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The Hunger Holocaust

GPN Original

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We condemn the Holocaust in Europe in the 1940s and vow that such things must never happen again. However, "never again" is a promise that has been unfulfilled, in Rwanda, Darfur, and elsewhere. There is another type of holocaust that is not even recognized, the holocaust of hunger. Is there any reason why "Never Again" should not apply to that holocaust?

The millions of nutrition-related deaths worldwide, repeated year after year, can be viewed as a type of holocaust. This phenomenon is different from the well-known deliberate genocides, but it is not for that reason unimportant.

As that decade comes to a close the tragic reality is that little, if any, progress has been made toward meeting those goals. During any year, millions of children starve to death, tens of millions have gone to bed hungry and malnutrition continues to afflict hundreds of millions of people in all parts of the world. These statistics make hunger by far the most flagrant and widespread of all human rights abuses (Alston 1984, 7).

A careful analysis of the 10.4 million deaths of children under five worldwide in 2004 showed, "Child underweight, together with micronutrient deficiencies and suboptimal breastfeeding, accounted for 35% of child deaths . . . (World Health Organization 2009, 9, 28)." The total number of child deaths each year is going down, but slowly, so it is still reasonable to estimate that child malnutrition alone accounts for more than three million deaths each year.

With the number of hungry people worldwide estimated to have gone beyond the one billion mark in 2008 (FAO 2009), there are surely many millions of additional malnutrition deaths of adolescents and adults every year. Some of those deaths

are due to overweight. Many are due to specific nutrient deficiencies, including the deaths of more than a million children and more than 50,000 women during pregnancy and childbirth each year (Micronutrient Initiative 2004). For people of all ages, most malnutrition deaths are due simply to undernutrition, people not getting enough good food to eat.

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Why does widespread hunger happen? Why is it tolerated? Where is the outrage?

EXPLANATIONS

The massive worldwide mortality due to hunger is stunning not only because the numbers are so large, but also because so few people know about it. The failure to address the world hunger problem adequately is at least partly the result of indifference, not caring enough. The fact that the number is not carefully monitored and widely reported is itself evidence that people have little interest in it.

Apparently the rich are not highly motivated to alleviate hunger and the poverty that underlies it. The consequences are captured in the title of a 2004 study, *Fatal Indifference: The G8, Africa and Global Health* (Labonte 2004). Its chapter on "Nutrition, Food Security and Biotechnology" concludes with the understated observation, "The lack of explicit commitments, goals and strategies related to enhanced food security, especially in the regions of the world where undernourishment is most prevalent, is disturbing."

One indicator of the inadequacy of the motivation is the promise made in 1970 at the United Nations General Assembly that donor governments would raise their Official Development Assistance (ODA) to 0.7 percent of their Gross National Income by the mid-1970s. That commitment has been reaffirmed many times. The contributions have increased steadily, but the donors' average ODA reached an all-time high of only 0.47 percent of national income in 2008, almost four decades after the original promise was made. Of the 22 countries in the Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, in 2007 and 2008 only Sweden, Luxembourg, Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands reached the target level of 0.7 percent. In 2008 the United States contributed the largest amount of ODA, about \$26 billion, but this was under 0.2 percent of its national income (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2009).

Some individuals and organizations care deeply about the problem of hunger, but globally the motivation to end hunger is not at the level it needs to be. Hunger

could be ended quickly if the people who have the power cared enough about the people who have the problem. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton got it exactly right when she said, “the question is not whether we can end hunger, it's whether we will (On the Hill 2009).” There are no major technical obstacles.

In 2008 the United States was the only country to vote against a United Nations General Assembly Resolution that “would have the Assembly reaffirm that hunger constitutes an outrage and a violation of human dignity, requiring the adoption of urgent measures at the national, regional and international level, for its elimination (United Nations General Assembly 2008).”

Apart from widespread indifference, another explanation for the persistence of hunger is that many people benefit from it. As a result, whether consciously or unconsciously, many people and many countries act in ways that ensure that hunger in the world is sustained.

