

# HUNGER IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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## Abstract

Economic analysis of hunger calls for an informationally broad approach that takes adequate account of the distinct interdependences involved. This paper examines the interdependences between (1) income and food consumption, (2) operations of different economic factors, (3) production and trade in different countries, (4) macroeconomic stability and food security, (5) intrafamily distributional rules and the sharing of food and health care, (6) women's power and fertility behaviour, (7) military expenditure and economic deprivation, (8) early undernourishment and its consequences on health and skills, (9) political incentives and the direction of government policy, and (10) public activism and social commitment. The implications of these interconnections are briefly discussed.

**Keywords:** Hunger, food, undernourishment, entitlement, women's empowerment, intrafamily distribution, fertility, political incentives, military expenditure.

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## HUNGER IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD<sup>1</sup>

Amartya Sen

We live in a world with persistent hunger, widespread undernourishment and frequent famines. It is often assumed that nothing much can be done to remedy these desperate situations. It is frequently presumed that these maladies are hard to tackle in the short run, and that the problems may actually get worse in the long run, especially with the growth of population. Implicit pessimism often dominates international reactions to these miseries in the world today, and this can itself lead to fatalism and the absence of serious attempts to remedy the sufferings that we see.

There is, in fact, little factual basis for such pessimism, nor any cogent grounds for assuming the immutability of hunger and deprivation. But in order to solve the "world food problem," as it is often called, we have to have a clear idea of the nature of the problem. Clarity is sometimes difficult to achieve because the subject of hunger is dominated by preconceptions and often by attempts to understand a very complex problem in excessively narrow terms. What is needed above all is an adequately broad understanding of different aspects of hunger in the contemporary world. The deprivation of food can take many different forms and have quite disparate causes as well as distinct effects. There is no "the" world

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<sup>1</sup> Text of the first Dr. Rajendra Prasad Memorial Lecture for the Food Corporation of India given in New Delhi on 12th June 1997.

food problem, and the understanding of hunger in the modern world calls for an adequately discriminating analysis. An undifferentiated view can make it harder to eliminate the different types of deprivations that afflict people in the modern world.

### Varieties of Problems

Let me illustrate. India can be legitimately proud of having eliminated major famines since independence - the last famine occurred here in 1943, three years before independence. In contrast China did have a truly major famine in 1958-61 in which between 23 and 30 million people died. Yet the average level of nutritional achievement has been much higher in China than in India for very many decades now - predating the economic reforms of 1979. While more people died in China during the famine resulting from the Great Leap Forward than have died in any famine in India in recorded history, the normal mortality rate in China has been much lower than in India from the 1950s onwards. Indeed, I had calculated some years ago that the extra mortality from so-called normal causes in India is sufficiently higher than in China to lead to the remarkable fact that in every four or five years, on the average, there is more extra "normal deaths" in India than the enormous number of people who died in China in that great famine. Forces of normal mortality - unprevented by good nutrition and health care - killed more people every four or five years in India, compared with China, than the death toll of the world's largest recorded famine.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See my Commodities and Capabilities (Amsterdam: North-

I have commented in the past about the India-China contrast, and the contrast is striking but reasonably well understood. Let me turn now, however, to an important contrast between India and sub-Saharan Africa. The median age at death in India around 1991 was 37 years; this compares, incidentally, with a median age of 64 years in China. What about sub-Saharan Africa? There the weighted average of median age at death has been a remarkably low 5 years.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in as many as five African countries, the median age at death has been 3 years or below. Seen in this perspective, the problem of premature mortality - related ultimately to hunger, illness and other causes - is enormously sharper in Africa than in India. This difference, added to the fact that many African countries have continued to have famines whereas India has not had any since independence, would seem to make India's record very much superior to Africa's.

