



“Hunger through the eyes of a child”

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~ The Hungry Child ~

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Hunger has become practically invisible in the developed world. We rarely encounter it face to face. If we do see hunger on our television screens, it is likely to be on the face of a child. It is through the eyes of a hungry child that we can best understand the incredibly debilitating nature of hunger, its erosion of a child’s body, mind, and future.

Countless millions of children have enjoyed the most basic of human rights – the right to food and education – thanks to the dedication and vision of George McGovern. A couple of weeks ago I nominated George McGovern for the United Nations Prize in the area of Human Rights, because Senator McGovern has worked harder than any other individual to ensure that the poorest children of the earth can hope to grow and learn to live full and healthy lives, can go on to serve their families and communities and even nations as he has done.

As founding father of the World Food Program, McGovern’s efforts have helped to bring food to almost 1.2 billion people around the world since the organization was established in 1963. His efforts at home in the United States, creating and promoting key nutrition programs

have transformed the lives of tens of millions of poor families. These programs have helped ensure that poor American children received a healthy meal each day at school and poor mothers and their children -- often from minority groups -- received nutritional assistance through the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) initiative.

Above and beyond his direct efforts to bring food to the hungry, McGovern has tirelessly advocated for the rights of hungry children, highlighting the dual benefits of good nutrition and a solid basic education for future generations. As WFP's Global Ambassador on Hunger, McGovern has lobbied decision makers around the globe to ensure that the world's 300 million hungry children get adequate food and nutrition as well as a basic education.

In 2001, McGovern and Republican Senator Bob Dole partnered to promote the concept that every child in the world should have lunch at school. The George McGovern-Robert Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Act 2001 established a regular program of assistance by the United States Government to provide nutritious meals to poor students around the world. Almost 16 million children in 64 countries received a meal at school through the World Food Program alone in 2002.

Senator McGovern recognized very early that the key to ending hunger in our time lies in our children. In my travels the past year and a half as Executive Director of the World Food Program, I too have realized that children must be our highest priority. Ensuring sound nutrition has to be the very first investment a society makes in its children. I would like to take you on a journey, to see the impact of hunger on a child. At every stage of childhood, hunger wears down a child's ability to withstand disease, to grow and to learn, to become the person that he or she might have been. It is frightening to think about the untold potential that the world is losing because children don't have enough to eat, and don't go to school. I would also like to suggest how you too can join the effort to halve the number of hungry people by 2015.

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

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.

It's not just a question of how much mothers and infants eat – they also need to get the right vitamins and minerals. In developing countries, more than half of all pregnant women do not have sufficient iron, causing 300 women to die during childbirth every day. Iron deficiency also increases the risk of premature delivery, and low birth weight babies. According to the World Bank, the most cost-effective health intervention available today is fortifying food with iron – it surpasses even immunisation in its impact on health. Iodine deficiency is the single greatest cause of mental retardation and preventable brain damage in newborns; fortifying salt with iodine is a simple, cheap solution.

In the first few years of life, the situation doesn't improve for a hungry child. One in four of the world's children aged under five is underweight¹ – skinny for their age. That means they're more likely to die from infectious diseases, their immune system is weak and their long-term physical and mental development is compromised. Think about that for a moment. One in four of the world's children probably won't grow up to be a healthy adult. Their motor skills – crawling, walking, running, kicking a ball, jumping a rope – will likely be limited. They probably won't be as bright as their well-fed peers, taking longer to learn how to speak, relate to their environment, express their emotions.

Adequate nutrition is essential for the brain's development, particularly in the first weeks, months and years of life. A study undertaken in a South African hospital showed that children aged 14-15 months admitted with malnutrition displayed signs of cerebral shrinkage – their brains were literally smaller than those of well-fed children. After 90 days of intensive nutritional rehabilitation, the majority of children recovered². However, the extent of the damage done, and whether the development that was stalled while the children were malnourished can be made up for, is still not clear.

¹ World Health Organization, *World Health Report 2002*, Geneva, 2003.

² UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children 2001*, Geneva, 2002, p. 14.

Malnutrition contributes to 60 percent of deaths of 11 million children under five each year. Deficiencies in critical micronutrients are particularly damaging. For example, vitamin A deficiency is the leading cause of preventable blindness among pre-school children. Simply increasing vitamin A intake among pre-school children, on the other hand, can stop blindness, strengthen children's immune systems and reduce death rates by an average of 23 percent.

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 year and a half I have been in roughly 50 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.

Many poor families have indeed made the connection between education and hope for the future. Kennedy, a dirt-poor farmer from Gumbi in Malawi, sold the family ox cart to pay for his sister to go to one of the best schools in the country. She won a place at the school by scoring one of the highest grades in national exams, the first girl in the village to go on to secondary school. The problem is that the ox cart will only cover the first two semesters' fees, and it was the only income-producing asset that the family owned.

