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Safe and Secure

by Nathan Kiehn

(English 1101)

Going to bed at night with a full stomach is important. Having a decent quantity of food every day is vital for people's health. Food keeps our bodies strong and moving and our brains functioning properly. On a broader scale, it keeps our societies efficient and working. Without it, humans suffer. Without it, we become hungry and weak. Without it, we starve. People suffer. Society suffers.

In *Environmental Science for a Changing World*, authors Karr, Interlandi, and Houtman, discuss a few of the worldwide crises caused by lack of food. The book covers particular crises in African countries that occurred in quick succession in 2008, beginning on February 22. Starting “in Burkina Faso...a brewing global crisis finally came to a head...riots broke out in the country's two major cities...[and] the chaos only spread from there. In neighboring Cote D'Ivoire, tear gas was employed and dozens were injured; in Cameroon, some two dozen people were killed; in Egypt, a single boy was shot in the head.” (350) These riots, and the chaos that ensued, were caused by a two year inflation in food prices, which “[i]n the 7 months leading up to the riot...had then doubled.” (Karr, Houtman, and Interlandi, 350) In countries where “families were already spending between 50% and 75% of their income on basic staples,” the drastic increase in the prices of these staple foods at the very least—including rice, beans, bread, and milk—and the lack of food security this caused, pushed people to react violently. (Karr, Houtman, and Interlandi, 350)

This situation sounds extreme, but globally, access to food is an issue that people have been known to riot and kill over. Domestically, questionable food security may not be an issue that drives people to kill, but it is still a problem; in America, it's more about eating the right kinds of food—making nutritious, healthy selections of what we eat—than assuring we get enough food. Worldwide, food security is a substantial issue that involves problems of both quantity and quality; however, these problems may be solved if the right education about quantity and quality is employed.

Karr, Houtman, and Interlandi go on to define food security as “having physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food” (351). Generally speaking, food security means people's ability to get enough food that is good for the human body. However, the concept of food security is a lot more complex, so the definition really needs to be broken down into multiple components. The first part of the definition covers access, and even that needs to be divided into separate physical, social, and economic components.

Physical access is simply the ability to acquire food, a problem a lot of people face, especially those who are living in developing countries. The documentaries *The Environmental Revolution* and *Nanook of the North* show examples of people in developing countries who struggle to obtain food. Various hunter-gatherer societies, like the African Bushmen depicted in the documentary *The Environmental Revolution* and the Inuit from Robert Flaherty's classic film *Nanook of the North*, have to hunt and kill their food. There aren't any grocery stores, convenience stores, or markets they can visit. Physical effort is required to grow crops in the Bushmen's case, or hunt seals in the traditional Inuit society depicted in *Nanook*. Their lives depend on the success of a few central figures to be able to bring back food to sustain the community.

Social access can be hard to achieve, as well. Political corruption and unrest can keep food out of the hands of people who need it. In the video *High Food Prices: Haiti on the Brink*, we see the story of a nation plagued by such issues. Haiti, a country already suffering economic problems,

struggles under the burden of a situation worsened by political corruption. The corrupt government, however, is a factor worsened by ecological problems. The video mentions that, at one time, 60% of the country was covered in trees; now, it's only 2%, due to deforestation. The deforestation is caused by the Haitian people's need to heat their homes or to sell wood as charcoal so they can have money for food. Without opportunities, stability, and essentials from the people who are meant to protect the country, Haitians are forced to take drastic measures in order to survive.

Sometimes, problems with food security come from a society's unstable lifestyle choices. Karr, Houtman, and Interlandi cite a case study in their book that compares the Vikings of Greenland to the Inuit of the Arctic. About a thousand years ago, the Vikings settled Greenland, prospering for nearly five hundred years before vanishing completely. This was mainly because the Vikings focused on raising their cows on Greenland's available pastures—which were already being diminished by naturally changing climates—instead of adapting to changes the land underwent. Their neighbors, the Inuit, provide a counter-example, being a people who had long looked to the sea to provide. The Inuit “were expert hunters of ringed seal...knew how to heat and light their homes with seal blubber...[and] loved to fish,” thus using a diversity of food sources for various means. The Vikings lost their resources and had to leave Greenland, whereas the Inuit remained. Unlike the people of Haiti, the Vikings drove themselves into a dark situation. They weren't forced. They just didn't learn.

