

## **Poverty and Hunger in the Developing World: Ethics, the Global Economy, and Human Survival**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The large number of hungry people in a global economy based on industrialization, privatization, and free trade raises the question of the ethical dimensions of the worsening food crisis in the world in general and in developing countries in particular. Who bears the moral responsibility for the tragic situation in Africa and Asia where people are starving due to poverty? Who is morally responsible for their poverty - the hungry people themselves? the international community? any particular agency or institution? In the context of Article 3 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, which states that "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security" (UNDHR, 1948), the ethical question of poverty and hunger becomes a major human concern that should be discussed publicly and resolved by whatever means available. But how can the poor and hungry realize their right to life and security if their very survival is at stake? This paper maintains that responsibility for global poverty at present lies in recent neo-liberal trends in the global economy and with those individuals and organizations who, though small in number, have acquired a disproportionate share of the world's assets and financial resources. That being the case, it is suggested that our monetary and financial policies are in need of drastic changes with regard to global responsibility towards the hungry and impoverished.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Let me begin this paper with some basic questions related to the global food problem: "Why does a global food system that produces enough food every year to feed everyone on the planet deny access to an adequate human diet to one-seventh of the human race?" (McLaughlin, 2002, p. vii). What new measures can be formulated to tackle global poverty and hunger? Where do the roots of the global food problem lie? Does globalization have any ethical dimensions or is it merely an economic concept for facilitating business transactions and enhancing profits? How can equality and justice be established in the world if the gap between poor and rich is ever widening?

To examine these questions and others at a more practical level, imagine that there are seven members in a family which has sufficient agricultural land for farming, advanced technology, adequate finance, good business relationships, and high ethical values. But one of the seven members is starving and living in poverty because the entire property and resources of the family are in the hands of other members. The members who own the resources are becoming richer and the member who is poor is becoming poorer. In the context of this example there arise some questions of ethical import: Are not the six members of the family responsible for the deprived situation of the seventh member? Are they not collectively responsible for every move and action that causes and worsens his situation? Although our example is hypothetical and small in scale, the current food situation in developing countries worldwide could be thought of in a similar way.<sup>1</sup>

\*The material presented by the authors does not necessarily portray the viewpoint of the editors and the management of the Asia Association for Global Studies (AAGS).

The issue of universal human rights and responsibilities in terms of collective human ethics must be viewed through a global prism of human existence and survival. In recognizing human rights at the global level, we should scrutinize economic policies based on privatization, industrialization and free market capitalism. If we do, we can see that maldistribution and concentrated ownership of resources in a few hands is aggravating socio-economic inequality worldwide. Indeed, it is notable that the assets of the globe's three richest individuals exceed those of the 48 least developed nations combined (Robinson, 1998). In no previous era has such concentration of wealth and grave inequality ever been witnessed.

Humankind has set foot on the Moon, built space stations, and developed advanced technologies<sup>2</sup> - yet a vast number of people around the globe, including women and children and rural dwellers in particular<sup>3</sup>, do not meet their minimum dietary needs (Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UN, 2006; Ravallion, 2007). Such a state of affairs clearly must be redressed. In this paper, my aim is to point out the ethical dimensions of the global economy and human survival with regard to the questions I have mentioned above. I argue that the problem of hunger is not the result of a scarcity of food but of a lack of collective human ethics at different levels - individual, local, national, and international. Since we lack the appropriate form of human ethics to tackle hunger, we lack the required urgency and accuracy in our policies and actions. Consequently, a large number of people, mainly in the southern hemisphere of the globe, are unduly suffering from food and health problems.

### **POVERTY AND GLOBAL HUNGER: THE GROUND LEVEL**

The problem of hunger can be visualized mainly in two ways: (a) by analyzing factual data and (b) by directly observing severely affected areas in Asia, Africa and Latin America. One can collate empirical data from governmental and non-governmental national and international organizations and can reach conclusions that others have already accepted. But to know the real situation, visits to areas where hungry people fight daily for their survival reveal with more force that "life below the poverty line is so lacking in the basic necessities for a decent life that it is a bad thing that anyone has to subsist in these conditions" (Singer, 2002, p. 87). Through direct observation, the outsider can come face-to-face with the grinding poverty enveloping a vast number of people across the globe. However, data collected by various organizations can still help us estimate the approximate figures on which to base plans and actions. Thus, what follows is a brief look at key factual data related to hunger in the developing world.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) report (2005) observes that extreme poverty remains a daily reality for over 1 billion people who live on less than US\$1 a day and 800 million people who suffer from acute scarcity of food. Poverty-related ills are most alarming in Africa, where poverty is still rising at an alarming rate. The report further indicates that the three world regions most afflicted by poverty are Sub-Saharan Africa (46.4 percent), Southern Asia (29.9 percent) and Eastern Asia (16.6 percent). These three regions are also the most adversely affected by hunger, with the hungry representing 33 percent of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa, 22 percent in Southern Asia and 13 percent in South East Asia. As stated in the report, Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia were the worst affected regions in terms of the number of hungry people during the period 1990-2002. The report also observes that most of the hungry people are from rural areas depending "on consumption and sale of natural products for their income and their foods" (UN, 2005, p. 8). But since rural inhabitants are either landless or have only small agricultural plots with no other forms of financial and technical support, they are bound to live or die impoverished. Even though they manage to produce grain or other agricultural products on their small plots, they cannot manage or supplement their needs in any other way.

