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Rotary: A New Partner in the Fight Against Hunger?

Thank you for having me today.

Hunger has become practically invisible in the developed world. We rarely encounter it face to face. But let me share a few statistics with you to give you a sense of the scope of the problem.

- Today, more than 842 million people around the world are undernourished.
- Hunger claims more lives than AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria combined.
- Out of the 10 greatest threats to public health, undernutrition is still number one. One in 4 of the world's children under 5 years old is underweight - 168 million all told. The life of a child is lost every 5 seconds to hunger.

Much of the suffering from hunger today is among millions of victims of AIDS and their families. AIDS has added a new, more sinister element to the dynamics of hunger.

- 42 million people are living with HIV/AIDS-95% of these people live in poor or developing countries

- 29 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa live with HIV/AIDS. Only 1% of those who need anti-AIDS drugs receive them.

- In Swaziland in Southern Africa, more than 38 percent of mothers attending prenatal clinics test sero-positive, one child in five under the age of 15 will be orphaned by 2005. The most disturbing prediction is that life expectancy will fall below thirty years of age by 2010 if current HIV/AIDS trends continue.
- 14 million children worldwide have lost their mother or both parents to AIDS, and the majority of these orphaned children live in Sub-Saharan Africa.

If these facts and figures aren't enough, by 2010 it is estimated that 20 million children will have lost one or both parents to AIDS.

In addition to destroying families, the disease is devastating the agricultural production in many African countries. Seven million African farmers have died from AIDS. Many more adults are too sick to work, and have put off planting their fields. Their children have no one to teach them how to farm. They are left in the care of grandparents, who may be too old or infirm to help, or worse still, left to fend for themselves.

The need for survival outstrips the possibility of a childhood or an education. Children barely old enough to baby-sit are running households, taking care of younger siblings and searching for means to provide food and water. For many, there is no time to attend school and yet without an education, the vicious cycle linking poverty, hunger and HIV/AIDS will only continue.

Suffering Quietly

Tragically, the vast majority of the world's hungry are suffering quietly, far removed from the politics and intrigues which steer the world's political will.

As Jeffrey Sachs noted about Africa: "Living standards are falling, food output per capita is declining, life expectancy is plummeting on the back of the pandemic diseases, and of course this creates an environment that no investor would even take a second look at....It's possible for a whole sub-continent of 700 million people virtually to fall off the face of the planet with not so much as a ho-hum in our daily newspapers."

Children

Hunger begins eroding a child's health and potential even before the child sees the light of day. Because hungry mothers have hungry children, who, if they survive long enough, go on to have hungry children too. The effects of what happens in the womb, and in the first three years of life, can last a lifetime. Every year, up to 17 million children are born underweight: they weigh less than 5.5 pounds. These children are four times more likely than a healthy 3 baby to die in the first week of life from infections such as diarrhea and pneumonia.

Eliminating malnutrition among mothers would give countless children a fighting chance at life. And it would be so simple. Providing mothers with nutritionally balanced food containing protein and micronutrients can reduce the likelihood of a baby being born underweight by more than 30 percent.

Adequate nutrition is essential for the brain's development, particularly in the first weeks, months and years of life.

Hunger exacts a price on society. How many opportunities is the world missing? How much talent is lost, simply because mothers and their children didn't get enough to eat? How many of the next generation's shining stars -- sports heroes, scientists and statesmen -- might never have the chance to achieve great things? One quarter of the world's children might not even get past their fifth birthday, let alone aspire to greatness.

As children reach school age, hunger again gnaws away at their chances for a better life. More than 100 million children don't attend school. Two thirds of them are girls. They'll never learn to read or write. Their curiosity about places beyond their home and village will never be stimulated. Their aspirations will never venture much beyond what they see and hear and touch every day: poverty.

In the past 2 years, I have been in roughly 60 countries, from Afghanistan to Angola, from North Korea to Zimbabwe. One of the things that struck me is the fact that children who go to school aspire to much greater things. Take for example 12 year old Mehram, from the outskirts of Kabul, Afghanistan. He's the brightest boy in his class, and he wants to become a doctor. Medina, one of the girls in the school, wants to become an English teacher. The fact that they're in school at all is quite a miracle. Until a couple of years ago, in Afghanistan it was next to impossible for a girl to attend school. Now they're planning to become teachers. One of the only reasons that keeps children as poor as Mehram and Medina in school is the fact that WFP distributes biscuits in schools, thanks to a donation from India.

