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Editors

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Ethics, Hunger and Globalization

In Search of Appropriate Policies



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The International Library of Environmental, Agricultural and Food Ethics

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ETHICS, HUNGER AND GLOBALIZATION

IN SEARCH OF APPROPRIATE POLICIES

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FOREWORD

SOCIAL JUSTICE, ETHICS, AND HUNGER: WHAT ARE THE KEY MESSAGES?

The international human-rights commitments which the world's governments have accepted over the past half century, if taken seriously as shared values and as legal obligations, are invaluable tools for addressing the inequities of the global economy and the divisions between nations and peoples which are so evident today.

This book will carry that broad theme forward by focusing on one stark reality – millions of men, women, and children on our planet wake up hungry and go to bed hungry each day. The contributors to this book, leading scholars in the fields of ethics, economics, religion, and nutrition, are suggesting a new vision that combines ethics and economics – a vision that recognizes both legitimate national interests and global concerns, and which highlights the connections between ethical principles and law – which for me, of course, centrally includes international human-rights law.

The book seeks to promote concrete policies and practical actions that will reduce poverty, hunger, and malnutrition. As other contributors, notably Professor Asbjørn Eide, have done, I want to reinforce the case for the importance of including a human-rights perspective in efforts to eliminate global hunger. Why? First, because human rights open up new avenues of advocacy and action across a range of areas related to hunger; from agricultural policies and research to technology development, from food production to food safety. Equally important, by embracing a human-rights perspective, we are able to draw on tools of legal accountability which can help push governments and other actors to take appropriate actions to fight hunger and poverty.

THE REALITIES OF GLOBAL HUNGER

It is worth taking a moment to remind ourselves of just what hunger means in human terms. I came face-to-face with the reality of hunger and poverty during my time as President of Ireland and, later, as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. I remember, as if it were yesterday, my visit to Somalia as President of Ireland. I sat beside women whose children were dying – and children whose mothers were dying. As a mother myself, I felt the sheer horror of that. But as the Head of State of a country that was once devastated by famine while vast quantities of food were shipped abroad, I also felt the terrible and helpless irony that this could actually be

happening again. And, quite frankly, I felt then – and have never lost – a profound sense of anger and outrage and, indeed, self-accusation that we are all participants in that re-enactment.

But if we are to come to terms with the sense that we should be following a different course, and doing more, it is just as important that we also reflect briefly on the almost mind-numbing statistics on world hunger. According to the World Hunger Map, every seven seconds a child under the age of 10 dies – directly or indirectly of hunger – somewhere in the world. The UN's Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) has recently estimated that the number of undernourished people around the world has increased to 840 million: comprising 799 million in developing countries, 30 million in countries in transition, and 11 million in industrialized countries.

On top of these horrifying statistics, more than 2 billion people around the world suffer from so-called 'hidden hunger' or micronutrient malnutrition, resulting in children who fail to develop their normal physical and intellectual capacities – and will suffer as a result.

We know, too, that the hunger crisis is compounded further by, and interlinked with, other global challenges which must be fought vigorously if we hope to make progress in achieving food security for all. Perhaps the most difficult is the fight against HIV/AIDS. The interconnection between AIDS and hunger can be seen most starkly in Africa, where infection rates are rising among African women. Almost 60% of those living with AIDS in Africa are now women. Women also represent 80% of Africa's small farmers, who have traditionally been able to help their families and communities in times of food crisis. But the toll being taken by AIDS makes this task increasingly difficult.

I learned an important lesson recently about the connections between food security and HIV/AIDS. I was observing the work of a small non-governmental organization (NGO), Mamelani, which provides training and support for a community living in Khayelitsha outside Cape Town. I was reprimanded severely for taking too simplistic an approach to the issue of access to drugs and treatment. 'There are too many voices calling for those who are HIV-positive to have access to antiretroviral drugs, without making it clear that these drugs may be necessary towards the end, but that good nutrition is far more relevant to prolonging life and to the quality of that life,' I was told. My informant continued:

People who are HIV-positive require greater quantities of vitamins and minerals in order to bolster their immune system and stave off the dire effects of full-blown AIDS. Selenium, vitamin A, and magnesium are particularly crucial. Foods rich in these should be readily available so that the gap period between infection and illness can be widened. With provision comes the need for proper nutritional education to prevent the grave tendency of people falling sick to believe that their only recourse lies in antiretroviral treatment. Indeed, nutrition must be ensured throughout or the benefits of this treatment will be minimal.