We sometime see poor people by the roadside holding up signs that say “Will Work for Food.” Many people work for food. People need food to survive, so they work, either in producing food for themselves in subsistence-level production, or by selling their services to others in exchange for money. How many of us would sell our services if it were not for the threat of hunger? Hunger is fundamental to the working of the world's economy.

Hungry people are highly productive workers, especially where there is a need for manual labor. They are the front-line producers and processors in food production and in many other industries. Their importance is not evident if their productivity is measured in terms of their earnings, but many companies that make major contributions to the gross national product do that by using poorly paid workers. Those who have few options sell their services cheaply. In doing that the poor help to enrich those who own the factories and the machines and the land, and help to provide consumers with inexpensive products.

For those who depend on the availability of cheap labor, hunger is the foundation of their wealth. In his Dissertation on the Poor Laws in England of 1786, Joseph Townsend observed, “. . . hunger is not only a peaceable, silent, unremitted pressure, but, as the most natural motive to industry and labour, it calls forth the most powerful exertions . . . (Townsend 1786).”

The famed essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson saw that people often pay for their food with their independence:

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion (Emerson 1841).

Usually hunger motivates people to work cheaply in quiet ways, but at times it is blatant, as in the case of “Tetley’s Tata Tea Starving Indian Tea Workers into Submission”:

Tata, the transnational Indian conglomerate whose Tetley Group makes the world famous Tetley teas, has taken 6,500 people hostage through hunger. The hostages are nearly 1,000 tea plantation workers and their families on the Nowera Nuddy Tea Estate in West Bengal, India. Permanently living on the edge of hunger, the workers and their dependents are being pushed to the edge of starvation through an extended lock out which has deprived them of wages for all but two days since the beginning of August. The goal of this collective punishment is to starve the workers into renouncing their elementary human rights, including the right to protest extreme abuse and exploitation. . . . (IUF 2009).

The nutrition literature says it is important to ensure that people are well fed so that that they could be more productive. That is misleading. Well nourished people do have greater potential for carrying out physical work, but they might not agree to actually do it. No one works harder than hungry people. People who are well nourished have greater capacity for productive physical activity, but they are far less willing to do that work.

There are many reasons to allow hunger to persist.

Ending hunger through assistance program could be costly. Those who have money can always find other ways to use their resources.

Generous social welfare programs might produce waves of unwanted migration to the areas with the most generous handouts.

Many believe that hunger helps to protect the world from runaway population growth.

The conventional thinking is that low-paying jobs cause hunger. For example, one report tells about “Brazil’s ethanol slaves: 200,000 migrant sugar cutters who prop up renewable energy boom (Phillips 2007; also see Simoes 2008).” While it is true that low-paying jobs create hunger, at the same time hunger causes low-paying jobs to be created. Who would establish massive biofuel production operations in Brazil if they did not know there were thousands of hungry people ready to take the awful jobs they offer? Who would build any sort of factory if they did not know people would be available to take the jobs at low pay?

A nongovernmental organization estimates there are about 27 million slaves in the world (Free the Slaves 2007). They define slaves as people who are not

allowed to walk away from their jobs. While there are many people who are literally locked into workrooms, there also others who work in slave-like conditions, such as bonded laborers in south Asia and migrant farm workers in the United States (Dooley 2009; Immokalee 2008). Apparently, the count by Free the Slaves does not include those who might be described as slaves to hunger, people who are free to walk away from their jobs, but have nothing better to go to. What are their numbers? It may be that many people who work are slaves to hunger.

If there were no hunger in the world, who would do all the hard work in fields and factories? Hunger ensures that many people will work cheaply. That is a blessing to those who benefit from the fruits of their labor, whether as employers or as consumers. People at the high end are not rushing to solve the hunger problem because for them hunger is not a problem but an asset. For those who depend on the availability of cheap labor, poverty is the foundation of their wealth.

We sometimes talk about hunger and poverty as scourges that all of us want to see abolished, but that naïve view prevents us from coming to grips with what causes and sustains them. Hunger and poverty have great positive value to many people. Indeed, they are fundamental to the working of the world's economy.