Finally, an economic factor comes into play with the access problem. There are some countries that can't provide people with the basic essentials that they need, nor can they export some of those essentials and make money. In a developed nation like the United States, the economic portion rarely factors into the problem, as “industrialization and farm subsidies enabled (mostly American) farmers to produce vast surpluses of wheat corn, and soybeans,” which are then shipped around the world, encouraging the global marketplace. (Karr, Houtman, and Interlandi, 355) To offer a contrasting view, in Africa, we find that “[f]armers in countries like Burkina Faso could not compete with such cheap and plentiful food imports [from industrialized countries]—plagued as they were by land degradation...and armed conflict.” (Karr, Houtman, and Interlandi, 355)

The quotes display the difference between developed and developing countries in an economic sense. Without the elements of industrialization—from a system already in place to access to a global market—developing countries are hard pressed to compete with fully industrialized countries. The quotes even show that certain problems lead to others, like the social impact of armed conflict leading to the economic problem of farmers not being able to sell their products. In response, farmers revert to growing “cash crops,” like corn. Because these crops can be exported to be converted into fuel or other commodities, the farmers choose to sell them instead of personally using them as food or animal feed. A strong economy is needed to make sure food is grown for the proper reasons.

The final part of the definition discusses the types of food that are needed for a country to be secure. To Karr, Houtman, and Interlandi, these foods must be sufficient, safe, and nutritious. In terms of sufficiency, the documentary *The Plough That Broke The Plains*, a case study of the history of American farming in the High Plains region, shows the consequences of what happens when food grown for eating becomes food grown for industry. Though the film offers a specific example, the general costs are the same. Fields are over-plowed; monocultures—row upon row of the same crop—are created depending on what crop is needed; soil erosion sets in.

Finally, food needs to be safe and nutritious. Personally, I've volunteered at both Kline Creek Farm in West Chicago, Illinois, and Feed My Starving Children (FMSC) in Aurora, Illinois. During these experiences, I've seen examples of what is considered to be nutritious food. Kline Creek Farm, a forest preserve that mimics what a farm would have been like in DuPage County in the 1890s, grows food that is as natural as possible, eliminating the chance that consumers eating their food will ingest dangerous chemicals. They also rotate crops—switching up the types of the crop they choose to grow—which lets them grow a variety of healthy food. Feed My Starving Children, with the help

of nutrition specialists, created a blend of vitamin powder, vegetables, soy, and rice to help malnourished children grow strong and healthy; rice is also a recognizable staple food all over the world, so consumers of FMSC's food are eating nutritious that they also know and hopefully enjoy.

A lot of problems impede food security; three of these are physical access, people's mindset, and environmental problems. The problem of physical access works in two ways. First, with developing countries, being able to get food is the major problem, as has been discussed earlier. But even with those other issues put to the side, there are situations where the physical land itself cannot sustain the growth of food necessary to feed its people. In a country like Burkina Faso "the land is so parched that it has crusted over into...hard dry cake. To grow anything here takes a special kind of ingenuity." (Karr, Houtman, and Interlandi, 358)

Secondly, in developed countries like America, our access to food may be a little too unlimited. In the documentary *Supersize-Me*, filmmaker Morgan Spurlock visits a Naperville, Illinois elementary school that has a lunch buffet line that serves, among other items, fries, chips, and pizza. When asking an employee about all this, Spurlock is surprised to hear from the woman that the kids don't have to choose the food offered; the students can—and do—bring their own brown paper bag lunches with healthier options in them. Spurlock is skeptical that the kids would choose to bring healthy food over selecting the delicious, fattening food already offered at school. The choice seems obvious.

The concept of education about this specific issue also feeds into the problem itself. With developing countries, it's often a lack of education that serves to be the problem. Men and women who don't have access to knowledge also don't have access to food. As mentioned earlier, the authors write that it takes a "special kind of ingenuity" to grow food in Burkina Faso's hard soil, a difficult task which the people aren't educationally or technologically prepared for. (Karr, Houtman, and Interlandi, 358) In America, the educational problem is the opposite. We lack, or reject, education about making healthy choices. We are inundated with commercials and advertisements for fast food and fattening meal choices, ads that "educate" us to buy less-than-healthy products.

This problem in developed countries even extends into the economy. The documentary *A Place at the Table* has an instance where an American mother mentions that the unhealthy foods are the cheapest; they're what she can buy given the money she has. Marion Nestle, a nutritionist, adds that processed foods have gone down 40% in cost since the 1980s, where, in contrast, produce has increased in price by 40%. In an economic sense, then, there is a lack of security; snacks and desserts are getting cheaper while fruits and vegetables are becoming more expensive. This is yet another example of "education": unhealthy foods are sold at low prices, compelling people to purchase them, especially those who couldn't purchase healthier options otherwise.