The health condition of children in impoverished areas is also alarming and causes more than half of children's deaths. The regions in which children's health is worst and imperilled

further by hunger are Southern Asia (47 percent) followed by Sub-Saharan Africa (31 percent) and South Eastern Asia (29 percent).<sup>4</sup> Despite the disturbing number of hungry children and adults reported by different agencies worldwide, the target of the Millennium Development Goals is to reduce the number of people suffering from chronic hunger by half between 1990 and 2015. However, achieving the MDGs goals will be an immensely challenging task unless apathy and indifference in the developed world are confronted head on.

A recent report from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in fact indicates that the global food crisis is actually worsening. It suggests that hunger is rising and due to high food prices 75 million more hungry people were added to FAO's Global Hunger Rolls (GHRs) in 2007, with the total number of people afflicted by hunger worldwide reaching 923 million, out of which 907 million were located in the developing world (FAO, 2008, p. 4).<sup>5</sup> According to the report, Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa possess the largest number of undernourished people, amounting to about 750 million or 89 percent of the world's hungry in 2003-2005 due to food price increases (p. 7). The report also points that even though the world grew richer and produced more food than ever in the last decade, hunger has still increased phenomenally - thanks to high food prices, lack of concerted action and a lack of global commitment toward alleviating hunger.

The World Bank presents an alternate picture of poverty using different measuring scales for different periods.<sup>6</sup> Its 2008 report suggests that poverty is increasing beyond earlier estimates but the poverty profile and the overall rate of progress against absolute poverty in the developing world resemble those of preceding years. Regarding poverty in Asia, the report shows poverty has fallen sharply in East Asia but increased in other parts of the world. The Report observes that

over 1981-2005, the \$1.25 poverty rate in South Asia fell from almost 60% to 40%, which was not sufficient to bring down the number of poor... If the trend over this period in South Asia were to continue until 2015 the poverty rate would fall to 32.5%...which is more than half its 1990 value. So South Asia is not on track to attaining the MDGs without a higher trend rate of poverty reduction. (World Bank, 2008, p. 22)

With regard to Sub-Saharan Africa, the World Bank (2008) reports that the level of poverty remained almost the same i.e., over 50 percent of the population in 1981 and 2005. As a result, the number of people classified as poor worldwide increased by 17 percent from 1981 to 2005, amounting to a 0.67 percent increase per year. This means that one-third of the world's poor will live in Sub-Saharan Africa by 2015. However, the report seems to be optimistic in its observation that "the developing world as a whole is clearly still on track to attaining the first Millennium Development Goal of halving the 1990s 'extreme poverty' rate by 2015" (World Bank, 2008, p. 25). Yet given the high levels of poverty evident on the continent, unless major policy changes are made toward Africa it is doubtful that the MDG poverty reduction target will be reached within the time frame suggested.

These are merely statistical estimates by international bodies and not based on a house-to-house census. They thus should only be seen as providing a partial glimpse of the poverty affecting billions worldwide. If a house-to-house census could be conducted, the statistics would likely reveal an even bleaker picture, as a large number of hungry and poor people were not likely included in existing statistics due to inaccessibility or other reasons.

Another way to understand the plight of the hungry, undernourished and poor is to consider the forms of inequality that exist in the world today. On the one hand, people have no food to eat, children lack even pencils to write with, and families have no houses to reside in and no lands to farm; on the other hand, many of the world's wealthiest people consume meals costing thousands of dollars in five star hotels, children in well-off families play

with laptops and modern electronic instruments, and the rich exchange gifts worth millions of dollars with loved ones.<sup>7</sup> If we consider the lives of "millions of men, women, and children on our planet [who] wake up hungry and go to bed hungry each day" (Anderson & Sandøe, 2007, p. vii) with those of the wealthy businessmen and CEOs of transnational corporations (TNCs), we can easily differentiate between the two opposite sides of our contemporary world - the richest and the poorest - and the gap between the two worlds is rapidly broadening day by day. The images and reports from developing areas reveal that a major crisis has emerged that we must devote major efforts to if we ever hope to bridge the widening gap.

