

David W. Smith Memorial Prize 2009

**“In many cities in developing countries, hunger and malnutrition are common among the poor, even when food is relatively abundant.” Discuss**

In 2007 Uganda exported food to the value of \$54,729, 771, however at the same time 19% of Ugandan children are undernourished<sup>1</sup>. Hunger is any caloric intake below the minimum established by the U.N. World Food Program of 2000 calories/day. Malnutrition is a broad term for a wide range of conditions that hinder good health, caused by an inadequate or unbalanced food intake<sup>2</sup>. These differences in definition and the specific nature of the definitions are one of the many factors why they are common among the poor. Despite theories, such as Malthus theories, which states due to the rapid increase in population over past decades there would not be adequate supplies of food, it is known that there is enough wheat, rice and other grains produced to provide every human being with 3,500 calories a day. Yet despite this, in many cities in developing countries hunger and malnutrition are common. This can be explained however by a number of reasons. These include the exportation of food, as a result of the dominance of TNCs; the limitations of food access, utilisation and knowledge; inherited malnutrition and levels of poverty and inequalities resulting in people not being able to afford food to make a healthy diet.

A major cause of hunger and malnutrition, despite food being relatively abundant, is the large number of food exported by developing countries, due to the fact many people are too poor to buy food and so food is exported with many producers purely concerned with their own profits. Many of the countries in which hunger is rampant export much more in agricultural goods than they import, as seen in the earlier example of Uganda and in India, where despite at least 200 million Indians going hungry, in 1995 India exported \$625 million worth of wheat and flour, and \$1.3 billion worth of rice<sup>3</sup>, the two main staples of India's diet. There are a number of reasons why this takes place. Firstly due to the more and more dominant role that TNCs play in food production in developing nations, it is seen that they are more concerned with their own profits, and thus will sell their cash crop for the highest price. In many cases a higher price can be gained by

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.wfp.org/country\\_brief/indexcountry.asp?country=800](http://www.wfp.org/country_brief/indexcountry.asp?country=800)

<sup>2</sup> [www.actionagainsthunger.org/understanding-hunger](http://www.actionagainsthunger.org/understanding-hunger)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.foodfirst.org/node/239>

exporting goods to more developed nations, as if sold in many developing nations they would have to be sold at a considerably cheaper price or else many would not be able to afford them. Many TNCs also displace subsistent farmers from their land, resulting in the good land being dedicated to the production of cash crops, which are then exported, whereas much of the surplus crops produced by subsistent farmers would be sold cheaply in cities. Thus one of the major causes of hunger and malnutrition in cities is that many people are just too poor to buy the readily available food, showing how it is individual policy-makers and TNCs who dictate who eats and who dies. This problem has been intensified by Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) imposed by the World Bank on developing nations. These forced countries to invest in mono, cash crops, owned by the private sector and thus the government lost control of food distribution to the private sector who are more concerned with profits as opposed to poverty levels.

The high cost of food and high levels of poverty, resulting in many people not being able to afford to buy food, is a major cause of malnutrition in many cities in developing nations. This results in many people often eating a very limited diet, consisting of the cheapest food available to buy. This has been intensified in recent months due to the rapid increase in food prices, with food prices increasing by 55 percent from June 2007 to February 2008<sup>4</sup>. This particularly affects urban dwellers as most people living in rural areas in developing nations are subsistent farmers and so are not as greatly affected by changes in global food prices. The limitation of food available to buy is also one that highlights the clear contrast between hunger and malnutrition, as in most of these cases people will not be hungry, as they will be able to afford and buy adequate food. They will however suffer from malnutrition due to the fact they are eating only one staple food, often the cheapest items available, which will not provide adequate nutrition. An example of this can be seen by the fact that 80% of the people who suffer from malnutrition suffer from iron deficiency<sup>5</sup>. This is most common in Asia where the staple foods is predominantly rice, with people having little access or are unable to afford red meat.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://stuffedandstarved.org/drupal/node/373>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.wri.org/publication/content/8365>

The differences in definition between hunger and malnutrition are also important in the fact that many of the children suffering from malnutrition have suffered since before birth due to the malnourishment of their mother. This results in growth being permanently stunted with the body never being able to recover from malnutrition. A key problem linked to this is the lack of awareness and education for many parents living in developing cities on nutrition. This results in parents not knowing the right foods to eat and so people have an unbalanced diet. This is particularly a major cause in the high rates of child malnutrition. This is intensified by the fact access to clean water is often limited in developing cities. An example of this can be seen in many Asian and African nations following the programme launched by Nestle to provide milk powder for babies, which had the greatest impact in urban areas as this was where the produce could be most easily distributed. This may have ended hunger, but caused great nutritional problems as clean water was not available to add to the milk powder as seen by the fact one and a half million children die each year from unsafe bottle-feeding<sup>6</sup>. These examples show how poverty is the underlying problem to hunger and malnutrition in many developing cities, as despite food being available many people can either not afford it, are not educated on how to use it appropriately or do not have access to clean water for cooking causing nutritional problems.

Food access and food utilisation are inadequate in many cities in developing countries, resulting in unnecessary hunger and malnutrition. This is for a number of reasons. Firstly for many households, food is the only flexible budget item, and food expenditure is what is reduced to avoid or reduce indebtedness. Parents, particularly mothers, regularly cut back on their own food, often skipping meals in order to ensure that their children do not go without. This can be supported by the fact 70% of the world hungry are women or girls<sup>7</sup>. Cultural factors also impact on this as in India women eat last and least throughout their lives, even when pregnant due to the positions of men and women in society. This causes men to over-indulge, whilst women remain hungry, despite the fact that there is adequate food if shared equally. This results in malnourished women giving birth to malnourished children, perpetuating the cycle. Furthermore food is

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<sup>6</sup> UNICEF

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.womensedge.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=511&Itemid=152](http://www.womensedge.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=511&Itemid=152)

often wasted due to people not being adequately educated as to how to use different foods. This is becoming more common as a greater, more diverse range of produce is imported to less developed nations. Food access is also often limited due in many cities due to the fact a high proportion of people in developing cities live in informal housing (in Mumbai 85% of people live in informal housing<sup>8</sup>), on the edge of cities, with no transport available. Thus many of these people are unable to access proper food markets. Amartya Sen supported these ideas with his theory which suggested hunger and malnutrition were a result of the deterioration in the entitlements of certain sectors of society, resulting in the poor having limited access to food, due to their weak purchasing and bargaining power, with many lacking anything that could be traded for or converted into food. This further links back to how poverty is the underlying problem in why hunger and malnutrition are common.

In many cities in developing countries, hunger and malnutrition are common among the poor, even when food is relatively abundant. This is most prominently because of poverty levels resulting in people not being able to afford adequate food, or the right nutritional balance; the ever increasing dominance of TNCs in many developing countries who are more concerned with the greatest price they can gain from exporting cash crops; a lack of education resulting in inadequate nutritional knowledge and in some cases inherited malnutrition. A small number of projects have been launched to try and deal with the huge inequalities between those who can afford food and those who cannot. This includes food sovereignty and humanitarian aid, supported by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and many non-government organizations. At present however these programmes will not go far enough and it is highly unlikely that the Millennium Development Goals towards reducing world hunger by 2015 will be met. Therefore it can be seen that above all it is international trade and economic policies which have caused immense poverty that has led to immense hunger and malnutrition, rather than food scarcity.

*(Words: 1492)*

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.awid.org/eng/Issues-and-Analysis/Library/Informal-housing-redevelopment-and-the-potential-impacts-on-women>