The speaker was my 23-year-old son, a volunteer with Mamelani, which teaches appropriate vegetable growing as part of a broader wellness program. The vegetables are grown on plots the size of an average door, which is the space between homes in that part of Khayelitsha.

Unfortunately, the problems don't end with coping with the AIDS pandemic. Lack of access to water supplies, failing local and national markets, inadequate infrastructure, weak national governance, and lack of responsible policy and action by the international community all fuel the food crisis.

Hunger, as we know, is still predominantly a rural problem. Of the 1.2 billion people who suffer from extreme poverty in the world today, 75% live and work in rural areas. The rural poor who suffer from hunger lack access to land resources, are often bound by unjust sharecropping contracts, or cannot grow enough food to feed themselves or their families.

The shocking truth is: We know that hunger is avoidable. There are sufficient food resources in the world to ensure that all the people should have enough to eat. Yet, the reality is that many of the current responses to hunger focus on food production, rather than on food distribution. Without getting into a debate on the efficacy and safety of biotechnology, or the importance of ongoing efforts to enhance agricultural yields, the mere fact that people are starving despite a superabundance of food suggests that we should look harder at how existing food supplies are distributed. Where they are distributed through market mechanisms that are not accessible to those without resources, questions should be asked about agricultural development policies which invest so little in small farmers and local food systems, and which would be more likely to actually feed people who cannot access food through normal market systems.

The bottom line is that we are in desperate need of new approaches, new ideas. We are not progressing at the necessary pace to reach the target originally set in 1996 by the World Food Summit, reiterated in the UN Millennium Declaration in 2000 and at the World Food Summit 2002, of halving the number of hungry people by the year 2015.

The issue we must address is: How could a new framework, based around ethics, social justice, and human rights, make a significant difference in ridding ourselves of hunger now and in the future?

A HUMAN-RIGHTS APPROACH TO FOOD SECURITY

How does a human-rights approach help in addressing the problem of hunger? First, by affirming the equal value and dignity of every individual. By reframing the debate on hunger in terms of rights, it means that taking action is an obligation, not a form of charity. Citizens and civil society groups can use a human-rights approach to put pressure on their national governments, reminding them of their commitments and demanding full civil society participation in the design and implementation of specific reforms.

Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948, the right to adequate food has been recognized as a central component of the right to an adequate standard of living. This right has also been confirmed in the principal human-rights conventions, in particular, Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which has been ratified, and thus accepted as a legal obligation, by the majority of the world's countries.

Most recently, in the Declaration adopted at the Rome World Food Summit in June 2002, the international community reaffirmed 'the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food.'

But what does having this right mean in practice? Essentially, the right to food obligates governments to ensure that adequate food is available, either through domestic production or trade. They must ensure that all people within their jurisdiction have access to food, and that access is not conditional on one's relative wealth, social status, or nationality. As the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Professor Jean Ziegler, points out in a recent report to the UN Commission on Human Rights, the right to food does not mean simply handing out free food to everyone.

The obligations that this right places on States are best captured in the General Comment, No. 12, adopted by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the expert body mandated to monitor States' compliance with their treaty obligations under the Covenant. As the Committee puts it, the right to adequate food imposes three types of obligations on States: to *respect*, to *protect* and to *fulfill*. The obligation to *respect* requires governments not to take political or other measures that would seriously reduce the availability of food or that would prevent access to adequate food for vulnerable populations. The obligation to *protect* includes the State's responsibility for ensuring that the actions of other governments, private entities or individuals, including transnational corporations over which they exercise jurisdiction, do not threaten the availability of food or deprive individuals of their access to adequate food. The obligation to *fulfill* requires that governments identify vulnerable groups among their populations, such as the physically disabled, children, and victims of natural disasters, and provide food and assistance using strategies that ensure the achievement of a long-term capability of people to feed themselves.

The fulfillment of the right to adequate food requires steps to be taken by all appropriate means, including, in particular, the adoption of legislative measures, supported by the necessary administrative capacity within the public and private sectors where appropriate.

Some 20 countries have adopted constitutions that, in more or less explicit terms, refer to rights concerning food or a related norm. A smaller number have developed legislative means to ensure enjoyment of the right to food in a comprehensive way. But it has become increasingly clear that many governments need additional guidance in taking the steps required to progressively implement the right to adequate food.

