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World Hunger: Ten Myths

*By Frances Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins**

How we think about hunger matters

In troubled times, all of us seek ways to make sense of the world. We grasp for organizing beliefs to help us interpret the endlessly confusing rush of world events. Unfortunately, however, the two of us have come to see that *the way people think about hunger* is the greatest obstacle to ending it. So in this Backgrounder we encapsulate 40 years of learning and in-depth new research to reframe ten such ways of thinking explored in our latest book *World Hunger: 10 Myths*. We call them "myths" because they often lead us down blind alleys — or simply aren't true.

Myth 1: too little food, too many people

Our response: Abundance, not scarcity, best describes the world's food supply. Even though the global population more than doubled between 1961 and 2013, the world produces around 50 percent more food for each of us today—of which we now waste about a third. Even after diverting roughly half of the world's grain and most soy protein to animal feed and non-food uses, the world still produces enough to provide every human being with nearly 2,900 calories a day. Clearly, our global calorie supply is ample.

Increasingly, however, calories and nutrition are diverging as the quality of food in most parts

** Adapted and edited by KellyAnne Tang and Tanya Kerssen from the forthcoming* World Hunger: 10 Myths *by Food First co-founders Frances Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins (New York: Grove Press and Oakland: Food First Books, 2015). See original for notes and references.*

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of the world is degrading. Using a calorie-deficiency standard, the UN estimates that today roughly one in nine people is hungry—about 800 million; but adding measures of nutrient deficiencies as well, we estimate that a quarter of the world's people suffer from nutritional deprivation.

Food scarcity is not the problem, but the scarcity of real democracy protecting people's access to nutritious food is a huge problem. So, fighting hunger means tackling concentrated political and economic power in order to create new equitable rules. Otherwise hunger will continue no matter how much food we grow.

Myth 2: climate change makes hunger inevitable

Our response: Climate change is no myth. It already means crop losses from drought and the expansion of pests into new regions. The World Food Program forecasts the number of malnourished children to increase by 24 million by 2050, or about one-fifth more than without climate change. These expert observations form a powerful call to action, but they are a far cry from a verdict that hunger and famine are inevitable.

We can instead decide that climate change is an opportunity for instigating positive change. Because the global food system is so inefficient and inequitable, we have plenty of room to increase available food before we hit earth's actual limits.

Fortunately, changes in food and farming that best address climate change are precisely those that most benefit the world's hungry people, the environment, and everyone's health. If remade, our food system has unique capacities to help rebalance the carbon cycle by cutting emissions and storing more carbon in the soil. Climate-friendly farming practices are low-cost and especially benefit small-scale farmers and farmworkers, who are the majority of hungry people. While climate disruption is now inevitable, vulnerability is largely under human control. As we correct the severe inequities and inefficiencies in our food system, we can ensure that no one goes hungry as we face the climate challenge.

Myth 3: only industrial agriculture and GMOs can feed the world

Our response: Industrial agriculture relies on patented seeds, manufactured fertilizers and pesticides, and large-scale machinery. The production increases of "industrial agriculture" are no myth, but this model of farming is not sustainable and has already proven unable to end hunger. With a narrow focus on production, it fails to take into account the web of relationships, both those among people and those involving the natural world, that determine who can eat.

The industrial model also ends up accelerating the concentration of control over land and other resources that lies at the root of hunger and of vast environmental damage. Tightening control of land is also true in the United States where farms are being squeezed out so that only four farms remain today for every ten in 1950. And despite the vast output of US industrial agriculture, one in six Americans is "food insecure." Worldwide, the model's unsustainability shows up, for example, in topsoil eroding at a rate 13 to 40 times faster than nature can replenish it; and the run-off of chemical fertilizers has created more than 400 aquatic dead zones. While industrial agriculture has not ended hunger, fortunately there are proven pathways—such as agroecology—that help to end hunger by protecting the environment while enhancing equity, food quality, and productivity.