In so doing, we must also note that global hunger is a multifaceted phenomenon linked to and worsened by HIV/AIDS, child labor practices, environmental degradation, and a wide array of other problems that occur within a general context of poverty. Some social and economic problems such as illiteracy, unemployment, and domestic and political violence are also worsened by poverty, particularly in Asia and Africa (Bhalla, 2002, p. 21). Thus, it can be argued that poverty is the root cause of all other kinds of social and economic problems in the developing world - including hunger - and these problems will not truly be eradicated until global poverty is overcome. In order to tackle this global crisis of poverty and hunger, strong measures are urgently required so that we can establish a world in which people of all backgrounds and creeds can enjoy more fulfilling and dignified lives.

#### **THE GLOBAL HUNGER CRISIS: CAUSES AND IMPACT**

Two key questions that concern policymakers, workers, human right activists, and ethicists who are seriously committed to eradicating poverty and hunger in the world are: why has the current crisis happened? and why has the world community failed to abolish poverty and hunger? International agencies such as the FAO, World Bank, World Food Program, among others suggest two major factors are responsible: (1) natural disasters such as floods, cyclones, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and so on; and (2) socio-economic factors such as political conflicts, wars, and inappropriate economic and social policies.

Food policy expert Martin M. McLaughlin, however, disagrees with the claims of international bodies and provides an alternative perspective. According to McLaughlin, the major reason for the existing crisis is the failure of people who have the knowledge and power to take the steps needed to improve the production and distribution of food. In contrast to conventional wisdom, he argues that "the hunger that food-insecure poor people experience is not primarily the kind that is caused by famine, natural disaster, or war, but the kind that results from the way the food and agriculture sector of the global economy operates" (McLaughlin, 2002, p. viii). His view seems to be logical and convincing if we consider the World Food Program's assertion that there is enough food available for everyone on this planet regardless of natural disasters (Weis, 2007, p. 11). If McLaughlin is correct, and the evidence suggests he is (Shapouri & Rosen, 2009, pp. 361-378), then hunger mainly results from operational and distributional failure rather than resource failure.

If food availability is not an issue, then hunger is undoubtedly avoidable. It is noteworthy for instance that "once the UK's 60 million people have met their daily nutritional requirements, there is sufficient food left over to feed 33 million people," or more than the "estimated 31 million undernourished people in Ethiopia" (BBC, 2006). The British may question why they should help Ethiopians when they do not appear directly or indirectly responsible for the situation in their country. Such a viewpoint might appear justified at first glance, but on ethical grounds and in terms of collective human responsibility, the British in possessing an abundance food are obligated to alleviate hunger whether in Ethiopia or any other region of the world.

In the light of the above, we can say that hunger is neither caused by natural disaster nor the scarcity of food; rather, it results from the disproportionate affluence of a few and poor

governance at various levels. As will be discussed below, there are also two related causes that can be blamed openly for worsening global hunger - agricultural failure due to industrialization and the failure of the Global Food System (GFS).

### **Industrialization and Agricultural Decline**

In the developing world, great harm to the agricultural sector is inflicted by local industry. Fertile agricultural land is essential for producing foodstuffs, but such land is increasingly being used for non-agricultural purposes by industries from mining to oil and gas. Agricultural lands are also threatened by serious problems such as soil degradation, deforestation, and drought due to pollution and other industrial activities. Such strain on agricultural lands directly affects the productivity and interests of the farmers and the survival of local people who are dependent on the lands. In most cases where foods are grown, particularly in rural areas, the locals are poor and hungry because they either do not have enough land and the financial resources to cultivate crops and manage their lives.

Linkages to external markets are another factor that commonly contributes to agricultural decline. A trend away from food crops to cash crops to feed industries and satisfy export markets is evident in many regions of the developing world. While the move toward cash crops may seem economically sound, it serves to undermine food production for local needs (Copeland, 2000). Shockingly indicative of this process is the thousands of acres of land throughout the developing world that are being used for producing pet food in the West. Anuradha Mittal observes that "the state of Punjab, also known as 'the granary of India', grows abundant food even today, but most of it is being converted into dog and cat food for Europe" (Mittal, 2002, p. 7). In Latin America and the Caribbean, where around 33 percent of the total population are poor and 13 percent are extremely poor, beans used to be the major source of protein for about 200 million low-income families. Lured by higher prices for exportable vegetables, however, farmers have abandoned the cultivation of beans to grow cash crops. This has resulted in price rises and scarcity of beans causing hunger and malnutrition among the population (Madeley, 1999, pp. 65-66).

In earlier centuries, rural poverty might have existed in different parts of the world due to limitations in technology and problems related to seeding, irrigation, cultivation, storage and transportation. But today, in the twenty-first century, we possess the technological means and know-how to produce enough food to feed the world. In this changed context, the hunger problem no longer seems to be natural or inevitable. Despite more than adequate food production, the poor around the globe do not have regular access to food. Of course, the problem is not of producing more food to feed hungry people but to make sure that food that is available is accessible to those in need.