MOVING THE RIGHT TO FOOD FORWARD

The World Food Summit in 2002 recommended the elaboration of voluntary guidelines to support these efforts in the context of national food security. An Intergovernmental Working Group was established to elaborate, over a period of two years, a set of guidelines for this purpose and the FAO Committee on World Food Security has adopted voluntary guidelines to support the progressive realization of the right to adequate food.

The guidelines, although a voluntary instrument, are seen by many as a breakthrough that will give new energy to efforts to achieve the UN Millennium Goal of halving the number of the world's hungry by 2015. They address the range of actions that governments should take to ensure food security for all at a national level. They provide a new international reference for civil society organizations in scrutinizing governments' performance in defeating hunger and malnutrition around the world. Legal experts will undoubtedly draw on the guidelines in future proceedings involving food security at a national level. I would encourage this book to review these guidelines and consider how they might inform your conclusions and recommendations in the future.

I must be clear in stressing that each country is responsible for ensuring the right to adequate food for its own citizens. But achieving food security for all won't be possible for the poorest people on the planet without more responsible policies and actions on the part of the richest nations.

What would more responsible policies look like in practice? The FAO Panel of Eminent Experts on Ethics in Food and Agriculture has found that, over the past 15 years, aid to agriculture and rural development has declined by nearly half. The Panel also notes that many developed countries have not fulfilled their commitment of contributing 0.7% of their gross national product for development assistance, and have not provided sufficient assistance to the agricultural sector.

The links between adequate food and access to productive resources such as land are also addressed through this analysis. Human-rights standards make it clear that vulnerable people, including landless people, need special attention, and that indigenous peoples and women should be entitled to the right to inheritance and ownership of land. Human-rights standards also emphasize the importance of access to information and scientific knowledge, such as information on nutrition and reform of agrarian systems, in such a way as to achieve the most efficient development and utilization of natural resources.

Clearly, such policies must be changed if rich nations are to play a more constructive role in eliminating hunger. That will require political courage and a greater public awareness of the connections between poverty and global instability which can affect us all.

The FAO Panel rightly observed that:

Market globalization must be matched by responsible and responsive global governance through institutions capable of ensuring the enjoyment of human rights – including the right to adequate food and

to be free from hunger – to everyone. The international community, through its institutions and organizations, must recognize its duties to offset the negative consequences of globalization on a very un-level playing field, and to advance conditions that generate equal opportunity for all.

The project I now lead – Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative – has been working with the Aspen Institute and the Brookings Institution on precisely this question: How to encourage a more informed and principled approach, here in the United States, to the fight against global poverty. Earlier this year we convened a group of leading experts and policy-makers around the issue of how to influence the USA's policy agenda on poverty. The results of this initial discussion, which will continue next year, are available in a report, *America's Role in the Fight Against Global Poverty*, available on the websites of EGI, the Aspen Institute and the Brookings Institution.

The point is that human-rights standards, together with the international system that has been built up to interpret and support national governments in implementing their treaty obligations, provides important guidance. I wish to stress, however, that human rights alone won't provide all the answers. Some of the dilemmas around hunger that we are facing today present moral and ethical questions that human-rights standards can certainly help to identify but do not always resolve. Consider, for example, the role of the food and agriculture industry. The actors involved in addressing hunger are not only States but also multinational corporations. Every facet and segment of the global food system is increasingly dominated by huge transnational corporations which monopolize the food chain, from the production, trade, and processing, to the marketing and retailing of food. This narrows choices for farmers and consumers. What are the ethical and human-rights responsibilities of this influential industry sector?

According to a recent report, just 10 corporations control one-third of the US\$23-billion commercial seed market and 80% of the US\$28-billion global pesticide market. Monsanto alone controls 91% of the global market for genetically modified seed. Another 10 corporations, including Cargill, control 57% of the total sales of the world's leading 30 retailers and account for 37% of the revenues earned by the world's top 100 food and beverage companies. In South Africa, Monsanto completely controls the national market for genetically modified seed, 60% of the hybrid maize market, and 90% of the wheat market. Wal-Mart, the world's largest food retailer, is expected to single-handedly control 35% of US food and drug sales by 2007.¹

Does the current structure of the global food system influence the increasing focus on agricultural yields, and the relative lack of attention paid to how food is distributed locally, nationally and internationally? Some experts contend that the more that companies keep the emphasis on increased yields, the less they have to answer for the distortions caused by their disproportionate market share, and for the social impacts of the agricultural policies they help to advance through their extraordinary influence on the political process.