Why end hunger and other forms of malnutrition? Most people will want to prevent or remedy their own serious malnutrition or that of their family members. The question that needs to be answered is, why should any of us want to deal with the malnutrition problems of others, especially distant others who we don't know and will never meet? We need to have a clear answer to the why question if we are ever to have good answers to the how question.

There are often grand efforts to provide assistance during sudden-onset disasters like the earthquake in Haiti on January 12, 2010, but what was the world's response to the preceding decades of chronic hunger in Haiti? The persistence of hunger and poverty in the world should lead us to wonder whether the ongoing challenge of hunger has ever been addressed in a serious way.

Despite the comforting rhetoric, the historical evidence suggests that in fact there is not a harmony of interests between those who suffer and those who have the power to solve those problems. Their interests conflict. Hunger and poverty are manifestations of structural violence that is mediated through social systems. This structural violence leads to the endless re-creation of hunger and poverty.

Hunger and poverty persist because of the powerlessness of the poor and the indifference and exploitativeness of the rich. There are three key points:

- Disjunction. Hunger and poverty persist largely because the people who have the power to solve the problems are not the ones who have the problems.

- Compassion. On the whole, the people who have the power do not have much compassion for the powerless.
- Material interests. The powerful serve mainly the powerful, not the powerless, because the powerless cannot do much for the benefit of the powerful. In many cases the powerful exploit the powerless.

The powerful have the capacity but not the will to address the problems adequately, while the powerless have the will but not the capacity.

The explanation for the failure to act should be clear. While we may wish it were otherwise, it is factually a mistake to view humanity as one. We are divided, so it matters that the costs of ending hunger and poverty would go to one group while the benefits would go to another.

The disjunction between those who have the problems and those who have the power to solve them is seen both within countries and globally. The lack of caring within countries is evident when we see widespread malnutrition side by side with concentrated wealth.

GENOCIDE

On June 24, 1981 a group of 52 Nobel Prize laureates issued a Manifesto Against Hunger:

We . . . address an appeal to all men and women of good will . . . so that dozens of millions of those who are suffering from starvation and underdevelopment, victims of the international political and economic disorder so widespread today, may be restored to life.

An unprecedented holocaust, whose horror includes in a single year all the horror of the exterminations which our generations saw in the first half of the century, is still happening today and continuing to widen, every moment that passes, the perimeter of barbarities and death in the world, no less than in our consciences.

All those who have taken stock of the holocaust, who are publicising it and fighting it, are unanimous in defining politics first and foremost as the cause of this tragedy . . . (Manifesto 1981).

Is it reasonable to claim that hunger worldwide, allowing the deaths of millions of people each year, amounts to a form of genocide?

The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 9, 1948 and entered into force on January 12, 1951. According to article II:

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. (UNOHCHR 2010a)

The hungry do not constitute a group in the sense indicated in the convention. It recognizes only national, ethnic, racial, and religious groups as potential victims of genocide. Thus, in terms of this convention, the idea of calling hunger genocidal is questionable.

INTENTIONS

The convention also specifies there must be the intent to destroy if an action is to be identified as genocide. However, hunger does not result from the deliberate action of readily identified actors in the pattern characteristic of other commonly recognized genocides.

Deliberate neglect describes the pattern of many governments' responses to hunger. It is comparable to the disputed concept in law of "willful negligence" or "advertent negligence," defined as "Negligence in which the actor is aware of the unreasonable risk that he or she is creating (Garner 2004, 1062)." The term is not self-contradictory. Neglect can be understood as the failure to do something that should be done—and that failure may or may not be intentional. If it persists and it is obvious, it must be regarded as intentional. If the failure to attend to people's needs persists over time, even in the face of repeated complaints and appeals, that neglect should be described as deliberate.

There is a difference between not knowing what your actions will lead to and what is described in law as "reckless disregard" for the predictable consequences of one's action. Manufacturers of cars and pharmaceuticals are expected to pull their products off the market if they learn they have serious harmful effects. Ignoring that harm while having full knowledge of it is a crime.