And yet we get a very different picture if we look at the prevalence of undernourishment in India vis-a-vis Africa. Calculations of general undernourishment - what is sometimes called "protein-energy malnutrition" - is nearly twice as high in India as in sub-Saharan Africa on the average (despite the fact that it is Africa - not India - that is ravaged by wars and turmoil and famines). Judged in terms of the usual standards of retardation in weight for age, the proportion of undernourished children in Africa is 20 to 40 per cent, whereas the percentage

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Holland, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> See World Bank, World Development Report 1993 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), Table A.3.

of undernourished Indian children is a gigantic 40 to 60 per cent.<sup>4</sup> About half of all Indian children are, it appears, chronically undernourished.<sup>5</sup>

I know that there is a school of thought that argues that retardation does not matter much (that "small" may even be "beautiful," or at least "not terrible"), but recent medical research has suggested quite the contrary: it does make a big difference to health, morbidity and even cognitive skills.<sup>6</sup> While Indians live longer than Africans, and have a median age at death much higher than Africans have, nevertheless there are many more undernourished children in India - not just in absolute terms but also as a proportion of all children - than in Africa. The nastiness of our nutritional record is second to none. If we add to it the fact that gender bias at death is a substantial problem in India, but not so in sub-Saharan Africa, we see a picture that is much less favourable to India than to

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<sup>4</sup> See Nevin Scrimshaw, "The Lasting Damage of Early Malnutrition," World Food Programme, May 31, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> This is not to deny that each of the standard criteria of undernourishment admit some room for doubt, but indicators based on health and physique do have some advantages over measures that simply look at food input. It is also possible to make use of the available medical and functional knowledge to improve the criteria to be used. On these and related issues, as well as on the comparative picture of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, see the powerful study of Peter Svedberg, Poverty and Undernutrition in Sub-Saharan Africa, mimeographed, WIDER, Helsinki, 1997, to be published by Clarendon Press, Oxford.

<sup>6</sup> See the literature reviewed in Scrimshaw, "The Lasting Damage of Early Malnutrition" (1997). See also Partha Dasgupta, An Inquiry into Well-being and Destitution (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), and Siddiq Osmani, ed., Nutrition and Poverty (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

Africa.<sup>7</sup>

There is no one "world food problem." There are a number of distinct failures, and the focal problem varies from region to region. The distinct problems call for different types of concern, even when there are common predicaments as well. In dealing with the nature, causation and remedying of hunger in the contemporary world, we cannot escape this basic recognition.

### World Food Summit and the Lost Opportunities

I shall come back to the diversities presently. But first some remarks on the attempts to see the "world food problem" in artificially unified terms. Why do these attempts persistently occur? Perhaps there is a general temptation to see things in aggregative terms - to marshall a complex reality in some summed up figures. Such aggregations are also invoked to draw attention to what is taken to be the "total magnitude" of a "world problem." For example, in motivating the World Food Summit held in Rome in November 1997, the United Nations's Food and Agricultural Organization (the FAO) made prominent use of such a simpliciter: "an estimated 800 million people are still chronically undernourished."<sup>8</sup> Numbers like that, which attempt to summarize the pictures from different countries and regions in shocking overall statistics, are striking. They may have their use in raising public concern, but they give the impression of a "similar" deprivation the world over, whereas an

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<sup>7</sup> See also Peter Svedberg, Poverty and Undernutrition in Sub-Saharan Africa (1997).

<sup>8</sup> FAO, World Food Summit: Renewing Global Commitment to Fight Hunger (Rome: FAO, 1996).

understanding of the complex reality calls for discriminating analyses.

The World Food Summit last November did succeed in emphasizing - and drawing attention to - the enormity of the so-called food problem. But despite some good papers and commentaries, the thrust of the conference - at least its official part - failed to take a sufficiently differentiated view of distinct types of food deprivation and their diverse causation. The Summit was only a partial success, which focused much more on the production of food than on the determination of who gets how much food and how. Even though the latter problem - how food is "earned" in the real world - received a bit more attention ultimately than it had in the "preparatory" presentation made by the Food and Agricultural Organization which hosted the Food Summit, the focus tended to be distinctly on the amount of food produced. The production of food is not, of course, a negligible issue, but there are so many other problems that also need urgent attention.