Myth 4: organic and ecological farming can't feed a hungry world

Our response: In many parts of the world, organic farming practices that minimize or forgo manufactured pesticides and fertilizer are proving effective. Building on this, an approach called agroecology involves much more than the absence of chemicals. Agroecology is an evolving practice of growing food within communities that is power-dispersing and power creating—enhancing the dignity, knowledge, and capacities of all involved. Agroecology thus helps to address the powerlessness at the root of hunger. It builds on both traditional knowledge accrued over millennia by peasants and indigenous people and the latest breakthroughs in modern science. Its practices free farmers from dependency on corporate suppliers and thus reinforce the dispersion of power, including for women.

While some studies indicate that industrial agriculture produces higher yields than these alternative practices, many small farmers using ecological farming in the Global South are enjoying yield increases, some quite dramatic. In any case, this model of farming—one that views life's multiple dimensions as connected and interacting—has multiple benefits beyond productivity. It not only avoids

the negative and unsustainable environmental and health impacts of the industrial model, but also contributes to addressing climate change. It both reduces emissions, relative to the industrial model, and increases carbon absorption.

Myth 5: we have to choose between greater fairness and more production

Our response: Justice and production are not competing but complementary goals. On average, small farms in the Global South produce more per acre. They often use land efficiently by integrating diverse crops as well as livestock or fish, which are typically fed crop residues and produce waste that can be used as fertilizer. Such integrated systems can also yield greater nutrition compared to single-crop systems. Small, agroecological farms are also commonly more energy-efficient and use little fossil fuel. By contrast, capital-intensive US agriculture characterized by large farms uses seven to ten units of primarily fossil energy to produce just one unit of food energy.

Greater gender equity also increases productivity. In the Global South women are responsible for growing 60 to 80 percent of the food, yet few own the land, and worldwide women receive only about five percent of agricultural extension services. If women had the same access to productive resources as men, their agricultural yields could increase by 20 to 30 percent: the total additional food produced could feed as many as 150 million people. The only path to increased production that can end hunger is one in which those who do the work gain a greater say and reap a greater reward.

Myth 6: the free market can end hunger

Our response: A free-market-is-all-we-need formula blinds us from seeing that a well-functioning market is impossible without democratic government, and that food is more than a commodity. In fact, most nations have declared access to adequate food a human right; and the fulfillment of any right cannot logically be left entirely at the mercy of market exchange. Since food is both necessary to life *and* a market commodity, the only way this right can be realized is for governments to ensure that every person has the means to secure enough healthy food, and, if unable to work, has access to dignified public support.

The market serves human freedom only on one condition: that people have purchasing power to express their values in the market. Thus, freedom expands as societies set rules ensuring that wealth circulates widely and fairly. Unfortunately, we've not protected our freedom from what Supreme Court Justice William Douglas called "the curse of bigness" that kills a fair market. Oligopolies, almost as destructive as monopolies, exist when a handful of companies control a huge market share. From grain trade to the store shelf, that's what we now see. Four companies control as much as 90 percent of the world's grain trade. Such private monopoly power kills competition and generates hunger from plenty. Worst of all, concentrated private power usurps public decision-making so government policies increasingly benefit the elite minority. Thus, removing the power of private wealth in politics is not a separate concern. It is essential to ending hunger.

Myth 7: free trade is the answer

Our response: The notion that trade, freed from government meddling, will help reduce hunger is grounded in the theory that every country can benefit from its "comparative advantage"—each exporting what it can produce most

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cheaply and importing what it cannot. So countries with hunger and poverty can increase exports of commodities best suited to their geography. Then, with greater foreign exchange earnings, they can import food and other essentials to alleviate hunger and poverty.

But if such is the outcome of increasing exports, why in so many countries have exports boomed while hunger and poverty have continued or even worsened? One answer is simply that those profiting from exports typically are large growers, international trading companies, foreign investors, and others who have no incentive to use their profits to benefit hungry people. Plus, all too often export crops displace food crops, as well as small-scale farmers, who are the majority of hungry people worldwide. Only as all citizens achieve a more equitable voice in control of their nations' resources can trade benefit the poor and hungry.