Due to their size and resources, these corporations can bring increased efficiency to food production – but they can also distort markets, threatening food security and ecosystems. In pointing out that the quest for monopoly profits can lead companies to constrain food access for poor people, Jean Ziegler affirmed last year that ‘despite the fact that transnational corporations increasingly control our food system, there are still relatively few mechanisms in place to ensure that they respect standards and do not violate human rights.’²

Thus, a new challenge is to ensure that such powerful actors in the globalized economy are accountable for the impact of their policies on human rights, including the right to adequate food. However, most global agri-food companies have yet to sign up to corporate social responsibility initiatives such as the UN Global Compact. Other business sectors, such as the pharmaceutical and IT sectors, which we at EGI are working with through a three-year project – the Business Leaders Initiative on Human Rights – are addressing their respective industry human-rights responsibilities. I would challenge agribusiness to join us in doing the same. These complex issues are effectively dealt with in the various chapters of this book.

What is the significance of the political initiative started on 20 September 2004, when the Presidents of Spain, Brazil, France, and Chile, together with the United Nations Secretary General, presented the idea of a Global Fund Against Hunger and Poverty based on innovative financing mechanisms? I am aware that Oxfam welcomed this initiative as ‘an important effort to refocus the priorities of the global agenda,’ although it had some reservations. As Honorary President of Oxfam, I am happy to quote them as follows:

Nevertheless, it is essential to take into account that the ‘innovative’ mechanisms proposed in the Fund against Hunger will never be an alternative to the principal sources of financing for development. It is these principal sources that will be a measure of the true effort of donor countries: a sustained and ambitious increase in aid flows; effective measures to reduce the foreign debt burden; and fair rules of trade that allow poor countries to take advantage of the opportunities that trade has to offer them. . . .

None of this reduces the importance of finding new ways to finance development. If it achieves adequate backing, the Global Fund against Hunger and Poverty can channel important additional resources through ‘innovative financing mechanisms’. In fact, the proposal touches on endemic problems in international development, such as the regulation of tax havens and speculative capital.

The fundamental contribution of the Fund is the political impetus it will give to some initiatives that are already known, among which the following stand out:

- The tax on international financial transactions would not only contribute significant economic resources, but also would help to

stabilize financial markets and alleviate the effects of crises, such as the one suffered by East Asia in the nineties.

- The granting of Special Drawing Rights by the IMF can partly resolve the chronic lack of hard-currency reserves suffered by many developing countries, especially during times of trade and financial crisis.
- The initiative also includes the International Financial Aid Program proposed by the British government two years ago. Despite the fact that there are still many doubts about this instrument, its passage opens the possibility to move forward future commitments in development aid by issuing bonds, backed by donor countries, on the capital market.

CONCLUSION

The message I wish to leave with the reader should come as no surprise: All of us – as individuals, communities, governments, businesses, civil society, and academic institutions – have responsibilities for reducing hunger, here in the United States and around the world.

While national governments have primary responsibility for the protection of human rights, international law also places obligations on States to cooperate and work together in order to create the conditions under which these rights can be realized worldwide. We must prove to people around the world who are denied their fundamental rights that these commitments have meaning, and that we will hold our governments accountable for their actions or inaction.

No one can deny that overcoming global hunger requires better and more responsible governance at all levels. However, it requires the active engagement of the wider society as well. Encouraging such participation is one of the chief strengths of the human-rights approach. The language of rights can be a powerful motivating force that enables members of civil society to mobilize support so they can ensure that the fundamental objective of food security for all is realized. Books such as this one are encouraging because they can provide both grassroots organizations and policy-makers with principled messages that can shape advocacy and legislation in the future.

Making progress in the fight against global hunger will require resources and commitment on an unprecedented scale. It will require that the richest nations see it as part of their long-term national interest to help those governments most in need to strengthen their own systems of governance. This will include rebuilding the capacity of the State to ensure respect for the rule of law and to provide essential public services.

But it will also require us to look beyond immediate responsibilities to our own families, communities, and nations, and to recognize collective responsibilities to our fellow women and men wherever they may be. Perhaps the time has finally come to acknowledge, as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights put it more