The host of the World Food Summit, the FAO, is perhaps most influential public organization in the world dealing with hunger and food deprivation. The dedicated members of the FAO try very hard to improve the world, and if the attempts do not yield as much as they could, the cause is not lack of effort. Perhaps there is a basic - in fact constitutive - flaw in the way the FAO was set up in the early days of the United Nations. The FAO is in charge of both "food" and "agriculture," as its name indicates. It is concerned with hunger (as food deprivation),



but it is also concerned with agricultural production, in particular food production. The dual priorities can get in each other's way. Indeed, in asking an organization that is responsible for international public policies on agricultural production to take charge also of official leadership in removing hunger and food deprivation, the founders came close to taking a particularly narrow view of the nature and causes of hunger in the world. When FAO was set up in the early years of the United Nations, the inclination to see hunger as resulting mainly from the inadequacy of food output and supply was common. While decades of research has shown that to be just not the case, the impact of that over-simple theory survives even today through the organizational structure of the FAO.

This confluence of roles tends to make the FAO typically rather alarmist about the adequacy of food production (as part of agricultural production) in the context of "world hunger" and rather negligent of other causal influences on the existence and persistence of hunger. Food production remains the central focus of concern for the FAO, and despite many attempts to broaden that outlook, there is a persistent attempt to see hunger through the glasses of agricultural production. Shri11 warnings come regularly from Rome that the world food output is getting close to falling behind population growth. The problem with this approach is not only that the diagnosis is just not correct, but also that there are extremely serious real problems that call for urgent attention and get none.

Food production is indeed an important component of solving

the problem of hunger in the modern world. But much else also needs to be done, including among other things:

- enhancement of general economic growth,
- expansion of employment and decent rewards for work,
- diversification of production,
- enhancement of medical and health care,
- arrangement of special access to food on the part of vulnerable people (including deprived mothers and small children),
- spread of basic education and literacy,
- strengthening of democracy and the news media,
- reduction of gender-based inequalities.

These different requirements call for an adequately broad analysis, alive to the diversity of causal antecedents that lie behind the many-sided nature of hunger in the contemporary world. At the organizational level, it also calls for better integration of public policies in different fields, involving an active role for the public itself. The problem of hunger cannot be dissociated from these other deprivations, and a broader approach is certainly needed. In what follows, I shall try to illustrate the nature and importance of an adequately broad approach to hunger in the modern world.

### Food Production, Population Growth and Pessimism

First some quick remarks on the problem of so-called "balance" between food production and population growth - the issue that is taken to be so central in many lines of policy analysis, including some that got much hearing at the World Food

Summit. We must get the readings straight. The trend of food output per head has been persistently upwards for the world as a whole and for most regions of the world - Africa (for reasons to be discussed) being the main exception. The fact that this rise in food output per head has continued to take place despite adverse economic incentives (associated with a sharp fall in the relative price of food vis-a-vis other goods) adds force to the recognition that producing enough food is not in itself the problem. It would be a great mistake to focus on food production as the central problem. The need for broader economic, social and political development involves many other requirements.

The relation between food production and population size can, of course, change in the long run, particularly if population growth remains very fast. But the growth of world population has started to slow down significantly, partly due to the expansion of family planning knowledge and facilities, but also due to other features of social and economic change.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, fertility rates do come down sharply, there is much evidence, with social development, including general availability of family planning facilities, and also with more empowerment of women, related to such factors as female education and female employment.

These are the policy issues and political priorities to

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<sup>9</sup> The likelihood of food production falling behind population growth in the foreseeable future has been seriously disputed in the extensive empirical study of Tim Dyson, Population and Food: Global Trends and Future Prospects (London: Routledge, 1996). See also the studies on this prepared by IFPRI in Washington, D.C.

consider, rather than concentrating on some kind of a general fear of food falling short of population. As it happens, decades of research has shown that the so-called "balance of food and population" is a very bad predictor of hunger and starvation. We need a more sophisticated understanding of what the real problems are, what its distinct dimensions and aspects look like, what causal factors are associated with the respective deprivations, and how we may seek effective remedies.