When infant formula was first promoted in the third world, it might not have been anticipated that it would kill babies. But when international governmental and nongovernmental organizations documented and warned and campaigned about the problem, and the World Health Assembly passed guidelines to control the behavior of sellers of infant formula, and still the sellers persisted in selling the product in a way that is known to kill babies, that is unforgivable. It is a form of killing. When it has been estimated that promoting breastfeeding "has the

potential to save or delay ~720 postneonatal deaths in the United States each year (Chen 2003, e435),” how should we judge the fact that the United States government provides free infant formula to about half the infants in the country (Kent 2006b)? What are we to think of companies that promote infant formula in poor countries, where the risks of death from formula feeding are much higher? Those who are interested have been aware of this problem since Dr. Cicely Williams gave her “Milk and Murder” speech in 1939 (Baby Milk Action 2010).

In other genocides, killings are concentrated in a particular time and space. However, deaths from hunger are dispersed all over the globe and they are sustained over time. There is no central command structure causing these deaths to happen. There is nothing like the Wannsee conference of January 20, 1942 at which the Nazis systematically set out their plans for the extermination of the Jews of Europe.

There is that difference. The widespread neglect of hunger is not the calculated program of a few madmen assembled at a particular moment in history. The massive mortality due to hunger is more frightening precisely because it occurs worldwide with no central coordination mechanism. The culpability is not individual but systemic.

CRIMINALITY

Hunger deaths cannot be described as murders, but that does not mean that they are accidental or natural or inevitable. Some are self-inflicted, resulting from unwise personal dietary choices. The vast majority can be described as resulting from a form of negligent homicide by the surrounding society. Negligent homicide is still homicide.

Some argue that genocide should be defined narrowly, as it is in the genocide convention, to prevent the debasement of the concept. The difficulty is that a narrow definition might suggest that other kinds of avoidable large-scale mortality are less important. A sensible alternative would be to acknowledge that there are different kinds of genocide associated with different categories of victims and different forms of intentionality.

This is the approach advocated by Israel Charny in his taxonomic scheme. He defines genocide in the generic sense as the willful destruction of a large number of human beings, except as that might be necessary in self defense. He then suggests that in distinguishing different categories of genocide, the degree of willfulness or intentionality should be assessed, leading to rating of different degrees of the crime of genocide (Charny 1994).

Perhaps the definitions used in assessing homicides could be adapted. Just as there can be first, second, or third degree murder, so too there might be first, second, or third degree genocide. Further distinctions could be made to take

account of sustained deliberate neglect.

Widespread hunger deaths differ in many ways from the Holocaust and other atrocities we commonly describe as genocides. The differences, however, are not sufficient to dismiss the issue. The conclusion is virtually inescapable: hunger is so massive, so persistent, and so unnecessary, allowing it to continue should be recognized as a kind of genocide.

Hunger is not the particular type of genocide specified in the genocide convention, but as this large-scale ongoing deliberate neglect results in the avoidable deaths of many millions of people, it too should be viewed as a crime comparable to other types of genocide.

Families and countries may be poor, but the world is not poor. There are no technical mysteries about how to prevent hunger. Ongoing, widespread, intense malnutrition should be recognized as *prima facie* evidence of an ongoing crime by society. As a crime there should be mechanisms in law for correcting that manifest injustice, including means for calling not only parents and local communities but also governments to account. The foundation of that mechanism would be the clear recognition in law and practice of human rights.

THE HUMAN RIGHT TO ADEQUATE FOOD

The right to life is well established in international human rights law, so on that basis alone, widespread hunger should be recognized as violating human rights. In India the entire right to food movement is based on the simple assertion of the right to life in the nation's constitution.

However, at the global level, there is no need to derive arguments from the right to life alone. The human right to adequate food is now well developed in international human rights law (Kent 2005).

