food to eat. Despite widespread improvements in agriculture, governments didn’t make the parallel investments in infrastructure that would support increased yields. Local food markets remained grossly inefficient. Farmers could not get financing to purchase seed stock and fertilizer, nor crop insurance to protect themselves against weather problems. Developing countries had no farm subsidies in place to protect growers against food price crashes.

Hunger and Nearly One Billion People

Did the global community learn anything from the 2003 African disaster? Apparently not: As of 2008, almost one billion people around the world were undernourished, the greatest number in decades. Indeed, the situation is getting worse, not better, for the poor “in a world that produces more than enough food for everybody.” Death, malnutrition and disease kill 25,000 people daily, according to the United Nations – the same toll as if “60 jumbo jets” fell out of the sky every day.

“The failed momentum of the Green Revolution deprives some places...particularly Africa, from maximizing their agricultural potential.”

Yet, worldwide hunger is a “man-made catastrophe, caused one anonymous decision at a time, one day at a time, by people, institutions and governments.” In one notable example, as of 2007, the world’s developed nations were paying their farmers \$260 billion in subsidies, which creates a grossly uneven “plowing field” on which poor farmers cannot compete. In the US, 25,000 cotton farmers pocket more than \$3 billion annually in farm subsidies, adding to their average \$800,000 household wealth. Additionally, financial aid from rich countries comes with hypocritical strings attached: The World Bank will not lend money to developing nations that subsidize their farmers. American food shipments to poor countries, which began as a noble humanitarian gesture, are now “a jealously protected entitlement for those providing the aid.” In 2003, the US sent \$500 million worth of “American-grown grain” to Ethiopia to feed the starving. However, America offered only “\$5 million in agricultural development aid,” meager assistance to help Ethiopia build an infrastructure to feed its citizens.

Norman Borlaug and the “Green Revolution”

In 1944, American Norman Borlaug, a plant pathology PhD, was working in Mexico for the US government. His job was to combat wheat rust disease and breed a variety of wheat that would produce better yields for Mexican farmers. Borlaug was hugely successful. Within four years, he created rust-resistant wheat. He introduced the seed strain first to Mexican farmers and then to the rest of the South American agricultural sector. Thanks to Borlaug, Latin America was able to eliminate its chronic food shortages.

“The regular deluge of food aid had turned Ethiopia into a global welfare state.”

Scientists soon made similar breakthrough improvements with rice, Asia’s primary staple. Borlaug and his miracle seeds traveled to Asia, where governments began to buy “tens of thousands of tons of seed” to improve their crops. Borlaug went to India and showed farmers there how to improve wheat yields. Indians revered the scientist; he enjoyed such a high profile that Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi cultivated a patch of ground outside her home to grow his wheat. Within four years, India doubled its wheat harvest, becoming self-sufficient. Pakistan also began to experience remarkable wheat yields.

“The Americans know that with their subsidies they are killing so many economies in the developing world.” (Mody Diallo, official of a Mali cotton farmers’ union)

Soon, famine ceased to be a problem in both countries. Farmers in Turkey, Afghanistan, Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon and Iraq also began using Borlaug’s wheat strain. It spread to China and throughout Asia. This Green Revolution dramatically changed the lives of farmers in Asia: “Cereal production between 1970 and 1995 grew far faster than the region’s population.” Dependable farm incomes raised prosperity levels for all citizens. For example, in India, rural poverty fell from “64% in 1967 to 34% in 1986.”

“In 2007, the average household income of [US] farmers was \$86,233, which was 27.5% greater than the average income of all US households.”

Thanks to Borlaug and other devoted scientists, it appeared that millions of poor people could finally avoid the scourge of starvation. In 1970, the Nobel Committee awarded its Peace Prize to Borlaug for his groundbreaking work to feed the hungry. In his Nobel address, Borlaug stated: “Man can and must prevent the tragedy of famine in the future instead of merely trying with pious regret to salvage the human wreckage of the famine, as he has so often done in the past. We will be guilty of

criminal negligence, without extenuation, if we permit future famines.”

Success Breeds...Failure

Because of these remarkable scientific achievements, leaders worldwide began to believe that all nations soon would be able to produce enough food to nourish their growing populations. Global grain crops grew abundantly from 1975 to 1985, well outpacing population growth. This excess harvest resulted in giant surpluses that depressed food prices. The US government spent \$1 billion each year on export subsidies, moving its wheat to foreign markets to prop up domestic prices. European nations also began subsidizing their food exports.

“Today, eliminating hunger would be a bulwark against the extremism of the 21st century: global terrorism.”