J. W. Smith in this context has identified the same causal factors of global hunger, most of which are linked to the unbalanced production and distribution of foodstuffs. In his view, world hunger persists because "the low-paid undeveloped countries sell to the highly-paid developed countries because there is no local market," and also "the current Third World land owners, producing for the First World, are appendages to the industrialized world, stripping all natural wealth from the land to produce food, lumber, and other products for wealthy nations" (Smith, 1994, p. 64).

The World Bank's policies in developing nations such as India, Vandana Shiva further observes, also aggravate the situation by favoring export demand for fruits and vegetables and showing scant regard for the food requirements of the poor. The Bank goes as far as to persuade farmers not to produce food crops but concentrate on fruits and vegetables for export to wealthy countries. In so doing, its policies serve to undermine food security in impoverished nations (Shiva, n.d., para. 70).

The marginalization and subordination of developing nations within the global economy has obvious consequences for small-scale agricultural producers in the long term. Owing

to distortions and unfairness in global markets, farmers in the developing world are losing their autonomy and power of choice over food since they believe they cannot survive and sustain their livelihoods through traditional cultivation practices and without being part of the competitive capitalist world. If they are fortunate enough to have access to land, they toil laboriously and produce much food but barely eke an existence as agriculture has been transformed into a business that benefits only the rich in developed countries. Vandana Shiva describes the situation in India:

The farmers of India are definitely facing a deep crisis.... The Indian farmer works hard but is poorly rewarded because the [World] Bank's recipes transfer his incomes to agribusiness and the agrichemical industry. Corporate profits grow while farmers' incomes shrink. (Shiva, n.d., para. 53)

In such a way international agencies work together with large-scale industrial and commercial interests to undermine small-scale farming and aggravate global hunger. The same scenario Shiva describes in India is also played out in other developing nations in Asia and Africa (George, 2003, pp. 105-121).

### **The Failure of the Global Food System (GFS)**

The global food system (GFS) has worsened the crisis in numerous ways. About 40 percent of the world's total grain production is being used for livestock and meat production in different parts of the world. For example, in the United States, nearly 70 percent of food production is utilized for livestock (Robbins, 1999; Shiva, 2000). Agricultural foodstuffs from the developing world are often consumed by cattle and other livestock that are in turn being raised for human consumption in wealthier nations of the world. While this is occurring, human beings in impoverished world regions face hunger on a daily basis. The emphasis on feeding livestock before humans undermines efforts on the part of international bodies to distribute food through different channels to feed the hungry and reveals the GFS to be inherently flawed.

If there is no scarcity of food in the world, then why should a large number of people go to bed hungry and malnourished each day? One report shows that "world agriculture produces 17 percent more calories per person today than it did 30 years ago, despite a 70 percent population increase" (Mousseau & Mittal, 2005, para. 4). According to the FAO (2002), this production is sufficient to provide everyone's daily requirement of calories with at least 2,720 kilocalories (kcal) per person. This is more than the minimum requirement for one's good health. However, despite the sufficient production of food for all of humanity, global hunger still persists. Maldistribution is one reason. Indifference within the international community in terms of finding short-term and long-term solutions is also to blame.

It can be argued as well that the failure of the GFS relates to a lack of collective human ethics on the part of governments and the corporate sector associated with the global food industry. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has acknowledged that more than 40 percent of its agricultural markets are controlled by marketing firms such as Cargill, ConAgra, and Archer Daniels Midland (ADM), concluding that "the increasing concentration of food processing and marketing in the hands of a few transnational corporations (TNCs) is bringing about the possibility of market failure for farmers and consumers, not just locally, but on a regional, national, or global scale" (USDA, 1997, p. 1). One can imagine the situation of farmers and locals being exploited by foreign corporations in the developing world. From genetic seeds for their farmlands to their food items for consumption, the farmers and small landholders are dependent on agribusiness corporations. They are so ensnared within the global marketing network that they cannot grow crops of their own choices and needs. They are bound to buy genetic seeds and agricultural items on the global market at high prices to grow export-oriented cash crops for sale to global agribusiness giants at the lowest possible prices. Then with their limited earnings they are again bound to buy food items for their own needs at higher prices. In

fact, their agricultural lands are cheap resources and raw materials for agribusiness corporations and the people easy targets for business ventures (Magdoff, Foster, & Buttel, 2000).