### Africa's Political Economy and Systemic Disruptions

I mentioned earlier that Africa is an exception to the generalization that growth of food output across the world is keeping well ahead of population expansion. Indeed, Africa is sometimes seen as a great example of the vindication of the old Malthusian fears - of population outrunning food production. Is that really the case?

The economic predicament of Africa certainly does relate, among other things, to production problems and to the low - sometimes even negative - economic growth. But this is a crisis of production in general, not of food production in particular.

A general output problem looks like a problem with food output only because Africa still concentrates so heavily on producing food. Any country that is not so dependent on food output for income generation and employment can take a fall in food output per head with greater resilience, since it can purchase food in the international market, if it has the means (based, for example, on industrial production) to do this purchasing.

If, for example, we compare food production per head in

1993-95 with that in 1979-81 in different countries in Asia and Africa, we find a decline of 1.7% in South Korea, 12.4% in Japan, 33.5% in Botswana, and 58.0% in Singapore. There was, however, no growth of hunger in these economies, since they also experienced fast expansion of real income per head through other means (such as industries or mining), and also they happen to be richer anyway. The sharing of the increased income made the citizens of these countries more able to secure food than before, despite the falling food output. In contrast, even though there was little or no decline in food production per head in economies such as Angola (3.2% decline), Sudan (7.7% increase), or Burkina Faso (29.4% increase), they experienced considerable unfolding of hunger because of their general poverty and the vulnerable economic entitlements of many substantial groups. It is essential to focus on the actual processes through which a person or a family establishes command over food.

The roots of Africa's problems and suffering relate to wars, political instability and economic uncertainties. Newly independent African countries did make various moves towards democratic self-governance in the early post-colonial years, but by the beginning of the 1960s the continent got caught not only in a local wave of military activism, but also in the global cold war. Any military coup that displaced a legitimate government got the support of either the West, or of the Soviet Union or China, depending on which side the military leaders opted to be. Some military leaders indeed did very well out of

shifting rapidly from being aligned to one side to being aligned to the other - Somalia was a prime example of that.

Be that as it may, by the beginning of the seventies the take over by military rulers was very extensive, and so was the prevalence of famines and economic destruction. Dictatorships do not give much political incentive to governments to prevent famines. The rulers never suffer from famines, since famines are such divisive phenomena, which hit only the vulnerable and the weak. If the rulers had to face free multi-party elections and public criticism, they would have had political incentives to try hard to stop famines: elections are not easy to win on the wake of famines, nor are political criticisms - from opposition parties and the news media - easy to face. It is, therefore, not surprising that famines do not occur in functioning democracies. The prevalence of famines in Africa in the 1970s and later has had much to do with the dictatorial - often military - rule that got established in many African countries from the 1960s onwards.

Persistent wars and military activities also play havoc with systems of health care and epidemiological prevention. One reason why Africa has such a low median age at death - on which I commented earlier - is not just the prevalence of famines, but also the breakdown of health and medical facilities and the poverty of epidemiological intervention. I have had the occasion in the past to criticise India's indifferent record in these fields, and I believe that criticism is well deserved, but nevertheless India's performance in this area has been

relatively better than what has happened in sub-Saharan Africa.

If India has managed to have lower death rates and higher life expectancy than the bulk of sub-Saharan Africa, then the credit for that comparative relief goes largely to its relative stability and to the steady - though slow - expansion of the network of health care. I should also add that the high birth rates in Africa and a total fertility rate well above 6 for the continent as a whole (compared with India's below 4 figure), also relate to some extent to the lack of health care facilities, to which family planning opportunities are highly complementary.

