

Global Hunger: Causes and Actions

Tony Castleman

“Flatbread and salt,” the 35-year-old woman said, “twice a day, every day. For the past month that’s all we’ve eaten.” She gestured toward a toddler and older child playing nearby, “Them too. We haven’t had anything else to feed them.”

When I asked about lentils, the most common source of protein in the area, the woman responded with a resigned laugh. “We haven’t seen lentils in six weeks. Now that the squashes are ripe, we will eat them.” She pointed to the green squashes growing plump on vines stretched across the roof of her tiny mud house.

This woman and her family, living in a small village in northern India, are among the approximately 840 million people in the world who are undernourished. While victims of large-scale famine and starvation at times receive world attention and emergency aid, millions of other families face chronic hunger every day of their lives, largely unnoticed and unsupported by programs or policies. One-third of the entire population of sub-Saharan Africa is undernourished, as are nearly half of South Asian children under age five. Understanding the global hunger situation and its causes can help provide a context for understanding, and perhaps addressing, the hunger crisis in Israel.

Hunger is arguably the single greatest cause of human misery that exists in the world today. Malnutrition causes illness and early death, reduces productivity and income, and stunts children’s physical and mental development. By leaving children underweight with weakened immune systems, malnutrition directly or indirectly kills six million children under age five each year and causes over half of child deaths globally. In addition to the physical impacts, being unable to adequately feed oneself and one’s family can also create psychological impacts such as frustration and despair.

In a world that produces vast quantities of food, why does hunger continue to exist on such a large

scale? The primary cause is poverty. Even in a country such as India, which currently possesses large surpluses of wheat and rice, many households do not produce enough food or earn enough income to access enough food to meet their nutritional needs. Poverty is compounded by other related factors, such as droughts and floods. The recent droughts in southern and eastern Africa have devastated agricultural production and left over 20 million people at risk of starvation. The woman quoted above lives in an area

hit by frequent floods, exacerbating poor agricultural production and limiting people’s capacity to earn income by other means.

Conflict is another major source of hunger. Developing countries lose an average of \$4.3 billion of agricultural output each year due to armed conflict. Conflict displaces people from their homes, preventing them from producing food or performing other income-generating activities.

During wars, nations increase expenditures on armies and weapons, which often drastically diminishes the resources available for local agriculture or food imports. Civil conflict can also result in food being diverted to soldiers or in some cases being deliberately withheld from groups of people as punishment.

Poor policies are another source of hunger. Zimbabwe’s recent economic and land policies have combined with drought to dramatically reduce the country’s food production, turning it from a food exporter to the recipient of external food aid. This situation has left nearly seven million Zimbabweans at risk of starvation. A relatively recent factor that has gravely exacerbated hunger in many parts of Africa is HIV / AIDS. Striking large proportions of the population during their most productive years, the disease reduces food production and income, depletes savings, and often forces families to sell productive assets in order to access health care and meet basic food needs.

Governments, international agencies, and private organizations engage in a range of activities to prevent

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and alleviate hunger, such as strengthening agricultural production, public distribution systems and other safety net programs, nutrition education, income generation activities, famine early warning systems, and direct food aid. While these activities rely largely on governments and specialized organizations, there are also actions that we as American citizens and American Jews can take to contribute to the battle against global hunger.

One simple action is to improve our own knowledge and awareness (and that of our families and communities) about world hunger. Greater consciousness of the status and impacts of global hunger helps the issue to become a higher priority for *tzedakah*, for political action, and for community initiatives — three further actions. Many organizations implementing programs to prevent and alleviate hunger rely heavily on private contributions, and extending *tzedakah* to them — in the form of money, time volunteered, or in-kind donations — can enable these initiatives to reach more people more effectively.

The U.S. Congress wields considerable power to allocate funds to directly and indirectly address world hunger. Most members of Congress do not think these decisions are high priorities for their constituents. Individual and organized efforts to inform our representatives of our views on these issues, especially when linked to a specific bill, helps leverage important shifts in the government's resource allocations and policy direction.

Synagogues, youth groups, schools, and campus Hillel groups can include global hunger as a component of their service initiatives. Possible activities include organizing campaigns to focus public attention on the issue, developing linkages with implementing institutions or other groups working in the field, and mobilizing resources to support anti-hunger efforts.

Ninety-five percent of the world's malnourished people live in developing countries. As economic and communication systems globalize, the reach of our compassion and our social justice efforts must also broaden to embrace human beings suffering from hunger across the globe.

Tony Castleman works with the Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance Project at the Academy for Educational Development in Washington, D.C., providing technical assistance to USAID and NGOs on nutrition and food security programming. From 1994 to 2000 he served as Director of a nonprofit organization in India that implements health, education, and poverty alleviation projects.

Inadvertently, in the last issue of Sh'ma, we failed to acknowledge the long-time and profound support of one of our Advisory Committee members: Jeremy Burton.

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