As a last defense against hunger in underdeveloped countries, a public distribution system (PDS) is often in place to assist the needy. However, corruption and fraud ensure it does not function as intended. For example, in India, there is a PDS for both rural and urban areas to provide subsidized food items to the poor, but officials managing the PDS are in fact furthering their own private interests and consuming resources in illegal ways (Bhardwaj, 2009, para. 13). Rural populations do not receive the assistance intended for them due to corrupt business dealings linked to private and public agencies. Moreover, disadvantaged groups cannot challenge the system in some areas for fear of retribution from the politically and economically powerful individuals involved in such business activities.

The ongoing situation of poor countries clearly indicates that the world food problem is not natural in any way but rather is created and sustained by human indifference and complicity. Though small in number, transnational corporations have cornered world agricultural markets and care little about the implications of their dominance for the global poor. At the local level, corrupt officials engage in activities that ensure the needs of poor communities in developing countries remain unmet. This grave state of affairs tells us that, if billions of lives are not to be imperilled, a global effort will be required to combat hunger in the world's poorest nations. Such an effort will only be made possible if individuals, groups, and nations recognize their inherent responsibility to act in ways that support those who are suffering from hunger and malnutrition.

## **GLOBALIZATION, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY**

Earlier in this article it was discussed how the food crisis is a global human rights issue. We now turn to the question of how a human rights approach may help in addressing the problem of hunger in relation to globalization. Many human rights activists and ethicists around the world believe that poverty and hunger are directly linked to human rights. They maintain that global poverty violates human rights since "human rights entail duties that other agents are obligated to carry out in order to meet the rights of claimants" (Gosselin, 2006, p. 38). Articles 1, 3, and 25 of the UNDHR are confirmation from the international community that the dignity and rights of each human being must be respected.<sup>8</sup> The expression used in Article 1 of UNDHR, "in a spirit of brotherhood," implies an ethical standpoint that asks that everyone be treated equally.

Mary Robinson, former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, has rightly observed that a human rights approach can help address hunger "by affirming the equal value and dignity of every individual." However, she makes everyone conscious that "by reframing the debate on hunger in terms of right, it means that taking action is an obligation, not a form of charity" (Robinson, 2007, p. ix). In other words, as individual rights are undermined by insufficient access to food, it is everyone's duty to work toward the eradication of hunger.

If the people who are hungry and poor were to pose one question about their plight they would likely ask, "What made us this way?" To this question, the countries and companies that have exploited the natural resources of Africa, Asia and Latin America know the answer - that the most developed countries today, many former colonial powers, achieved their status through unjustified exploitation of others' natural and human resources. Gadgil & Guha (1992), for example, note how forest resources were exploited by Great Britain during the colonial period:

By around 1860, the British had emerged as the world leader in deforestation, devastating its own woods and the forests of Ireland, South Africa and north-eastern

United States to draw timber for ship building, iron-smelting and farming.... Their early treatment of the Indian forests also reinforces the claim that 'the destructive energy of the British race all over the world' was rapidly converting forests into deserts.... With oak forests vanishing in England, a permanent supply of durable timber was required for the Royal Navy as 'the safety of the empire depended on its wooded walls'.... In a period of fierce competition between the colonial powers, Indian teak, the most durable of shipbuilding timbers, saved England during the war with Napoleon and the later maritime expansion. To tap the likely sources of supply, search parties were sent to the teak forests of India's west coast.... (pp. 118-119)

The passage reveals how wealthier nations such as Britain exploited the natural resources of their colonies. The exploitation applied to all the colonies' natural and material resources such as coal, iron ore, gold, diamonds, ivory, rubber, and other raw materials that were used to support industrialization in Europe. The colonized nations in the present-day developing world were not poor in terms of their natural resources before colonization. They possessed abundant resources to support their populations. After continuous exploitation under colonial rule, however, few resources were left in their hands and poverty became their defining feature.

The siphoning of wealth associated with colonialism persists in our day vis-à-vis neo-liberal globalization. Today, TNCs participate in new forms of market-based exploitation. They characteristically gravitate toward regions where they can offer the lowest wages, pay minimal taxes, and evade accountability to local populations. Consequently, the litany of human rights abuses inflicted on peoples in the developing world through TNCs' pursuit of profits are too numerous to mention here. Among the more notable cases, however, were the aiding and abetting of the former apartheid regime in South Africa by TNCs such as General Motors, Ford, Daimler, and IBM ("US Court Allows Apartheid Claims," 2009); Royal Dutch Shell's links to the state execution of environmentalist and Ogoni activist Saro-Wiwa in Nigeria in 1995 (Faber, 2009, pp. 185-186); and the exploitation of child labor in sweatshop conditions by American companies such as The Gap in El Salvador and Nike in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Indonesia in the 1990s and early 2000s (Esbenshade, 2004, p. 8).

