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World Hunger Reduction: Missed Goals And Incomplete Strategies

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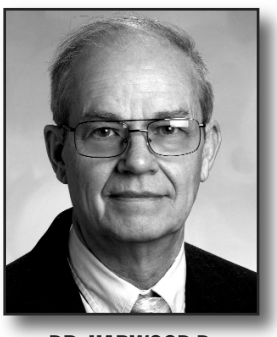

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As we near 2015, it is clear that the goal set by world leaders at the World Food Summit in 1996 will not be met. At that meeting, they set the goal of "reducing the number of undernourished people to half their present level no later than 2015." Current estimates indicate that between 850 million and 1.3 billion people were undernourished in the 2010-2012 period.

But this will not be the first time that the goal of reducing hunger has been missed. At the 1974 World Food Conference, world leaders vowed to eliminate hunger in 10 years. Needless to say that goal was not met – in the nearly 40 years since that conference we have not even been able to halve that number.

In 1974, the world population was close to 4 billion of which a little over one-fifth – between 800 million and 850 million – were undernourished. Today with a world population of over 7 billion and given the low estimate of the number of hungry people, one-eighth fall in that class, while given the high estimate, not much has changed.

So what is one to do?

One possible response to this dismal record is to throw one's hands up in the air, adopting a "the poor will always be with you" approach. But that response is one that few people find morally acceptable.

We remember as kids sitting through slide shows put on by visiting missionaries who talked about their medical and agricultural work. From a child's perspective, it seemed like the obvious solution was to teach them how to drive a Farmall or Oliver tractor – the color varied from family to family – and farm like we do.

Unfortunately, too many adults thought that way as well and today in many communities in developing countries one can see the carcasses of machinery that were provided by well-meaning donors. The problem was that our machines often did not meet their needs and even if they did, the local farmers did not have the supply lines and resources to maintain the donations in good working order.

It is not that everything was a waste; we are able to feed three or four billion more people than we did in the late 1950s. But technology alone is not the solution. It takes more than that.

Most people face chronic hunger because they lack access either to land and the resources it takes to farm or a job that pays enough to allow them to purchase sufficient food to meet their own nutritional needs and those of their family members.

If access is the problem then hunger reduction strategies need to entail decisions and activities that help increase access.

As we have seen in the US, a job alone is not sufficient if it does not pay a living wage. We have millions of working poor who could not afford nutritious meals if they did not have access to various public and private nutrition programs. A growing economy will not solve the problem of hunger under conditions of growing inequality.

Similarly, growing more food may not reduce the number of hungry if it is grown on land that was taken from small farmers and sold to outside investors as a part of a large development project. Such projects may help a country increase its gross domestic product, but it may do little to feed those who were displaced.

If we do not find a way to tackle the problem of access, in another 40 years we will be having this same discussion while more than a billion people go hungry. Δ

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