So far as the opportunity for expanding food production is concerned, the scope for this is indeed very substantial in Africa. This calls for appropriate economic policies (including agricultural research, institutional reforms, and changes in relative prices).<sup>10</sup> Africa must also consider the advantages of a more diversified - and less vulnerable - pattern of output. Most countries in the world have achieved economic prosperity and eliminated economic insecurity through industrialization (and along with that, by putting agriculture on a higher technological basis). In one way or another, this will have to happen in Africa as well. Indeed, the climatic uncertainties are, if anything, more acute in Africa than elsewhere, and Africa can do better than putting all its eggs in one vulnerable

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Carl Eicher, Transforming African Agriculture, Hunger Project Paper 4 (1986); and the papers of Jean-Philippe Platteau, Francis Idachaba, and Judith Heyer in Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, eds., The Political Economy of Hunger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

basket. It has already had many sad experiences of the effects of overconcentration on agriculture and of being periodically smacked by climatic disasters. For the long-run economic stability and security of Africa, economic diversification is quite crucial.

The tasks of economic and social change also draw attention to the importance of overcoming military and civil strife, expanding democratic governance, and also developing market institutions. The role of public policy must also cover the expansion of health care, family planning facilities, basic education (especially of women), and social security provisions.

All these contribute - directly and indirectly - to nutritional security, good health care, and economic strength and safety. What Africa needs is not a narrowly food-centred view of the economic task to be undertaken, but a really broad appreciation of its problems and opportunities.

#### Economic Interdependences: Types and Varieties

The need for broadening the approach to hunger does not apply only to Africa. There is a general need to do this no matter which region we study. In analyzing hunger and its causes and consequences, we have to take an adequately broad view of the process of acquiring food and of achieving nourishment (and its economic, social and political antecedents), and also of the extensive consequences of nutritional deprivation on the people, the economy and the society. The processes involve the market mechanism as well as public services. They are influenced by such "local"



considerations as inequalities in the sharing of food and medical attention within the family as well such "global" matters as national and international trade and exchange. They involve people's health and well-being as well as their productivities and participation in economic and social activities.

I note some examples of important interdependences that we have to consider.<sup>11</sup>

(1) **Interdependence between consumption and income:** This is the most basic interdependence in understanding food deprivation. Hunger is primarily a problem of general poverty and of deprivation of food entitlement and adequate health and social care.<sup>12</sup> It is necessary, in this context, to look not only at the effect of income loss on hunger, but also on the causal processes that can lead to a serious loss of effective income.

(2) **Interdependence between distinct sectors:** People can acquire food through trade and exchange. It is particularly important to pay attention to the exchange between labour power and commodities (given by employment opportunities and real

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<sup>11</sup> I have discussed some of these issues also in my keynote address to the meeting of the Parliamentarians of the world, arranged by the Interparliamentary Union, in the Italian Senate on the occasion of the World Food Summit, in November 1996. And also in my paper "Economic Interdependence and the World Food Summit," Development (the Society for International Development), 1996.

<sup>12</sup> This connection has been extensively investigated recently. My own attempts to do this can be found in Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), and jointly with Jean Drèze, Hunger and Public Action (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

wages) and between non-food and food commodities (given by general economic opportunities of production and trade).

(3) **Interdependence between different countries:** Food is bought and sold in world markets, and food self-sufficiency is not the only route - nor always the most economic route - to assure food security to all. While it is certainly the case that an economy under siege cannot rely on food imports, and it is also important not to ignore the imperfections of the world food markets, nevertheless the possibility of importing food has to be rationally considered along with other options. A "siege mentality" can be psychologically distracting and economically counterproductive. It is a question of rationally balancing the pros and cons of food imports.

(4) **Interdependence between food security and macro-stability:** Many past famines have been associated with high inflation, making the groups that fall behind (in the inflationary race) the selected victims of starvation. The Bengal famine of 1943, in which between 2 and 3 million people died, was a "boom famine" - an example in fact of an inflation-driven decline of food entitlement (of those least able to participate in the economic boom).<sup>13</sup> Prevention of severe and uneven inflation is, thus, an important part of achieving food security. This concern has to be supplemented by the need for the avoidance of substantial unemployment.