While such human rights infractions are highly visible and easily condemned, it may seem less obvious how the global food system affects human rights and involves ethical issues. The answer is that there are ethical duties in terms of individual and collective responsibilities within the world community to which every human being equally belongs. This is to say, from an ethical perspective on globalization, "cooperation on a global scale" is needed to establish ethical standards and "multilateral platforms" that consider how food and agricultural policies affect the poor worldwide (Braun & Mengistu, 2007, p. 193).

Ethically speaking, it is an obligation of both individuals and the world community, including business and industry leaders, to ensure that no one should live or die poor and hungry. Collective ethical responsibility demands that everyone who is able to play a role in eradication of this problem should assume his or her obligation towards assisting those in need. Collective responsibility presupposes individual responsibility because the former cannot be separated from the later in terms of a strong sense of human ethics and spirit of brotherhood.

### **Individual Responsibility towards Others**

Since a right to life can be protected only by maintaining individuals' rights to food, it is obligatory for us to make food available to the hungry. Here, "us" refers to all individuals who must fulfill their responsibilities in accordance with their potential and abilities. A taxpayer, for example, cannot escape from doing what is morally right simply by saying that his or her taxes have been paid. Rather, the taxpayer should also be aware of how the revenues from those taxes are being spent by the government. If the government spends



more tax money on military hardware than on feeding the nation's hungry, then the taxpayer should question the government's actions.

As the notion of individual responsibility is part of a complex and lengthy philosophical debate, it is not possible to discuss it fully here. Hence, my focus is merely on the practical as opposed to philosophical dimensions of responsibility. The term *responsibility* has strong practical implications in terms of a connecting force of human society of which every individual is a unit. The type of responsibility we individuals have towards ourselves is the same type of responsibility we are supposed to have towards others since no individual can survive and sustain his or her life without connecting it to the lives of other members of a society or community. And since we are "connected beings" within society, we are connected moral agents. This mutual interconnectivity means we should see the world as one human community or society of which we all are responsible agents.

Linked to this sense of "oneness," individual responsibility has a major role to play in the alleviation of global poverty and hunger. It is very simple for any one of us to live day to day, dine in restaurants, watch movies and enjoy other forms of entertainment when a large proportion of the world population lives in a state close to starvation; yet such ways of acting cannot be justified as responsible. When we think in such a manner, we are irresponsible moral agents living in our connected global world. We rationalize our irresponsibility by either saying that we do not live in a connected global economy and that each nation is sovereign, or we say that we cannot individually bring about change in the world economic system. But we cannot simply blame other people and nations because as individuals we have also failed to make our fullest effort to help the global poor. Though it may not always seem to be the case, happenings around the globe are directly linked to our individual actions and thus we are subject to blame for the misery of poor people worldwide.

### **Global Inequality and Collective Human Responsibility**

Poverty, then, results not only from a failure of individual responsibility but also from a failure of collective responsibility. Growing inequality in the world today clearly reveals this. Individual self-interest has achieved paramouncy over universal rights in our era of globalization, an imbalance we need to correct as soon as possible. With certain individuals and groups able to enrich themselves through globalization while others remain immersed in economic misery, poverty in developing countries should be seen as a product of the inactive and irresponsible members and agencies of our human society. Following Milton Fisk's argument, we can say that the social ethics should have primacy over individual ethics (Fisk, 2009). This means that globalization should not just involve the pursuit of individual self-interest but should be managed so as to benefit and not cause harm to individuals, groups and nations.

Of course, there are some positive dimensions of the global economy that can be seen openly in different sectors around the world. Industrial growth, the development of exports and imports, increased communications, and broader consumer choices are not bad in themselves. But the problem of hunger and food insecurity reveals that globalization also has a negative impact on poor nations. From a global standpoint, each and every action and policy must be judged not only from the perspective of economic growth, which may leave millions of people marginalized and hungry, but also from an ethical perspective of overall human development. Global economic efficiency should be promoted but not at the cost of collective human ethics and unless and until "the social and environmental costs of globalization are first computed; it is futile to treat economic growth as a touchstone of development" (Sharma, 2007, p. 270).

The world has failed to overcome the problem of poverty because both individuals and groups who are in a position to effect change do not take their responsibilities seriously.

Leaders in developing countries should bear certain moral responsibilities in saving people from poverty, but it is citizens of developed nations who have an even a greater responsibility to eradicate global poverty since they have benefited from years of colonialism and the exploitation of natural resources in other regions of the world.

An issue that clearly needs to be addressed is the collective responsibility of former colonial powers towards their ex-colonies. Former colonial powers' indiscriminate exploitation of the natural and human resources of their colonies, which lasted as long as four centuries in some cases, undermined dominated areas' capacity for future development. In spite of achieving political independence, former colonies remain unable to bring about economic and social development in their countries because they have lost and continue to lose resources for their livelihood and survival. Developed countries may question why they should be assigned with the collective responsibility to assist underdeveloped nations. In light of the massive transfer of resources to colonial powers during the colonial era, we have strong grounds to assign a collective responsibility to those nations that benefited from colonial rule. It is their responsibility to help offset the burden of poverty in developing countries by distributing surplus resources. Here, the principle of distributive justice as outlined by political and moral philosopher John Rawls may be of help.