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 benefits of education are not just enjoyed by the children who go to school. We spoke earlier about the fact that girls who go to school tend to have healthier children. They are also more likely to send their children to school. The International Food Policy Research Institute asserts that the 44 percent reduction in child malnutrition between 1970 and 1995 was largely due to increases in women's education. Every additional year of school a mother has results in a 5-10 percent decrease in mortality among her children. An educated workforce is key to the development of whole communities and nations.

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. The United States Government, thanks to the McGovern Dole initiative, provided WFP with \$300 million initially, to help reach every poor, hungry child around the world.

Unfortunately, there are plans to cut those funds by more than 80 percent. This is not the time for America – now recognizing and reacting to the needs of Africans as never before – to turn its back on a continent burdened by a lethal combination of poverty, war, recurring natural disasters and HIV/AIDS.

AIDS threatens to reverse any progress we have made in developing countries – particularly in Africa. In some countries in Africa, up to 30 percent of the population is HIV positive. As a result, the traditional family is fighting a rear-guard action for survival. By the year 2010, we expect that 20 million children will have lost one or both parents to AIDS. That's more than 25 times the population of South Dakota, and more than twice the size of New York City.

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 now running households, taking care of younger siblings and searching for a means to put food on the table. For many, there is no time to attend school and yet without an education, the vicious cycle linking poverty, food insecurity and HIV/AIDS will only continue.

In traditional food emergencies, food aid from other countries is brought in to bridge the gap until the weather improves, the rains come, or peace is found. But AIDS is creating a new type of famine and the future looks increasingly bleak. The impact of AIDS is not localized but spread throughout society, creeping slowly, with deaths occurring a decade after infection. Hunger caused by the AIDS crisis may be less visible than the famines that we have seen before, but the reality is that until a cure is found, it will spiral out of control. In Mozambique, for instance, there are already half a million maternal orphans, and with 13 percent of adult infected, that number is expected to double by 2006.

How will a nation like Mozambique, where the average person earns just \$220 a year, cope with one million orphans in just three years time? What will become of these children who have lost their families, their chance at schooling, and their childhood? Many of these children will flock to already crowded cities where they will live on the streets. Desperate for food and money, many are likely to resort to crime and prostitution. With the proper care and education, they could probably avoid this.

The international community cannot afford to sit back and watch the disintegration of African families. The time to act is now, while parents are alive and children still have hope.

In the Central Mozambican city of Chimoio, every day, 15 children lose their parents to AIDS. But with food and funding from the UN World Food Programme, one organization, Kubatsirana – which means “helping one another” – is making an enormous difference. Through a home-based care program, families with chronically ill members receive enough food assistance to cover their basic needs. Good nutrition keeps breadwinners, who would otherwise have to stop working, healthy longer. Parents too sick to work are not worrying about their family’s next meal. Children who might otherwise be taken out of school to help provide for the family are able to continue with their education. It is through such programs that families are held together for as long as possible and children are given a fighting chance for a brighter future.

For the millions of children orphaned by AIDS, a brighter future may only be possible with the assistance of organizations that complement the traditional family structures under such severe stress at the moment. While the first priority should be to support the extended family which has endured in Africa for centuries, providing vocational training courses helps orphans to obtain skills and participate in educational activities that will help them secure their future.

Fortunately, the future for the world’s hungry children is not entirely hopeless. A report released by the International Food Policy Research Institute last week said that the number of children suffering from malnutrition could drop from 166 million to just 38 million by 2050. Before we start celebrating however, you should know that 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.

The rules on agricultural trade need to be made fairer. Education, social services and health need radically higher levels of funding. And irrigation and water systems need to dramatically improve their efficiency and reach. The good news is that three months ago, the African Union agreed to devote 10 percent of public expenditure to agriculture. Countries in East Africa and the Sahel have made determined efforts to provide free elementary education for all children.

That kind of optimism and practical approach fits perfectly with the goals of the McGovern Center for Public Service. The promotion of public policy here in the US and abroad that will end child hunger has got to be one of the noblest efforts possible. Although hunger may seem to be a distant problem from the vantage point of Dakota Wesleyan University, there is a lot you can do right here on this campus. This month WFP will launch a Student Campaign against hunger. This campaign, which will have its own website, will provide you with the tools to start battling global hunger. It will include ways to help you to mobilize your communities and the world at large.

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. George McGovern saw long ago that hunger wasn't someone else's problem – it is our problem. He found simple, practical ways to stamp it out. I hope and pray that the George McGovern Center will continue and expand his marvellous work so that our dream of the first-ever generation of children free from hunger, can become reality. Wouldn't it be wonderful to look at the world through the eyes of a child and see hope rather than hunger?