Historically, many global conferences, summits, and declarations on food security, nutrition, and hunger have made passing references to the human right to adequate food. The World Food Summit of 1996 was the first to set out a process for clarifying and implementing that right. An authoritative interpretation of its meaning was published as General Comment 12 in 1999 (UNECOSOC 1999). The United Nations appointed a Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. In 2004 the Council of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations adopted Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security, on November 23, 2004 (FAO 2005). All this work helped to build consensus on the meaning of the human right to adequate food.

While the first phase of this effort focused on the obligations of national governments to people living under their jurisdiction, later work gave more

attention to the obligations of the global community (Kent 2008). The right to food guidelines say that national development efforts should be supported by an enabling international environment. Relevant international agencies “are urged to take actions in supporting national development efforts for the progressive realization of the right to adequate food in the context of national food security (FAO 2005, 33).”

The core document of the modern global human rights system, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, says in article 28:

Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized (UNOHCHR 2010b).

This in turn stands on the United Nations Charter, which says, in article 55

With a view to the creation of conditions of stability and well-being which are necessary for peaceful and friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, the United Nations shall promote:

- a. higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development;
- b. solutions of international economic, social, health, and related problems; and international cultural and educational cooperation; and
- c. universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion (UNOHCHR 2010c).

Article 56 of the Charter says:

All Members pledge themselves to take joint and separate action in co-operation with the Organization for the achievement of the purposes set forth in Article 55.

Thus the charter and the declaration clearly acknowledge the responsibility of the global community, taken as a whole, for the realization of human rights. If everyone is entitled to an international order that will ensure the full realization of all human rights, we must work on envisioning and establishing such an order. Surely it should be an order in which the world as a whole recognizes not only moral responsibilities but also legal obligations for the realization of those rights. We must begin with the understanding that there are global obligations that are beyond those of states to their own people. Then we can begin to work out their exact content.

The human right to adequate food means that there is an obligation to reach the goal of ending hunger and ensuring food security for all. These obligations fall primarily on national governments, but they are shared by all of us. There are

choices that can be made with regard to means, but there is no choice with regard to the obligation to move decisively toward the goal. Thus, concrete obligations for ensuring realization of the human right to adequate food for all can be identified through the formulation of a concrete strategy for realizing that goal. Once one knows what steps are required to reach the goal, then there is an obligation to take those steps. If there are several different ways to reach the goal, choices may be made among them, but there is an obligation to choose some path that can realistically be expected to reach the goal.

There have been many global programs for responding to large-scale malnutrition, but they propose only to work around the edges of the problem, not to end it. There is a need for a global strategy and program of action that really could be expected to end hunger as a major public policy issue in the world. Not only moral considerations but also a fair interpretation of human rights law and principles require such a strategy and program of action.

A child may be born into a poor country, but that child is not born into a poor world. That child has rights claims not only against its own country and its own people; it has claims against the entire world. If human rights are meaningful, they must be seen as universal, and not merely local. Neither rights nor obligations end at national borders. While national governments have primary responsibility for ensuring the realization of the human right to adequate food for people under their jurisdiction, all of us are responsible for all of us, in some measure. The task is to work out the nature and the depth of those global obligations.

In 1984 the editors of one of the earliest books on the human right to adequate food said:

At the conclusion of the World Food Conference held in Rome 1974 the governments of the world proclaimed “that within a decade no child will go to bed hungry, that no family will fear for its next day’s bread, and that no human being’s future and capacities will be stunted by malnutrition”.

As that decade comes to a close the tragic reality is that little, if any, progress has been made toward meeting those goals. During any year, millions of children starve to death, tens of millions have gone to bed hungry and malnutrition continues to afflict hundreds of millions of people in all parts of the world. These statistics make hunger by far the most flagrant and widespread of all human rights abuses (Alston 1984, 7).

Decades later their conclusion remains true. No violation of human rights has done more harm to more people than hunger. If no decisive action is taken, it will retain that distinction for years to come.

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Children in the International Political Economy (New York: Macmillan/St. Martin's, 1995);
Freedom from Want: The Human Right to Adequate Food (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005);
(Editor) *Global Obligations for the Right to Food* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008);
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