According to Rawls (1999), although inequality among nations developed at different times and in different places, we must think of the world as a global community and not as a particular society or country. We should view the world from a moral standpoint emphasizing equal human rights. Rawls proposes two principles of justice in regard to social inequality: (i) "each person is to have equal rights to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others," and (ii) "social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all" (Rawls, 1999, pp. 52-53). Though Rawls does not directly discuss poverty, his two principles of distributive justice can be taken to mean that all nations are obligated to eradicate global poverty in terms of establishing equality.

Though globalization is a highly contested term, economically speaking it has drastically changed trade relations among nations and individual value perceptions.<sup>9</sup> It is not an exaggeration to say that, owing to the neoliberal economic policies associated with globalization, people today think more of money than human values because they think that if they do not do so they will be left behind. Since no one wants to be left behind, neoliberal globalization, if not embraced, is still generally accepted as natural and inevitable. However, such attitudes among the general population as well as in agencies and companies obfuscate the true causes and nature of inequality in the world today. Negative processes associated with neoliberal globalization have resulted in serious socio-economic imbalances among and within countries. The grave situations in regions of Africa, Asia and Latin America indicate that existing national and international policies have not led to development through globalization and that much more needs to be done to ensure globalization is compatible with social justice.

For nearly two decades, globalization and free trade have been topics of major concern, but little attention has been paid to the ethical dimensions of global economic problems. The problem of chronic hunger in the world is not only due to the failure of the GFS we have discussed earlier, but it is also due to unjustified individual and national income disparities. The increasing economic gap and its serious impact on human survival in various parts of the world is starkly revealed when we compare the monthly incomes of CEOs in TNCs with those of the average laborers in developing nations. McLaughlin rightly asks, "where is the ethical justification for compensating a chief executive officer of a transnational corporation (TNC) at 485 times the average wage of his workers...?" (McLaughlin, 2002, p. 1)

I am not of the view that we should discard or ignore globalization *in toto*. Rather, I am suggesting that human ethics should figure prominently in discussions on globalization. At least some of the fruits of globalization should go to those who are in urgent need. We should not pass over our duties and responsibilities in the name of globalization. Our moral duties and responsibilities can be understood in the Kantian sense of "humanity as an end" and "obligatory duties to others" (Kant, 1976, pp. 429-430). Though my assertion here does not delve into the philosophical debate on whether Kant does or does not favor positive rights<sup>10</sup>, as rational and moral human beings we cannot ignore violations of human rights or ethical issues related to human survival. As former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan once appealed: "[T]he world can not stand aside when gross and systematic violations of human rights are taking place."<sup>11</sup> Our priorities and actions should be determined and legitimized only in terms of human welfare in all respects. Everyone should be accorded a dignified human life at all times and in all places.

### MEASURES RECOMMENDED

So by what means and plans can we at least minimize the effects of the global hunger crisis if it cannot be eradicated completely in a short period of time? Here, we must ask in what sense hunger should be understood and eradicated. Different opinions exist on the subject, but the issue should be understood in terms of comprehensive development so that affected people can improve their quality of life and reshape their future. Development should not only be understood in terms of GDP growth, but also the overall development of people in relation to access to education, healthcare, employment, food, clothing, and shelter.

As adequate food resources are not available in affected areas, the international community should first transport sufficient food items to those areas along with a committed group of volunteers, including agricultural experts. The experts and policymakers should envision how agricultural lands might be restored and developed to meet local and not external food needs. Countries promoting cash crops should put more emphasis on food crops such as wheat, rice, and beans, and farmers should be given greater and more appropriate technological and financial assistance by governments so they can better utilize their farmlands for achieving food self-sufficiency. Export-oriented policies should be considered but only if they do not impinge on local food production and needs and do not become dominated by agribusiness interests. Export-import policies should be based on local needs instead of global market-driven approaches.

The international community and local governments should also do more to balance their food storage and supply systems. If countries such as India first export vegetables or foods to developed countries and import them again to fulfill their own needs, serious wastages are involved. If a farmer grows apples in Himachal Pradesh, for example, and exports them overseas, and the people in Chennai import apples from abroad instead of purchasing them from Himachal Pradesh directly, only traders benefit while local people in Chennai ultimately have to pay more in the process (Shiva, n.d., para. 76). So what developing nations first must do is secure local demand for food. They should also formulate plans for regions where availability and accessibility of food have become challenges. If hunger and poverty are to be conquered, it is essential that governments at all levels and international bodies change their attitudes and policies. They must show their commitment to abolish a global problem for which they can solve. People, and not profits, should be prioritized while policies are formulated and implemented. At the individual level, meanwhile, we all must look beyond our immediate interests. The task of hunger reduction can be accomplished at the global level only if we always act in accordance with our individual and collective responsibilities.