Why don't children go to school? Because when a family is hungry, finding food is all that matters. In the most desperate places, that can be a full time job even for young children. That is a real shame, when the benefits of attending school, particularly for girls, are so overwhelming. Girls who go to school tend to get married later, and have far fewer children, with more time between pregnancies. UNICEF reports that infants born to mothers with no formal education are twice as likely to die before their first birthday as are babies born to mothers with an education beyond grade school. Educated mothers are also more likely to send their daughters to school, so the benefits of education are multiplied with each generation.

Hunger is a problem in the classroom too. Poor nutrition reduces students' ability to learn. Half of all school-aged children in developing schools suffer from anemia. This lack of iron renders children listless and unable to concentrate in class. Some 400 million school-age children worldwide suffer from worm infestations. These essentially deprive the child of a good part of the nutrients from the little food they eat. WFP, with help from the World Health Organization and the Canadian Government, is seeking to rid children of intestinal worms in 23 African countries.

The World Food Programme has used food as an incentive for parents to send their children to school for the past 40 years. The impact has been remarkable: when food is provided to children at school or as a take-home ration for the whole family, enrollment rates have tripled in some cases. In those places in Africa where school feeding programmes have been established for some years, enrollment rates rose faster than in schools where no meals are provided.

Fortunately, the future for the world's hungry children is not entirely hopeless. A report released by the International Food Policy Research Institute last year said that the number of children suffering from malnutrition could drop from 166 million to just 38 million by 2050.

But success is contingent on bold, progressive policy decisions. Rich and poor countries need to increase public spending on agriculture and rural development. Investment in agricultural research needs to be increased.

Rotary

That kind of optimism and practical approach fits perfectly with the goals of Rotary International. Ending child hunger has got to be one of the noblest goals possible, and one I hope this club will take on.

It is simply unacceptable that in this day and age, hunger and malnutrition remain the number one cause of death worldwide. Not heart failure, not cancer, not even road accidents – hunger.

The Rotary Club of Indianapolis is truly a remarkable organization. On the one hand, you have done so many things locally to help families here from coordinating blood drives, to raising scholarship money, to supporting Gleaners food bank, to helping Riley's Children's hospital, to assisting with the Gateways partnership.

The club has also made a significant difference in the lives of families overseas. I know you have been working with vulnerable families in Jamaica and I know you have collected funds to assist families in Zimbabwe. You have a global outlook that is impressive in its generosity, vision and outreach.

And your 1.2 million Rotary International peers around the world have an equally impressive global outlook.

Rotarians have recently helped victims of Caribbean hurricanes and tropical storms, including in Gonaives, Haiti, where Rotarians worked with WFP in helping provide food assistance.

In Seattle, the Rotary Club is dedicated to fighting hunger. In Texas, Hunger Plus (formed by 8 Texas Rotary Groups) is fighting hunger and in Milwaukee Rotary supports the city's food banks.

And, as you know, in 1985, Rotary International committed to helping immunize all of the world's children against polio through its Polio Plus program. Working with WHO, UNICEF, the Centers for Disease Controls, NGOs and national governments, Rotary is the largest private-sector contributor to the global polio eradication campaign. Rotarians have mobilized hundreds of thousands of volunteers and have immunized more than one billion children worldwide. By the 2005 target date for certification of a polio-free world, Rotary will have contributed half a billion dollars.

To that I say the following: If we can eradicate polio working together, certainly we can cut hunger in half by 2015. Rotary International has done extraordinary work in helping nearly end one of the worst scourges of our time – polio. Now we need to devote that same time, energy, money and passion to end the greatest public health threat of our time: hunger.

Bob Forney, President and CEO of America's Second Harvest, has come to WFP to propose that WFP and America's Second Harvest approach Rotary International to

ask them to adopt fighting hunger as their next global campaign. If Rotary can be so successful on polio, certainly it can mobilize the world to help end hunger.

I am here today to not only discuss the challenges of ending hunger, but the possibility for success. If we can eradicate polio in all but a few countries working with Rotary International, then Rotary International working with WFP and our partners like America's Second Harvest can help start the movement to half hunger by 2015.

I would feel no greater sense of pride as a Hoosier if this club, the Rotary Club of Indianapolis, supported and led this effort as we reach out to Rotary International for their next global campaign.

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