Myth 8: US foreign aid is the best way we can help the hungry

Our response: Ending hunger requires profound changes that enable people who have been made powerless to gain a voice in their own futures. But much of US government aid goes to nations whose economic and political elites are likely to feel threatened by such changes. Also

making it difficult for US foreign aid to help the hungry is that, not surprisingly, aid is a tool of foreign policy. "Remember that foreign assistance is not charity...It is a strategic imperative for America," noted Secretary of State Kerry in 2013, echoing his predecessors. Thus, much depends on how policymakers choose to define the national interest.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the "Global War on Terror" has become the centerpiece of US foreign policy, reflected in the concentration of US country-specific economic aid: the top five recipients, garnering more than one third of such US aid, are Afghanistan, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Jordan, and Iraq.

You might be thinking that, surely, one aspect of US assistance—food aid—helps the hungry. Since the program's inception in 1954, US food aid has been predominantly "tied aid"—meaning the food must be grown, processed, and packaged in the United States and shipped overseas on US-flagged vessels. This "tying" of food aid thus benefits private US interests and makes food shipments more costly and much slower—hardly what's needed in emergencies. European and other important donor nations have untied their food aid.

There are, however, two especially powerful ways we *can* help: removing obstacles placed in the way of hungry people by policies of our governments and activities of multinational corporations; and seizing the power of positive example by democratizing our own societies to end hunger.

Myth 9: it's not our problem

Our response: While the extent and severity of hunger differ greatly between the Global North and the Global South, there are powerful parallels and interconnections. Exploring them, we've come to see that our well-being and that of future generations depend on how deeply we grasp this commonality and whether we make choices based on that understanding.

The extent of hunger, poverty, and extreme inequalities in the US violates much of what Americans want to believe. Ranked by infant death rate, widely understood to reflect a society's food insecurity and poverty, the US places 56th globally—just behind Serbia and Lithuania. Inequality in the US is even more extreme than in India, Liberia, and Yemen.

In the US, consumers are often told—sometimes not too subtly—that they benefit from imported goods made affordable by the very fact of lower wages "over there." But this benefit is illusory, as we register the many thousands of good jobs lost here and the downward pressure on wages and benefits in the US that are hidden in the perception of "cheap" goods. Globalizing corporations, in effect, require workers to compete with their counterparts in countries that keep wages low by suppressing unions and failing to uphold safety and environmental standards.

Exploring the common challenges and needs of majorities in both North and South, it's vitally important to weigh not just what one's own society has achieved but also the direction it's headed. So we must ask, are we moving toward assuring that everyone can enjoy the basic essentials for human dignity *or* are we moving toward the life-stunting conditions associated with "hungry countries"?

Myth 10: power is too concentrated for real change—it's too late!

Our response: It's certainly no myth that economic power is concentrated in the hands of a few, and that it translates into political power. Indeed, in the eyes of some, we're returning to feudalism—but in corporate form. So let's ask, how did feudalism end? People stopped believing in it! Could we be in such a moment in which people the world over stop believing in the economic and political structures that make so many feel powerless?

Certainly, transformational change *is* under way: as regular people rethink their own power—more and more people are discovering that the capacity to act is not fixed. It grows and shrinks in response to our own creativity, insight, fortitude, knowledge, capacity to empathize, desire, connection to others, and more. Power is so much more than money and guns. Our own motivation is strengthened also by the realization that in an interconnected world we can be sure that our every act has power.

Grasping these truths, we realize it is simply not possible to know what's possible. We can each count the numerous occasions in which what most people assumed to be impossible actually happened.

In such a time, courage is key. To be part of the solution means being willing to take risks, including challenging oneself and others to rethink ideas so taken for granted as to be like the air we breathe. We can seek out and draw lessons from the courage of those the world over—many who might appear powerless—together building democratic solutions to needless suffering and creating life-supporting societies.

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