## CONCLUSION

The above discussion is a warning for to us to re-examine, reframe and redirect our actions and policies ethically, socially, and economically. It is not crucial for us to know whether there is one person hungry, one million or ten billion; rather what is most important is to accept that there are hungry people on the planet despite adequate food and that we must act fairly and as quickly as possible to eradicate poverty and hunger. It is an undeniable truth that the global food problem is serious and we have failed in dealing with it. We are yet to universalize those human rights declared by the United Nations in 1948. Experts and analysts have given various opinions and governments and non-governmental organizations around the world recognize the crisis but there are no signs that poverty will be overcome in the near future. As this paper has stressed, our ethical failure has served to perpetuate both poverty and hunger. Not only food problems but also the backwardness of rural areas in Asia and Africa in the twenty-first century can also be seen as a result of our ethical failure on a larger scale. The world may be witnessing progress as a result of globalization, but it provides the good life everyone desires only to a small and privileged section of humanity.

Since the situation is worsening in most developing countries, concerted action is necessary at the local, national, and international levels. Every individual should be conscious of their obligations toward others and do their best to combat hunger. The key message to the world community is that "those have much more than they need to sustain a decent life have a moral duty to help those who, without assistance, are bound to suffer or die prematurely" (Anderson & Sandøe, 2007, p. 305). If we are truly conscious and serious of the implications of our moral duties towards the global poor, there is no reason why both poverty and hunger cannot one day be completely eliminated.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Some may ask whether the family I have described is an appropriate analogy for a global issue. However, globalization, as I understand it, does not just relate to economic processes but represents an interconnected world with humanitarian implications. Hunger and poverty are ethical as well as economic issues, but as an ethicist I wish to emphasize the moral dimensions of these related problems.
- <sup>2</sup> It is interesting to know that China and India, two countries which alone account for 42 percent of the world's chronically hungry, have the economic means and knowledge to develop advanced technology for use in space research.
- <sup>3</sup> As pointed out to me by Dr. Priyedarshi Jetli at the University of Mumbai, urban inhabitants in developing nations are also increasingly becoming impoverished. In fact, "between 1993 and 2002, 50 million more people joined the ranks of those living on less than \$1 a day in urban areas" (Ravallion, 2007, p. 16).
- <sup>4</sup> The reality is that "every seven seconds a child under the age of 10 dies - directly or indirectly of hunger - somewhere in the world" and that "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" (Robinson, 2007, p. viii).
- <sup>5</sup> This is the ninth progress report by the FAO since the World Food Summit of 1996 in Rome. The 2008 report focuses mainly on high food prices and its serious impact on poverty and hunger worldwide, particularly in developing countries.
- <sup>6</sup> To measure poverty in developing nations, the World Bank until recently employed two poverty line scales: US\$1 and US\$2 a day at 1993 levels of purchasing power parity (PPP). Now, however, the World Bank sets the poverty line at US\$1.25 and US\$2 per day at 2005 PPT levels for the purpose of global aggregation and comparison on poverty worldwide (World Bank, 2009).
- <sup>7</sup> As an example, there are four Indians (two of them are brothers) in the list of top ten billionaires of the world and four of them collectively share a net worth of US\$160

- billion. Mukesh Ambani, the elder brother, who is worth US\$43 billion, gifted a US\$60 million airbus plane to his wife Neeta on her birthday in 2007 (*Reuters*, India, Nov 2, 2007). Anil Ambani, the younger brother, whose wealth is estimated at US\$42 billion, gave a €34 million (approx. US\$45 million) super luxury yacht, built in Italy, to his wife Tina in 2008 (*The Economics Times*, India, 22 December, 2008).
- <sup>8</sup> Article 1 states that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." Article 2 states that "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person." Article 25 states that "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control" (UNDHR, 1948).
- <sup>9</sup> Although we are living in an era of globalization, it is not yet clear that globalization is beneficial when we face problems such as poverty, hunger and political conflict. As globalization has both supporters and detractors, the exact definition and moral dimensions of the term are hotly debated (Peters, 2004).
- <sup>10</sup> Rights can be placed into two categories - negative rights and positive rights. A negative right requires only "forbearance on the part of others" while a positive requires "others to provide goods, services, or opportunities." For example, if a person A has a *negative right* to life against another person B, then B is required to refrain from killing person A, but if person A has a *positive right* to life against person B, then B is required to act as necessary to preserve the life of A (Donnelly, 2003, p. 30).
- <sup>11</sup> Annan (1999, para. 3).

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*Krishna Mani Pathak*

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