



Background Paper

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Frontline Issues in Nutrition Assistance

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A few years ago, Anne Omolo, a teacher at the primary school in Sauri, a village in western Kenya, noticed attendance at the school was low. The students were listless and their academic performance poor. They were hungry, she realized, and so she and some of the other teachers at the school took it upon themselves to purchase food for the students.

It was not possible to feed everyone, so initially they chose to feed the seventh and eighth graders because they were preparing for national exams. Since the start of the program, there has been a dramatic rise in test scores and attendance. In the upper grades, attendance is nearly 100 percent. As a class, the student scores on national exams are among the best in the country.

The success of this school-feeding program in Sauri demonstrates a clear connection: Children who are served a meal during the day do better in school than children who go hungry. Hungry children have trouble concentrating on their lessons. They are more prone to illness and to miss school as a result, and their bodies pay a heavy price that continues to affect them. They become adults who are also likely to suffer illnesses and be less productive workers, unable to help themselves break out of poverty.

At Woods Lake Elementary School in Kalamazoo, Michigan, 80 percent of the children qualify for federally subsidized meals. All the children who receive free or reduced price meals come from households that are struggling to get by. Without these subsidized meals, several of the families would be forced to endure additional financial hardships. Take away these meals and hunger in this community would likely rise.

The National School Lunch Program has been providing nutritious meals to U.S. schoolchildren since 1946. In 1973, a School Breakfast Program was added. Woods Lake Elementary serves breakfast as well as lunch, and the kids think it is great. “When we get late buses, the first thing the kids ask is, ‘Do we still get breakfast?’” said the principal Joannie Weldon. “And we say, ‘Of course you do.’”¹

Just as in Kenya, the school meals programs at Woods Lake Elementary provide children with much more than food. These programs give disadvantaged children a fighting chance to succeed in school and grow up to be healthy adults.

Hunger and Nutrition

Hunger 2006: Frontline Issues in Nutrition Assistance argues for improving nutrition assistance programming both in the United States and in the developing world. Nutrition programs like those described above have had an astonishing



Schoolchildren, regardless of where they live, benefit from programs that provide nutritious meals, allowing them to concentrate and learn.

Martin Lueders

impact in places where hunger could have – but thankfully has not – robbed children and adults of their health and potential.

Nutrition is often missing from discussions about hunger. Sometimes that makes sense. In life or death situations, good nutrition can seem like a luxury. People must eat whatever is available to survive. Over the long term, however, not eating the right kinds of foods can have devastating health consequences. Human health depends on an adequate supply of vitamins and minerals.

More than two billion people around the world suffer chronic vitamin and mineral deficiencies. Their health is at risk because they are not getting the right kinds of food, and many will die as a result. Six million children under the age of five die each year as a result of malnutrition.

Diseases like HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, so common in the developing world, not only rob people of their health but also increase their vulnerability to hunger. Malnourished people are more susceptible to illnesses and suffer rapid and severe health consequences. Many are farmers who grow food for their families and communities. When they become too disabled to tend to their crops, they can no longer produce adequate amounts of food. Other family members suffer, and the cycle of hunger continues.

Nutrition programs are not a catchall solution to hunger. The root causes of hunger must be addressed through long-term commitments to improvements in infrastructure, agricultural productivity and poverty reduction. These longer-term strategies should be accompanied by direct nutrition interventions that aim to meet people’s immediate food needs.²

Here in the United States, not all U.S. children are as fortunate as those who attend Woods Lake Elementary. Nutrition

assistance programs do not reach every eligible person due to bureaucratic roadblocks, social stigma, and lack of political will to allocate sufficient funds to serve all those in need.

Frontline Focus

Understanding the nutritional status of hungry people creates a foundation for improving frontline responses to hunger both in the developing world and the United States.