This one-two punch – “rising rich-world subsidies and cheaper commodities” – was a body blow to developing world farmers, particularly in Africa. Also, the huge worldwide surplus of grain changed people’s attitudes about the likelihood of future famines. Many came to believe that global hunger would soon disappear. As a result, leaders, governments and philanthropies paid less attention to famine, and more to health, education, AIDS and climate change. At the same time, environmentalists began objecting to the Green Revolution’s use of genetic engineering, “fertilizers and pesticides.” The developed nations began to focus more on the adverse effects of food production, and less on finding ways for African farmers to optimize their crop yields.

“Biofuel companies are now competitors of the hungry.”

In 1981, Harvard economist Elliot Berg published an influential paper for the World Bank outlining its proposed African strategy. The Berg report, which called for African nations to economize, provided the knockout blow to African agriculture. Parroting the report’s prescriptions for dramatic policy changes, World Bank officials proposed that private enterprise become the primary change agent to spur African economic development, and not the continent’s often corrupt, bloated governmental bureaucracies.

“Filling a 25-gallon fuel tank of a sport utility vehicle with a blend containing 85% ethanol...would consume about eight bushels of corn, which contained enough calories to feed a person for a year.”

The International Monetary Fund wholeheartedly agreed; so, in order to get development loans, African governments had to shut down their monopolies and let free markets take over in a “structural adjustment.” To meet the new austerity demands, African states greatly reduced their agriculture programs (but not their military forces) to enable the private sector to take over food development. But most African nations had little or no private sector capable of providing farmers with financing, materials and insurance. African peasant farmers, already operating without an adequate safety net, suddenly had no protection at all. No one was available to sell them “fertilizer and seed” or to purchase and transport their harvests. Thus, structural adjustment turned out to be a “fatal cure” for African farm advancement.

“Food is the moral right of all who are born into this world.” (Norman Borlaug)

Because developed nations believed that Africa’s prosperity would evolve from manufacturing rather than from farming, agricultural development aid to Africa fell through the floor. By the “closing decades of the 20th century,” farm development funds as a percentage of all financial aid dwindled to only 3% from a previous 17%. The result of all this retrenchment was the death of the hope that Africa could one day achieve food self-sufficiency, its best protection against widespread famine.

How to Fix the Problem

Global hunger represents a complex, imposing challenge. Nations, corporations, philanthropies and world leaders must take immediate steps to eliminate famine and extend the full benefits of the Green Revolution to Africa’s distressingly weak agriculture sector. The following basic actions are the most crucial:

- **“Keep promises to expand development aid”** – Developed nations have somehow found the money to bail out sectors of their economies hurt by the recent recession. They also should be able to finance their previous pledges to Africa. According to the Gates Foundation, approximately \$9 billion in aid goes to African agricultural development annually. However, Africa needs to receive some \$20 billion each year to make a notable difference (a lower figure than that of the recent Citigroup bailout).
- **“Create a global fund to aid small farmers in Africa”** – Money needs to go to individual farmers so they can make investments that will improve their crop yields, such as creating ponds and dams to preserve rainwater, employing “no-till practices” that preserve ground moisture, and procuring and using hybrid seeds and fertilizer.
- **“Invest in infrastructure”** – Currently, irrigation does not serve even 4% of sub-Saharan Africa’s planting fields; only one of three rural Africans “lives within one and a half miles of a paved road.” Without adequate irrigation, farmers face an uphill fight to grow food; without roads, they can’t get their harvests to markets.
- **“Africa takes responsibility”** – By 2008, of the 53 African nations, a mere seven had allocated as much as 10% of their budgets to agricultural needs. The rest of Africa must invest more in providing technological and other advances to their farmers, and must offer incentives for cultivating more land.
- **“Plant new seed technology”** – Bioengineered crops that can resist bugs and disease may also provide maximum nutrition. Major corporations are beginning to “share their breakthroughs with poor farmers on a royalty-free basis.”
- **“Find an alternative to turning food into fuel”** – Using corn and other food plants to make ethanol means that much less food is available for the world’s poor. Instead, science should develop biofuels from inedible plants or inedible parts of plants.
- **“Consider an international grain reserve”** – This would allow for immediate responses to food emergencies around the world.
- **“Level the plowing fields”** – African farmers should get subsidies, just as farmers do in developed nations. Subsidies help struggling nations achieve food self-sufficiency.
- **“Give US food aid the flexibility for local purchase”** – This way, indigenous farmers would directly benefit and the food would arrive much more quickly where it’s needed.
- **“Get involved”** – Want to help feed the hungry? You can make a difference – through your “church or a charity or a university or a business.”

About the Authors

Roger Thurow is a foreign correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*, where **Scott Kilman** covers agriculture. In 2005, the United Nations honored them for their reporting.