(5) **Interdependence between distributional equity and the sharing of food:** There is much evidence of extensive

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<sup>13</sup> On this, see my Poverty and Famines, 1981, Chapter 6.

inequalities in the distribution of food and health care within the family in many parts of the world, particularly in Asia and North Africa. Distributional disparities can have a major impact on the well-being and productivity of the neglected members. There is also evidence that such disparities can be substantially reduced by a number of social, economic and political changes. The economic empowerment of women seems to have a significant role here, among other causal influences. This draws our attention to the importance of such critical variables as female employment in remunerative jobs, the sharing of property rights, and the spread of education (especially female education).<sup>14</sup> The relation between economic opportunities and the sharing of food also applies, obviously, between classes and regions.

**(6) Interdependence between women's standing and fertility decline:** There is a growing body of evidence that women's literacy and education not only help to combat gender-based inequalities in distribution and also generally tend to reduce the mortality rates of children, but also tend to moderate

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<sup>14</sup> Some of the underlying issues are discussed in my "Gender and Cooperative Conflict," in Irene Tinker, ed., Persistent Inequalities (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). See also the classic study of Esther Boserup, Women's Role in Economic Development (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970). The extensive literature in this field includes, among others, Megan Vaughan, The Story of an African Famine: Hunger, Gender and Politics in Malawi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); the papers by Barbara Harriss and Anne Whitehead in Drèze and Sen, eds., The Political Economy of Hunger (1990); and also Bina Agarwal, A Field of One's Own (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), among many other contributions in this rapidly expanding area of research.

fertility rates.<sup>15</sup> A high rate of growth of population is one of the factors that contribute to the intensification of the problem of food insecurity and hunger (even though the rate of growth of world population has definitely been slowing down). While some pressure groups concentrate too exclusively on the population issue ignoring other problems, and that bias must be avoided, there are good reasons to take note of the growth of population as one factor among many that deserve serious attention. There is considerable empirical evidence that fertility rates can come down sharply as a result of greater power of young women within the family (often the most suppressed members of the household), since the lives that are most restrained and compromised by frequent child bearing and rearing are those of the younger women themselves. The crucially necessary empowerment of younger women includes the availability of family planning opportunities, but also the economic and social standing of women in general, governed by such factors as female employment and economic power and by women's education and social and political involvement.

**(7) Interdependence between political incentives and public policies:** As has already been discussed, famines do not occur in democratic countries with a relatively free press and active opposition parties (even when these countries are very poor).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Mamta Murthi, Anne-Catherine Guio and Jean Drèze, "Mortality, Fertility and Gender Bias in India: A District-Level Analysis," Population and Development Review, 21 (December 1995).

<sup>16</sup> On this see my Resources, Values and Development (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), Chapter 19. See also Drèze and Sen, eds., The

Elections and the possibility of public criticism make the penalty of famines affect the rulers as well - not just the starving victims. Even the provision of health care can be substantially influenced by the nature of the political process and deeply disrupted by military and sectarian governance. Much does depend, however, on the enterprise with which democratic freedoms are used by the citizens.

**(8) Interdependence between wars, military expenditure and economic deprivations:** Wars not only lead to the destruction of productive assets, but also to severe reduction of incentives to invest and undertake economic expansion. Sometimes war-related inflations also disrupt the entitlements of those who fail to keep up with the others. Furthermore, by increasing the power of military rulers and by encouraging their tendency to eliminate opposition and democracy, wars can also be indirectly disruptive of the efficient and smooth working of political incentives in the direction of protecting the vulnerable. Many famines in the world have been associated, in one way or another, with war and military activities. India has been luckier than Africa in avoiding wars over the last 25 years, but its military expenditure is still incredibly large (as it is also in Pakistan). The benefits of cutting defence costs can be very substantial not only in expanding nutritional supplementation, but also in providing funds for education and health care.

**(9) Interdependence between early undernourishment and**

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Political Economy of Hunger (1990), especially the papers by N. Ram and Rehman Sobhan.