Hunger 2006 argues that in the developing world, national efforts to address hunger should integrate nutrition interventions within the framework of broader development initiatives. Incorporating nutrition concerns into agricultural production and processing, for example, are two ways to improve the nutritional content of foods. Combining nutrition educa-



America's Second Harvest

Overall, the federal government has put together a strong portfolio of child nutrition programs. However, not all eligible children are served by these programs, and that means there is still work to be done.

tion with health services helps increase people's knowledge and awareness of nutrition and the link to improved health and well-being.

Simple vitamin and mineral supplementation, either by dispensing tablets or fortifying foods in factories, represent affordable ways to make rapid progress against malnutrition. "Probably no other technology available today offers as large an opportunity to improve lives and accelerate development at such low cost and in such a short time," notes the World Bank.³

The Micronutrient Initiative, a global partnership specializing in fighting vitamin and mineral disorders, estimates the cost of providing effective protection to 380 million African women and children to be less than \$1 per person per year. After five years the cost would drop to less than half of that.⁴

Solving the problem of nutritional deficiencies is likely to require a combination of many interventions, including the establishment of nutrition safety nets. Safety net programming can ensure that good health and nutrition are within reach of everyone. Just as safety nets literally catch people if they fall, nutrition safety nets are intended to lessen the impact of poverty on human health.

In the United States, the Food Stamp Program, the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs, and the Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants and Children (also known as WIC) are all examples of nutrition safety nets. These and other federal programs make up a large part of the focus of *Hunger 2006* dedicated to U.S. nutrition assistance.

The United States is fortunate to have millions of volunteers in churches and community centers in every state helping to end domestic hunger. But the problem is a big one – too big for charities to handle alone. The emergency food network,

a \$2 billion per year operation, contributes only a fraction of what the federal government spends on the four biggest nutrition programs: food stamps, school lunch and breakfast, and WIC. In the first half of 2005, the federal government spent close to \$25 billion on just these four programs.

The fact that hunger reached historic lows in the United States during the 1970s, and now has gone back up to where it was before, suggests the cause of hunger in the United States is primarily political. Indeed, the resources exist to feed all Americans. The only reason children and families continue to go hungry in this country is that our government allows it to happen.

The Way Forward

The U.S. government has adopted the goal of cutting domestic food insecurity in half by 2010, and it is well within its capabilities to do so. *Hunger 2006* shows how to improve the federal nutrition safety net.

Included among our recommendations for strengthening nutrition assistance in the United States are the following:

- Food Stamp benefits must be adequate to ensure that low-income families have the means to purchase healthy foods. Healthy foods are more expensive than heavily processed, less nutritious foods. Good nutrition provides a vital boost to families so that they may escape poverty.
- Every low-income child in the United States should receive free school meals and have guaranteed access to summer food services in their communities. These nutrition programs help ensure that children grow up to be healthy and have a chance to succeed at school.

Addressing the problem of malnutrition in the developing world is absolutely essential to achieving the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. Halving hunger is the first goal, but the entire set of Millennium Development Goals cannot be reached without making significant progress against malnutrition.

Included among our recommendations for improving nutrition assistance in the developing world are the following:

- A one-time push could get countries all over the world to fortify widely used foods and dramatically improve health.
- Nutrition programs should figure more prominently in development programs.
- The world should establish mechanisms, including a humanitarian reserve fund, to respond to famines without waiting for CNN to broadcast photographs of starving children.

Improvements in nutrition assistance are necessary to reach domestic and international goals of cutting hunger in half. With improvements like those called for in *Hunger 2006*, we can achieve dramatic progress against hunger, poverty and disease, both in the United States and around the world.

¹ More Schools Serve Breakfast. (30 January 2005) *Kalamazoo Gazette*.

² <http://www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2004/51809/>

³ World Bank. *Enriching Lives: Overcoming Vitamin and Mineral Malnutrition in Developing Countries*. Washington, DC: World Bank (1994), p. 1.

⁴ *Our Common Interest: Report of the Commission for Africa*. (2005), p. 198.