This leads to the second problem, which is people's personal mindsets. Wendell Berry sets up the idea of "industrial eaters" in his essay "The Pleasures of Eating." He says that industrial eaters are people who don't think through what they're eating or why they're eating...they just eat to eat. He says:

The passive American consumer, sitting down to a meal of pre-prepared or fast food, confronts a platter covered with inert, anonymous substances that have been processed, dyed, breaded, sauced, gravied, ground, pulped, strained, blended, prettified, and sanitized beyond resemblance to any part of any creature that ever lived. The products of nature and agriculture have been made, to all appearances, the products of industry. (Berry, 2)

Berry's essay also hones in on the educational problem. We eat certain foods, as Berry notes, because advertisements offer up a choice that is cheap and looks appealing, while hiding the true appearance of what went into the product. Or sometimes, it may be because shopping at our

convenience and grocery stores is cheaper and easier. On visits to a farmers' market in Naperville and Whole Foods in Glen Ellyn, I noticed the prices for foods were generally higher, and the farmers' market didn't have many of the amenities—such as healthcare products—that stores typically have. Shopping at a farmers' market would force people to make another stop at a different store to get the supplies not available at the farmers' market.

Eating food items because we enjoy them isn't necessarily bad, but that idea can lead to promoting industries specializing in food production that use tactics that harm the environment and take away from the overall nutrition and diversity of the food that we can eat. Methods can hurt the soil, diminish yields, and cause other damaging impacts, leading to a variety of problems, including food shortages. Karr, Houtman, and Interlandi use the example of cod, which once “supported not just a fishing industry but an entire culture down the northeastern coast of North America.” (Karr, Houtman, and Interlandi, 278) However, overfishing caused cod populations to dip severely, and they weren't allowed to recover, leading to the collapse of the fishing area. When that happened, fishermen started “fishing down the food chain,” hunting species the cod ate, further removing the cod's chances for recovery. The only thought was that cod tasted good; this was the driving force behind fishermen's actions.

A final problem facing food security is environmental issues, which can impact both access to food and people's mindsets regarding food. Environmental problems can be caused by agricultural or other food production methods, and environmental problems can cause agricultural issues. For example, they can affect livestock. The loss of crops, land degradation, and soil erosion can take food away from cows that are raised for meat; pests lead to uses of pesticides, which can bioaccumulate in the meat and be repelled by pesticide-resistant strains of insects. Fish, another form of livestock, can be killed by algal blooms, patches of algae on the surface of the water that make “levels of dissolved oxygen in the water plummet—a condition known as hypoxia,” which cause fish to asphyxiate. (Karr, Houtman, and Interlandi, 316)

It should be noted that, while these are problems within the environment, they are all anthropogenic in origin, that is, they are caused by humans. The loss of crops happens when cows are overgrazed to try and fatten them up; pesticides are used to keep crops free of pests; algal blooms are a result of sediment and nitrogen pollution, where manmade debris gets into the water and depletes the oxygen. So while all of these problems—physical access, negative attitudes, and environmental difficulties—affect the nature of food security, they all stem from a very simple source: mankind. Interestingly, the anthropogenic problems themselves are the results of the practices we apply to agriculture—growing crops, raising cattle, using pesticides—which is a process created by humans.

Again, as with the other two problems, education, or lack thereof, has its role to play in environmental issues as well. Tying into people's mindsets, the problem may be more along the line of resistance to education. Farmers have “focused on those crops with the highest market demand” and, since these crops may not typically grow where the farmer resides, the farmer becomes “heavily dependent on external outputs—water, pesticides, and fertilizer.” (Karr, Houtman, and Interlandi, 385) Fishermen, seeing the ocean as unowned and limitless, think that fish will always be there for the taking, *their* taking specifically. The problem here is that we have gotten used to methods of growing crops, catching fish, and performing other food services without examining potential problems further down the road. By better understanding the world and the resources we use, these “potential problems” can be countered.

There are some things we cannot change. Certain happenings in the environment or weather cannot be altered or reversed. And while we can stem the damage done by our actions, our past activities have led us to where we are on the worldwide food security stage. So what needs to be done now is to find a way to make things better. Problems caused by mankind are a factor that we can work through in our struggle towards total food security. Physical access can be greatly improved, our mindsets can be altered, and even environmental issues can be combated. All it

requires is a little thought, a teachable spirit, and a lot of practice. Though the issues seem insurmountable—and though much damage has already been done—we have multiple ways of fixing the problems we have caused. Looking to the practices our ancestors employed, realizing that human life is more important than monetary profit, understanding that making small changes now is more comfortable than having to make huge adaptations in the future—these are small steps that can be taken to change our diets, practices, and minds. With those steps taken, then we can begin making true food security a reality.

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