## long-run consequences on health and cognitive skills:

Recent research has brought out sharply the impact of early undernourishment on long-run health, and even on the development of cognitive functions and skills. The fact that India has such a high rate of childhood undernourishment - one of the highest in the world - makes this a particularly alarming consideration.

Aside from protein-energy malnourishment, there are also issues of particular nutritional deficiencies, such as iron and iodine, the consequences of which can be silently serious.

The negative effects of early undernourishment can be serious throughout one's life. Various studies have confirmed the connection between low head circumference or low ponderal index at birth and mortality rates later in life from cardiovascular diseases. There has also been some evidence - based on studies in Preston and Hertfordshire in Britain - showing a greater tendency towards high blood pressure for people whose birth weight was particularly low.<sup>17</sup> Since the Indian population is known to be relatively more susceptible to cardiovascular diseases, the connection with the lowness of birth weight would be, certainly, worth examining. There are also observed connections between low birth weight and the ponderal index (that is, birth weight divided by birth length) and the incidence, later in life, of impaired glucose tolerance and non-insulin dependent diabetes.

There is, I believe, too much smugness at this time about the nutritional situation in India. The population is not in

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<sup>17</sup> See the references cited in Scrimshaw, "The Lasting Damage of Early Malnutrition," 1997.

the grips of famines; the country does not have to import food to survive; we do not see starving people in the streets. But India still has remarkably high levels of child undernourishment judged in terms of standard clinical criteria, and to dismiss this worry on the alleged grounds that "we seem to be doing all right" is gloriously stupid. A medical problem deserves some medical analysis, and not just self-satisfied visual observation.

Early undernourishment can be damaging not only for well-being, but also for the productive abilities and skills of the people involved, since the linkage between childhood nutrition and the development of cognitive skills is reasonably well established. A significant loss of human capital can be among the impacts of early undernourishment, and this interdependence adds to the direct consequences of nutritional deficiency on health and welfare. Recently, the World Food Programme has been active in drawing attention to this issue and in initiating some counteracting moves through nutritional intervention.<sup>18</sup>

**(10) Interdependence between public activism and social policies:**

It is crucial to bear in mind that public action includes not only what is done for the public by the state, but also what is done by the public for itself. It includes, for example, what people can do by demanding remedial action and through

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<sup>18</sup> There was an interesting seminar arranged on this subject ("Ending the Inheritance of Hunger: Food Aid for Human Growth") by the World Food Programme in Rome on May 31, 1997, which I was privileged to attend, and which included important presentations by Robert Fogel and Nevin Scrimshaw, among others. The symposium was linked with a new emphasis of the World Food Programme.

making governments accountable. This recognition demands that an adequate role be given not only to the protection of basic means of living and social security, but also - at a deeper level - to promoting the use of democratic rights of free elections, uncensored news reporting and unfettered public criticism. The use of political and civil rights can make a radical difference to the problem of hunger in the contemporary world and to its manifold consequences.

### A Concluding Remark

What is particularly crucial at this time is to make policies and programmes draw on the lessons that have emerged from decades of investigative research. For elimination of hunger in the modern world, it is critical to understand the problem in an adequately broad framework, involving not only food production and agricultural expansion, but also the functioning of the entire economy, and - even more broadly - the operation of the political and social arrangements that can, directly or indirectly, influence people's ability to acquire food and to achieve health and nourishment.

Furthermore, while much can be done through sensible government policy, it is important to integrate the role of the government with the efficient functioning of other economic and social institutions - varying from trade and commerce to active functioning of political parties, committed non-government organizations, and the institutions that sustain and facilitate informed public discussion, including an effective news media.



Hunger involves much more than food, and the solution of hunger in the contemporary world also calls for taking note of many different interconnections. I have tried to point to some of the central policy issues that have to be addressed in India and elsewhere. The response that we seek must fit the diagnosis of the problems that we face. Clarity of diagnosis can be critically important for treatment and cure.